

Lily's Boy

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/30856244) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/30856244>.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Underage Sex
Categories:	F/F , F/M , M/M
Fandom:	Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling
Relationships:	Draco Malfoy/Harry Potter , Remus Lupin/Severus Snape , Neville Longbottom/Ginny Weasley , Sirius Black/Charlie Weasley
Characters:	Harry Potter , Draco Malfoy , Neville Longbottom , Remus Lupin , Severus Snape , Sirius Black , Susan Bones
Additional Tags:	AU from PoA , Powerful Harry Potter , Manipulative Albus Dumbledore , Political Harry Potter , Not Molly/Ron/Hermione friendly , Implied/Referenced Child Abuse , Tropes , More tags to follow , Canonical Character Death , Non-Canonical Character Death , Semi sentient Hogwarts , Nonbinary Character , Harry Potter Gets the Love He Deserves
Language:	English
Collections:	Zaharya's Favourites , Avidreaders HP WIP faves , Marvelous Dark Harry , hp stories , Numerous OTPS Infinite Fandoms , Yo! Read This. Seriously. , LadyFracks Drarry Favs , Top 10% , aadarshinah's list of fics to die for , Kinda interesting , The Best Fics I Have Had The Pleasure of Reading , HPs I love , Ficspotter , Lovely Fluffy Life-filled Perfection , Keep up with these gems , Favorite HP Fics , An Assortment of Damn Good Fics , Librarians Coda , hp god tier , to binge read at any time of day but obvs 2am onwards is preferable , Cherry Lemonade will have spare time eventually! , Stories I should reread , Stories worth rereading , things i read that were pretty rad if i do say so myself , Absolute Favorites , Amazing fics to reread , ★ Deliciously Forbidden ★, ★ Potterette's Neverland Treasure ★, The reason I'm sleep deprived , I love you so , HP Favorite Works , Bookshelf full of wonderful complete multi-chapter Drarry , Amazing Epic Stories , it is the truth universally acknowledged that a young woman in a possession of no money job or prosperity must be in want of printing and binding good stories , Collection with my favourite HP fanfictions , Hp binge reading and absolute masterpiece , wicked wizarding worldbuilding , best fics to ever exist , fics that made me cry , complete besties bastards beloved , STO works that I want to read , sassy supportive severus , deceitful dishonest dumbledore , International Fanworks Day 2022 - Classic Fic Recs , Merry's Bookshelf for Drarry , The Foxy List , top tier hp fanfics , great harry potter fics , the best fics I've read on ao3 , Well Loved , Completed HP fics , Top tier HP fics , Fav Recs , 500k+ of pure talent and 3 am reads , The Printing Press 📄, Ash's cute n good fics (warning may not be cute) , Avada Kedavra B!tch , HP Rheos , Works worth reading again and again , Works worth

reading a million times over, [Digging for Gold](#), [Severus Snape and the trials of Not Getting Paid Enough for this BS](#), [Theos Harry Potter Must Reads](#), [fics to die for](#), [Fics That Belong In Olympus](#), [HP Fics that I love](#), [works i want to read](#), [The sun is rising and I'm still reading, my favs :\)](#), [Hufflepuffs are particularly good finders \(of great fanfiction\)](#), [Well-Written HP Fanfiction Collection](#), [Voxzie Faves](#), [I don't know what to name this collection](#), [Stories To Make The Soul Sing](#), [HP Best in Writing and Storytelling](#), [Pocky's Favorite Completed Works](#), [Harry Potter Bests](#), [read for inspiration](#), [Favourite Drarry](#), [PB100 I will revisit these over and over](#), [alREADYHPfics: Harry Potter fics that I have read](#), [Emma's Favorites](#), [Catherine's Favorite Fics](#), [Best Fics Read By Berlitz](#), [That's My Canon Now](#), [Ashes' Library](#), [i would die for you <3](#), [Hp enjoyed](#), [Ummmmm](#), [Long stories I'd die for](#), [Severitus fics for the soul](#), [Suggested Good Reads](#), [isabella9792_readinglist](#), [Finished Works Me Have Read](#), [Works Me Like](#), [Good mmm Me Read](#), [Like A Favorite Sweater](#), [HP Fics that are dear and special to me](#), [Random Fandom Favorites](#), [ZombieLove's Time Eaters](#), [Brennah_k's faves to read over and over again](#), [HP Slytherin-esque fics](#), [HP Reads for my sanity](#), [Lyrane's treasure trove](#), [fics that made me go feral](#), [heartbreakingly excellent works](#), [And they were fanfics \(Harry Potter\)](#), [My favorites hp](#), [e's good shit](#), [Most Scrumptious Fics I've Ever Read](#), [The Literary Treasury](#), [My recommendations/Rereads](#), [Best of Drarry](#), [Fics That Could Be Books](#), [I'm coming back for baby](#), [AHHHH i need to finish these fics](#), [The Bard's Roost](#), [Top Tier Would Read Again 10/10 \(ShaMarie381\)](#), [Harry Potter Fics I Do Adore](#), [guilty pleasures](#), [Harry Potter](#), [Best Harry Potter Universes](#), [Everyone deserves a healing arch](#), [Amaris' Harry Potter Favourite Super Duper Good Fics Ever](#), [Amazing Harry Potter AUs](#), [Best of the Best HP Fics](#), [my favorite fics <3](#),  [ONLY THE BEST](#) , [Five Star Fics](#), [masterclass](#), [i wish i can read these for the first time again](#), [one shots and finished and two years never updated' fanfics](#), [The best drarry](#)  ,  [Harry Potter](#) , [RJ's Faves](#), [bumblebee's fav hp fics! :-\)](#), [Sheer Brilliance- HP edition](#), [Harry Potter Excellence](#), [Giggler's favourites](#), [Fics LunaK does not want to lose track of](#), [Draco a Harry](#), [Finished and amazing works I've already read](#), [Cant put it down but at 3am](#), [S.T.I.L.L.](#), [Made me cry like a b](#), [best hp fics in my opinion](#), [Phenrispup Reads the World](#), [Brilliant Works](#), [Fab & Fave Harry Potter](#), [Todo lo que puedo llegar a OLVIDAR](#), [My Favorites9](#), [Great HP fanfictions](#), [Lilranko Interesting Read List](#), [Vivvy's hp must reads](#), [Favorite Harry Potter](#), [HPxDM](#), [HP and marauders \(ALL TBR/CR\)](#), [goldentrio](#), [He was rapidly becoming obsessed with Draco Malfoy](#), [Min's Favourite Drarry Fics](#), [I wanna eat you up \(like Betty Crocker\)](#), [Read Me Again Please](#), [hello yes i can't stop thinking about these works](#), [The Forest](#), [Maria Nelson's Favourites](#), [Fics I Must Read ASAP](#), [hp fics for when I need my fix](#), [The Golden Snitch Selection](#), [slytherinxpride's library of great harry potter fics](#), [Scythe - Later fics to read later](#), [Favorites forever and ever](#), [Favorite works of mandarijntje](#), [super cool and awsome works to show people](#), [Harry Potter](#), [Harry Potter](#)

[fics](#), [drarry fics I adore](#) ❤, [Stories that emotionally compromised me](#), [Perfect Finished Works](#), [Harry](#), [My Finished Reading](#), [Completed Masterpieces Across Fandoms](#), [Saav's Favs \(boring name\)](#), [Harry and his godfather <3](#), [fics that make my heart soar](#), [Fanfics that I hoard](#), [Epic Epics](#), [work again pls](#), [long fic to binge-read](#), [Bluemage Reread Again and Again](#), <33, [T.S.S \(This shit slaps\)](#)

Stats:

Published: 2021-04-23 Completed: 2022-01-14 Words: 746,386

Chapters: 109/109

Lily's Boy

by [SomewheresSword](#)

Summary

Before his third year of Hogwarts has even begun, Harry faces three whole weeks of unsupervised time in Diagon Alley. In that time he takes a trip to Gringotts - and that changes everything.

Burdened with the knowledge that Dumbledore has been blocking his family magic, and manipulating far more than he ever thought possible, Harry doesn't know who he can trust; but he knows he can't keep going that way. There's a whole world of lore and politics and history to catch up on, and the more he learns, the more Harry realises his true place in the world, and how much is being kept hidden from him. All the while, Dumbledore's twinkling eyes are constantly watching, and Harry can't let on how much he knows.

With help from unexpected places, Harry starts on a journey to end the war, and reshape the wizarding world. With how much he looks like James Potter, people have forgotten one important thing about him - he is Lily Evans' son, and she was one hell of a witch.

Notes

UPDATE 5/1/23: Hi friends! I am not really here very much these days, and as a general rule I don't reply to comments, but I've had enough of these requests that I'm gonna put it here. IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO TRANSLATE/PODFIC THIS FIC. First off, good luck to you, this thing is a monster lmao. Second off, I'm aware I can't really stop anybody, and I'm sure plenty of people have done so without my consent.

That being said, I am totally chill with translations of any of my works, as long as they remain on AO3 so they can be linked through using the proper crediting system; the fancy little thing that lets me acknowledge related/inspired works and then link them through this fic. If you do that, and let me know about it, I will happily confirm that and let it link through. Love that. If you are translating this on other websites (Wattpad etc), as I said I can't really stop you, but I'm gonna be grumpy about it~ If anyone finds any versions of this work on any site that is not AO3, those definitely did not have my permission.

That out of the way, thank you all for the enormous and mostly positive response to this fic. I'm no longer part of this fandom, but I'm glad I could bring comfort and joy to those who are. Peace out, friends <3

- Translation into Español available: [Lily's Boy \[Traducción\]](#) by [JENNIFERSIZA](#)

- Translation into Español available: [El Hijo de Lily \(Traducción\)](#) by [Madame_Van_Helsing](#)
- Translation into 中文-普通话 國語 available: [Lily's Boy【中译】](#) by [kaxbgw](#)
- Translation into Português brasileiro available: [Lily's Boy \(portuguese version\)](#) by [hearttbrkweathr](#)
- Translation into Русский available: [Lily's Boy](#) by [dripofnoble](#)

Chapter 1

Harry could hardly believe it, when it all sank in.

He wasn't expelled. He wasn't even getting *punished*. He'd inflated Aunt Marge, and the Ministry wouldn't even give him a slap on the wrist. But that wasn't the best part.

There were still three weeks until school began, and he would be spending them in Diagon Alley. *Alone*. Unsupervised — at least, as unsupervised as the thirteen year-old saviour of the wizarding world could *get* — allowed to do whatever he pleased, as long as he stayed within the confines of the alley. No teachers keeping an eye on him 'for his own safety', no Dumbledore with his annoyingly knowing gaze, no Mrs Weasley herding him around like one of her own. Not even Ron and Hermione. He could go where he liked, and not have to explain his actions to anyone.

He'd never had such freedom before. Harry couldn't wait to make the most of it.

.....

For the first few days, Harry didn't push the boundaries. He spent most of his time sat at a sunny table sat outside Fortescue's, doing his homework with a tall ice cream sundae at his side, charmed not to melt too quickly. It was a nice change from doing it under his blankets in the dead of night — and it let him see if anyone was actually keeping an eye on him. It was a perfect spot to people-watch, to keep track of anyone who might linger too long or look his way too often. He was noticed — of course he was noticed, he was Harry Potter — but no one seemed to be following him. Even when he left the ice cream parlour and went to explore, he couldn't see anyone keeping watch. He stuck to places he would be expected to go, of course. Quality Quidditch Supplies, Flourish and Blotts, Gambol and Japes'. Normal haunts for a thirteen year-old wizard.

Only after he'd finished all his homework, and made absolutely sure that he wasn't being secretly supervised, did Harry start to widen his exploration. In the past, when he'd been to Diagon Alley, whichever adult was with him had just wanted to get school supplies and get out as quickly as possible. Honestly, Harry didn't blame them, especially when he was with the whole Weasley family. But Diagon was *so much bigger* than he'd thought it was. There were all kinds of side-alleys with small shops and vendor stalls. Sure you could buy potion supplies, and spellbooks, and brooms — you could also buy enchanted jewellery and elaborate sweets and bespelled household objects, and a million other things in between. It made sense, Harry supposed; wizards didn't have a lot of places to shop, and you couldn't just conjure everything you needed. Diagon was like the biggest shopping centre wizards could go to. And it was all open to him, now.

Harry couldn't resist. With a bag of assorted sweets from Sugarplum's in hand, he meticulously scoured every inch of the alley from one end to the other, determined to uncover all its hidden joys. He bought a practice snitch at Quality Quidditch Supplies, and a self-inking quill from Scribbulus Writing Instruments. He spent almost an hour in the back of the

Magical Menagerie, talking to the snakes and telling himself he couldn't take them all home with him. He bought a new pair of glasses at a small stall next Madam Primpernelle's — indestructible, self-adjusting prescription, with weather-repellent charms. Harry's prescription hadn't been adjusted since he'd first got his glasses aged seven, and he'd forgotten what it was like to actually see clearly.

After a while, wandering the alley made his heart ache. All these new and wondrous things were items he probably would have grown up with, had he been raised in a wizarding family. No wonder Ron didn't care about the alley; it was all old hat to him. He wondered if Hermione had ever come here without them, and done the same thing he was doing now. He doubted it — she would've talked his ear off about it if she had. But how could she not be curious? There were so many incredible things; things he would buy, if he had anywhere to put them. He imagined the look on Aunt Petunia's face if he were to start filling his room with magical posters and enchanted clocks and a statue of a dragon that really breathed fire.

If he ever went back to Aunt Petunia. Minister Fudge might've said they were alright with taking him back at the end of the school year, but Harry doubted they were happy about it. Then again, he didn't really have any other options.

As he browsed the shelves of Wiseacre's Wizarding Equipment, Harry absently daydreamed about what his bedroom might look like in a wizarding house — his parents' house. Would it look more like Ron's? He snorted to himself; hopefully far less orange than Ron's.

But would he have a favourite quidditch team, with posters on the wall? A shelf full of spellbooks, with little moving figurines on the ledges? A fancy perch for Hedwig, with a self-filling water bowl? Bedsheets that changed colour when they needed washing? (You really could get *everything* in Diagon Alley).

He pushed the thought away, biting his lip against the unexpected swell of emotion. Desperate for a distraction, he turned his gaze to the display in front of him.

Wand Holsters, for the canny witch or wizard — never worry about losing your wand again!

They were thin leather tubes, with straps to secure them at each end. They came in several different lengths and colours; at first Harry thought it was to adjust for the length of the wand, but upon reading the description realised they were either for the forearm or calf, depending on your preference. Apparently they would accept wands of any length, even if they were longer than the holster itself.

He glanced down at his wand, sticking out of the pocket of his jeans. His mind flashed back to all the times he'd dropped it, or had it fall out of his pocket, or not had a comfortable pocket to stick it in. Perhaps buying one of these holster things wouldn't be a bad idea.

Harry kept reading the description. Each holster had in-built invisibility charms, and an anti-summoning ward once it had bonded with its owner. It claimed to keep the wand safe and accessible at all times — apparently, they were what aurors used on the job. Harry grinned to himself. That sounded pretty cool, if he was honest.

His grin faltered when he checked the price tag, and glanced inside his rapidly diminishing coin purse. He muttered a curse under his breath. “Why did I buy that stupid quill?” he hissed quietly, scowling.

Turning away from the wand holsters with slumped shoulders, Harry froze. He was in Diagon Alley — Gringotts was right around the corner. He had heaps of gold that his parents had left him. He just had to go get it!

He left the shop with a spring in his step, making a beeline for the enormous white building at the end of the street. One of the desks was open when he arrived, and the goblin manning it glanced down his long, crooked nose at Harry. “How may I be of assistance?” he asked in a low, slightly croaky voice.

“I’d, uh, like to withdraw some money from my vault, please,” Harry requested, refusing to let his nerves get the better of him. He wondered if it was like a muggle bank account, where you could just get the money without having to go to the vault itself. He didn’t fancy going on one of those mine carts right now. Every time since, someone else had withdrawn money for him. “Oh, uh, Harry Potter. The Potter vaults,” he added belatedly. The goblin’s eyes flicked up to his forehead, as peoples’ often did when he said his name.

“Vault key?” the goblin asked. Harry’s spirits fell. He didn’t have his key! Mrs Weasley was the last person to have it, he thought, but he was pretty sure she gave it back to Dumbledore when she was done.

“Oh. I, um, don’t have my key on me. Is that… a problem?”

“We can confirm your identity in other ways,” the goblin assured him. “But it requires your consent to a scan of your magic.”

Harry hesitated for a second. A scan sounded fairly harmless. People probably did it all the time; surely they didn’t carry their vault keys with them everywhere? “Okay, that sounds fine. I consent.”

The goblin nodded, then snapped his fingers and waved his hand towards Harry. His eyes narrowed behind his glasses, and he hummed, frowning. He snapped and waved a second time, frown growing deeper. Harry’s stomach churned. “Is there something wrong?”

“May I speak to you privately, Mr Potter?” the goblin asked, leaning back in his chair and pursing his lips. “There is a matter I wish to bring to your attention.”

Immediately, Harry’s brain conjured the worst; there was something wrong with his magic, or he wasn’t actually Harry Potter, or the goblins refused to let him in anymore. He nodded, shoving his hands in his pockets to stop them from shaking as he followed the goblin across the bank and into a corridor, where he was led into a small private room. The goblin gestured to a chair, and Harry sat. “One moment, please.”

The goblin left Harry alone in the room, but only for a couple of minutes. Those minutes felt like a lifetime as he waited, scenarios chasing each other around his mind, each more dire than the last.

When the goblin returned, it was with a second goblin at his side. This one looked older, with wispy white hair and a deeply lined face. “This is Gorrak, Mr Potter. He’s one of our senior staff, and specialises in inheritance claims and family magic.”

Harry wondered if goblins shook hands. When none was offered to him, he merely nodded, twisting his fingers anxiously in the hem of his t-shirt. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Gorrak. Can I ask... what am I doing here?”

“Do you consent to a scan of your magic?” Gorrak asked, bypassing all pleasantries. Harry blinked.

“I— yes, I consent.” If the goblins were planning to hurt him, they probably wouldn’t ask consent first.

Gorrak raised his hands, and his fingertips glowed with a faint silver light as he ran them over the air a foot in front of Harry. If Harry concentrated, he could feel a sort of... tingle, faint on his skin, making the hair on his arms stand up. Gorrak lowered his arms, scowling.

“Wizards.” He spat the word like a curse, sharing an unreadable look with his colleague. “Farlig, did Mr Potter have anyone with him when he spoke to you?”

“No, sir,” the other goblin, Farlig, replied promptly. “He was alone.”

“What’s the matter?” Harry interrupted, cheeks turning red as both goblins turned to look at him. “Something’s wrong. Am I okay? Is my magic okay?”

Gorrak eyed him speculatively. “Mr Potter, can you recall any time in which you have been the recipient of any sort of long-term enchantment, or ritual magic?”

Harry’s brow furrowed. “Ritual magic?” he repeated, bewildered. “No, not that I know of. Why?” Had someone cursed him?

“I expected as much. The block is so deeply ingrained, you were probably just a baby when it was set.” Gorrak’s muttered words were more to himself than Harry, but Harry caught them anyway, and froze.

“Block?” he repeated. His pulse thudded in his ears. “Are you— am I— I don’t understand.”

Gorrak met his gaze unflinchingly. “Mr Potter, I regret to inform you that there is a rather severe block on your magical core, entirely restricting your access to your family magics.”

The words echoed in Harry’s head.

“Family magics? What does that mean?” He’d never heard of such a thing.

Gorrak took the seat opposite him, a serious expression on his face. “Family magics, Mr Potter, are the magics passed down through wizarding families for generations. They are tied to your individual magical core, but are a separate part of it — they pass certain gifts or talents down family lines, and every wizarding parent will pass on some level of family magics to their children. Even muggleborn parents. In your case, however, the magics are of one of the oldest lines in wizarding Europe. They are an enormous part of your core, and

without them you will be refused any inheritance or heirships, as well as any family gifts you may naturally possess.”

Harry blinked, not sure he understood correctly. “So they’re just... gone?” he asked, panic rising in his gut. Gorрак shook his head.

“They are still there, Mr Potter. They are merely inaccessible to you. Can I assume you were unaware of any blocks or limitations placed on your magical core?”

“I had no idea. Who— Voldemort?” He’d said the block had been placed when he was a baby. Could it have come from the attack?

“Unlikely,” Gorрак replied. “The ritual undertaken for this sort of block takes several hours to complete. From what I understand of your... history, the Dark Lord Voldemort would not have had time for such magic.”

Harry felt sick. Someone he trusted — someone his parents had trusted, enough to leave their baby with them for several hours — had placed a block on his magic. “Is it— am I in danger? Will it hurt me?”

“Currently, it is causing you no issue but a slight drain on your magical core. You have an impressively strong core for someone so young, Mr Potter, so it’s likely you haven’t noticed the difference. However, as the heir to the Potter line among others, should you come of age while still under the influence of the block, you will be unable to claim your rightful seats on the Wizengamot, or any of your inherited properties. You would also come to harm when your magical core fully matures, as the block required to restrain your family magic also does not allow your magical core to expand in any way.”

“I have seats on the Wizengamot?” Harry spluttered, eyes wide. Wasn’t that the wizarding government? How could he possibly have access to that?

“Not yet, Mr Potter, but you will once you come of age. The Noble and Most Ancient house of Potter has been part of the Wizengamot since its inception, and it is your birthright. You may also hold other seats — with the political climate in the last few decades, several ancient houses have lost their immediate heir, and the title has had to find other avenues in the family tree. I am unsure just how many families you are inheriting magic from, but with that in mind, this block could be restricting a truly astounding amount of magic within you. The backlash upon your coming of age would likely be severe, and explosive.”

For several moments, Harry sat in silence, letting the goblin’s words sink in. It all felt like some sort of nightmare.

Eventually, Gorрак cleared his throat. “Mr Potter, if you would consent, I would like to check you for any other spells or enchantments on your person. This may not be the only thing done to you.”

“There could be more?” Harry scoffed, running a hand through his hair. “Right, of course, this is me we’re talking about. There’s always more.” He shook his head with a derisive snort. “I consent. If there’s any magic on or in me that isn’t mine, I want to know about it.”

His skin crawled like he could feel unfamiliar hands touching him, gripping his magical core and twisting.

“Please empty your pockets and remove your glasses, and any other enchanted items you may possess,” Gorراك requested. Harry took a few moments to do as asked, then stood somewhat awkwardly with his hands at his sides. He’d never had so much as a medical check-up, let alone a magical one. What was he supposed to do? “Keep still, this will only take a moment.”

Gorراك murmured something in a language Harry didn’t recognise — Gobbledeegook, probably — and a strange prickling feeling washed over Harry from head to toe. He resisted the urge to flinch away. Gorراك said something again in his language, but from Farlig’s reaction in the corner it was probably an expletive of some kind. “Someone has done you a great wrong, Mr Potter,” Gorراك declared. Harry’s heart sank.

“Am I dying?” he asked flatly. It would be just his luck if after all his run-ins with Voldemort, he was due to die from some slow-acting curse or something. Gorراك barked out a laugh.

“No faster than the average wizard,” he assured. “However, the block is not the only magic acting against you. There’s some kind of spell, I’ve never seen it before but it looks more recent, perhaps two or three years old, and it’s familiar. The same magic that belongs to whoever blocked your family magics.”

Slowly, pieces started to come together in Harry’s mind, dread gathering in his belly. “And what does this spell do?”

“I can’t be entirely positive, Mr Potter. If I were to guess, I would say it is something to do with your behaviour. It appears to encourage impulsiveness — or limit rational thinking. Something along those lines. Perhaps with the side-effect of making you more suggestible, easily influenced. Whoever cursed you wanted you to trust without reason, and act without thinking, no doubt to leap head-first into all those dangerous situations I’ve heard rumour of. It’s an incredibly powerful compulsion spell, Mr Potter; I’m amazed you have any sort of self-restraint whatsoever.”

Harry could only think of one person who would have means and opportunity to perform both the magic block and the compulsion spell, and the answer made his heart clench.

Dumbledore.

His parents would have trusted the headmaster with their baby, even alone for several hours. And even if they hadn’t, there was the time after their death, before Aunt Petunia found Harry on her doorstep — he couldn’t have been there *all* night, he would’ve frozen to death. Dumbledore was easily powerful enough to put the compulsion spell on Harry when he started at Hogwarts, too. He always seemed to be up to something — gently nudging Harry in certain directions, playing everyone around him like puppets and alway seeming to know more than he should. Making Harry impulsive and easily influenced was one thing, but what did Dumbledore stand to gain from limiting his family magic?

He didn’t want to believe it, but it was the only thing that made sense.

"I'm afraid that's not the only thing," Gorрак continued, as if Harry wasn't suffering enough. "Though this is probably less of a surprise. There's heavy residue of dark magic, situated around your scar. Unfortunately, this is not familiar to me, though I can have a team research it if you wish, and with any luck they will figure out how to remove it. No one has survived the killing curse until you, Mr Potter — that magic is foreign to both wizards and goblins. I cannot remove it, and am reluctant to attempt such in case it harms you. As it stands, it does not seem to be doing you any damage."

Relief flooded Harry — that one was less worrying. He had always assumed there was something strange about his scar, since it never truly healed. Curse residue would make sense. If it wasn't hurting now, they might as well leave it alone.

"But what about the block, and the spell? Can they be removed?" he asked tentatively, his gut churning at the prospect of having to live with the limit on his magic forever, like some sort of ticking time bomb. Seventeen felt like ages away, but it wouldn't be far off.

"They can," Gorрак confirmed. Harry sighed in relief, shoulders slumping. "Farlig, please guard the door." The lock clicked, and Farlig stood in front of the door with his shoulders squared, his jaw set. "Mr Potter, if you wouldn't mind standing."

When Harry stood, Gorрак snapped his fingers, and the chair he'd just been sat in turned into a low bed, like the kind in a doctor's office. "Please lie down on your back." Harry did, heart racing. Letting a goblin he'd only just met perform magic on him made his survival instinct snarl, but he refused to spend any longer with a block on his magic. Besides, what was he going to do, write to Dumbledore about it? Not after everything he'd discovered today!

"This may hurt, Mr Potter." That was all the warning Gorрак gave before he began chanting. It again was in an unfamiliar language, and as soon as the chant started up Harry's body began to glow white, his skin growing warm. He gripped the edges of the bed, forcing his eyes to remain open, even when the sensation turned sharp. A cry escaped his lips — it felt almost like something was sucking at him. No, *biting*. Like a creature had sunk their teeth in and refused to let go, while Gorрак was pulling it out of his body. Above his heart, the glow turned darker, and Harry watched in horror as a ball of black magic began to form above him. The ball grew bigger and bigger, Gorрак's forehead glistening with sweat as he chanted and moved his hands, fighting against the foreign magic in Harry's body.

Harry couldn't have said how long he was on the table for, but eventually Gorрак's chanting grew louder, and he wrenched his hands up high, sending the ball of black magic careening away from Harry and towards a crystal Harry had just noticed on the desk. The crystal turned from white to black in an instant, and the glow around Harry faded. "You may sit up, Mr Potter," Gorрак declared, sounding breathless. Harry did so. The goblin sank into the chair opposite, leaning heavily on one elbow. "Whoever placed those curses certainly did not want to give up without a fight, but it is done. I took the liberty of retaining samples of the magic — should you reach a time where you wish to press charges against an individual, this can be used to compare magical signatures and prove guilt."

Gorрак looked him in the eye, and it was clear the goblin also had a good idea of who placed the spells. Harry grimaced. "Thank you." He didn't know if he'd ever need it, but it was good

to know it was there. “I... how can I tell if the spells have been replaced? Or something new put on me?”

“Wizard magic is different to goblin magic. Most wizarding detection spells wouldn’t pick up on something like that,” Gorراك informed him. “However, I believe there are books explaining how to learn to recognise your own magic, and see any signs of alteration. In future, should you ever have concerns, any Gringotts goblin would be happy to perform a scan of your magic. Congratulations, Mr Potter; your family magics are strong and healthy, despite their tampering.”

Harry closed his eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath. He might have been imagining things, but if he concentrated he felt... lighter. Like he’d been wearing weights, and suddenly they were gone, his magic buzzing faintly under his skin. “If I were you,” Gorراك continued, “I would be very careful when doing magic for the next few months, while your body adjusts to having access to its full magic reserve. You may find new spells come easier to you, and old spells a little more... forceful, for a while.”

“Right,” Harry murmured, nodding. He’d have to test that once he got back to Hogwarts. It wouldn’t do to suddenly be exploding things all over the place, especially if Dumbledore was keeping an eye on him.

“While you are here, Mr Potter, might you be interested in taking a Line Test?” Farlig spoke up from his place at the door. “As we explained earlier, some family lines have since died out, and heirs are turning up in all sorts of unexpected places. Most purebloods take the test before they begin schooling — you’ll want to know the breadth of your inheritance long before you come of age.”

He hadn’t realised that inheritance and family lines were such a big deal in the wizarding world, but then he thought about how Malfoy and some of the other Slytherins talked about their families, and even how people spoke about the Weasleys. A family name seemed to hold a lot of information about a person, to purebloods. Perhaps there was more to it than just tradition and prejudice.

“What do I have to do?” he asked warily. Farlig strode across to the desk and rifled through a drawer, coming out with a square of pale purple parchment.

“Just three drops of blood on this, Mr Potter,” he explained. “The results are entirely confidential.”

Well, that didn’t sound so bad. Harry approached the desk, accepting the small knife from Farlig’s hand and pricking his finger, dripping blood onto the parchment. It began to glow. With a snap of his fingers, Farlig healed the small cut, offering Harry a toothy smile.

At the top of the parchment, black ink began to form words.

Harry James Potter. Parents: James Charlus Potter, Lily Juliette Evans-Potter

Harry hadn’t known either of his parents’ middle names, and his heart clenched. After all the shocks of the day, he felt a small measure of relief knowing that at least this part of his life

wasn't a lie. He truly was the son of Lily and James Potter.

There was a beat, then more words appeared.

Blood Heir to the Noble and Most Ancient House of Potter

Again, not a surprise. He expected that to be the end of it, but the parchment continued.

Named Heir to the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black

His mind automatically flashed to the man in the newspaper, Sirius Black, with his gaunt face and wild hair. What a funny coincidence; it was a fairly common surname, after all.

Blood Heir to the Ancient House of Peverell

That was a name he'd never even *heard* before. Who were the Peverells?

Conquering Heir to the Ancient House of Slytherin

Harry choked. *Heir of Slytherin*? How could that possibly be? What did it mean, conquering heir?

He waited for a moment, to see if the parchment would throw anything else at him. Several long seconds went by without any more ink appearing, and Farlig cleared his throat.

"Congratulations, Mr Potter," he declared. "Four very respectable houses. I'll update our records and have the vault ownership adjusted accordingly."

"It's been a long time since someone claimed the Slytherin vaults, Mr Potter," Gorrauk murmured, looking thoughtful. "How very interesting."

"How is that possible?" Harry croaked, eyes wide.

"When an ancient family line dies out, or the last remaining heir becomes ineligible to hold the position, heirship can be transferred in multiple ways. In this case, when you defeated the Dark Lord Voldemort — believed to be the previous blood heir to the Slytherin line — you ended the line, and the magic deemed you a suitable replacement. You must share blood somewhere with Salazar Slytherin, but within pureblood families that isn't uncommon. The Slytherin family magic is unique, in that it has certain requirements for an heir — less about bloodlines, and more about magical strength and purity. The Dark Lord, when he entered this bank as a youth and took a line test, was an ineligible heir for the Slytherin line. No doubt his core was already tainted with too much dark magic for the family magics to accept him."

"But wasn't Salazar Slytherin a dark wizard?" Confusion was plain in Harry's voice, and Gorrauk chuckled roughly.

"Your wizarding history books aren't quite as accurate as your people believe, Mr Potter," he remarked. "Salazar Slytherin was no true dark wizard. His father, Septimus, was. We believe that Salazar himself changed the conditions of inheritance in the face of his father's twisted magical core. The practice of what most wizards now consider to be dark magic was, back then, fairly neutral casting. Instead, it refers to what you now see as the blackest arts. The

Dark Lord must have started some truly awful things at a very young age to have rendered his core ineligible.”

Opening his mouth, Harry almost asked why they didn’t just tell the wizards the truth, if they knew the real history of Salazar Slytherin. Then he thought about the attitude most wizards had towards goblins and other creatures, and his jaw clicked shut. No one would believe them if they tried.

“So what does all this mean for me? Being heir to all these houses?”

“At present, not as much,” Gorрак explained. “You will be unable to take on your full responsibilities until you are of age. However, heirs to ancient bloodlines play an important role in wizarding culture — you are the future of your people, Mr Potter. It is your job to preserve and uphold your family magics, as well as prepare yourself to enter the Wizengamot when the appropriate time arrives. I suggest you contact other family heirs and discuss the role with them; I’m afraid goblins know little in the ways of wizard culture.” He leaned back in his chair. “The confirmation through the Line Test will also allow you access to any vaults under the names of these families, though I’m afraid due to your age you cannot access many of them without a guardian. I can have a portfolio assembled of your vaults and properties and sent to you within the week.”

“If I may, Mr Potter,” Farlig cut in. “It may also benefit you to research independently what it means to be the heir to houses as old as yours. There are no doubt many books on the subject. Of course, you can always choose to reject your Wizengamot seats and any adjacent responsibilities, but they would continue to be held by your proxy. I believe that is currently Headmaster Dumbledore.”

At the thought of Dumbledore being responsible for his family name, something inside Harry hardened. “No,” he said immediately. “I’ll take my place. I’ll learn.” He didn’t entirely know what all this entailed yet, but he knew one thing for sure — he didn’t want Dumbledore making decisions on his behalf. Not now, and not when he was seventeen.

“Excellent choice, Mr Potter,” Farlig murmured approvingly. “Should the goblins of Gringotts be able to assist, please do contact us.”

“You’ve already done more than I ever expected,” Harry replied, head still spinning with everything he’d learned. “I— how much do I owe you, for all this?” It occurred to him belatedly that the gold-driven species were unlikely to do such a kindness for free. Farlig and Gorрак shared a smirk.

“We will take the necessary expenses from your vault and owl you the bill, Mr Potter,” Gorрак informed him. “I shall send it alongside your portfolio. I will also send recommendations for an account manager, and perhaps some investments if that is your wish. The money in those vaults has languished since the fall of the Dark Lord Voldemort, if not longer — seeing it back in circulation would make goblin-kind very happy indeed.”

If there was one thing Harry had learned from being forced to live with Vernon Dursley, it was that investing money in the right things was very important. “I would appreciate that, Gorрак. Thank you.”

"It is our pleasure, Mr Potter. Now," Farlig said, clasping his hands in front of him. "I believe you originally came here to withdraw money from your vault?"

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your kind words and enthusiasm! I'm so glad that so many of you who were reading the fic the first time around have found your way back :) And welcome to the newbies, too! I'm so excited to finally share this whole thing with you all.

Harry left Gringotts with his purse weighed down with gold, and his head weighed down with thoughts. He glanced at his watch, and his eyebrows rose — he'd only been in there for a little over an hour. It felt like a lifetime, it had changed so much.

Buying the wand holster was now the last thing on his mind. Instead, Harry made straight for Flourish and Blotts. He'd already spent half a day wandering the shelves, learning the many varieties of books available inside — no longer just going straight to the shelf for Hogwarts students and never venturing further. Familiar with the shop's layout, Harry found his way to the shelves full of books on wizarding history and culture.

A smirk tugged at his lips as he thought about what Hermione might say if she saw him buying books of his own free will. That smirk faded, however, when he thought of Ron's expression at the sight of the books themselves — titles like '*The History of the Wizengamot*' and '*Inheritance Magic Explained*'.

His eyes scanned the shelves, looking at the other people in there purchasing books. Perhaps it wasn't the best idea for Harry Potter to be seen buying books about pureblood culture.

Harry was about to start putting the books away, when his gaze caught on the bright paper of the bag from Gambol and Japes — of course! He'd almost forgotten about his purchases there, he'd had so much on his mind since then. He rifled through the bag until he found what he was looking for; small, egg-like capsules that promised a cunning disguise for up to thirty minutes. Supposed to be used to avoid being caught setting a prank, but Harry had bought some for the days when he wanted to go outside without being Harry Potter, with all that entailed.

He hid behind a deserted shelf and split one of the capsules over his head, feeling the magic run down him as if he had indeed just cracked an egg in his hair. Glancing at himself in the window, he grinned; staring back was a pale boy with straw-blond hair and dark brown eyes, his square face nothing like Harry's own. A shift of his fringe made him grimace when he saw his scar was still there, but luckily the disguise's hair was long enough to cover it. It would be enough.

Now on a time limit, Harry raced through the bookshop, tossing titles into his basket whenever they appealed to him. He didn't want to look too suspicious by just getting a stack

of books about purebloods, so he threw in a few more that looked interesting — a book of defensive charms and wards, one titled ‘*A Hundred Spells Every Wizard Should Know*’, a small book called ‘*A Muggleborn’s Guide to the Wizarding World*’, and one on goblin culture. It looked like he’d found some valuable allies, after all, and he wanted to learn more about them. Satisfied, he took his heavy basket up to the register, handing over the gold with a smile and adding the large bag of books to his other purchases.

There was a spring in his step as he left the bookshop, and he hid in a small side-alley until the disguise charm wore off. For the first time, he was desperate to get back to his room and actually read some books.

First, however, he made a quick detour to Wiseacre’s, emerging a few minutes later with a brand new black leather wand holster strapped to his wrist. He hadn’t *entirely* forgotten what had started the whole thing, after all.

.....

Harry spent all of that day and most of the next holed up in his room in the Leaky Cauldron, reading his new purchases. He felt like he was discovering the wizarding world all over again. He wished the *Muggleborn’s Guide* had been part of his first year book list; it would have answered so many questions, and saved him a lot of trouble.

It amazed him that no one taught muggleborns all this stuff when they were introduced to the wizarding world — or perhaps they did, and everyone just forgot he was muggle-raised. But then surely Hermione would have said something? He made a mental note to buy a copy for her upcoming birthday, and see what she thought of it. From some of the things she’d said and done over the years, he didn’t think she’d had any real introduction to wizarding culture either.

All the things that Ron and the others took for granted about being raised in the wizarding world. The history, the background knowledge, things like household spells and Ministry forms and inheritance magic — all of it was brand new to Harry, and he couldn’t get enough.

That aside, the books on pureblood culture were an eye-opener of an entirely different kind. After all he’d heard about the purebloods being backwards and traditional and fearful of anything muggle, reading about the history he couldn’t really blame them. Of course, he’d studied witch burnings in History of Magic — even had some summer homework on it that Florean Fortescue had been surprisingly helpful with — but those textbooks never went into the detail of how difficult it was to be magical in a time when the muggles were suspicious of everything. The origin of the Statute of Secrecy, and how the wizarding world changed after it, made Harry realise just how much history was in his family. Especially when he saw both the names Potter and Black popping up as notable figures in several of them.

He still hadn’t figured out how he was named heir to the Black family, but he wasn’t really bothered by that just now. He was too busy trying to wrap his head around what it meant to be an heir to not one but four prominent families in the wizarding community.

One of the few times Harry left his room, he bought himself a blank notebook with a password charm, so that he could take notes on everything and keep it secure. He now had

pages and pages of writing on all sorts of subjects, not just inheritance.

From what he could gather, being an heir now was a little like being an heir back in the regency days of England, when inheritance actually meant something. All the families properties and money would pass down to the heir, and they would become the head of the family when the previous head stepped down. That left them in charge of the family magics and wards, any Wizengamot seats they held, and the family name itself. This was mostly used for things like marriage contracts and such — everything had to go through the head of the family before it could become legal. That meant that when Harry turned seventeen, he would become the head of four families — he'd checked Wizengamot records, and all four seats were currently held in proxy. All four by none other than Albus Dumbledore.

It made Harry's blood boil when he thought about it — the more he'd connected the dots, the more he was sure that Dumbledore was the only person who could have put the block and curse on him. But for what end? He was training Harry up for something — that much had been clear since he'd met the man — but why did it involve cutting him off from his family magics, and causing his core to implode when he turned seventeen? What plans did he have for Harry that didn't let him become a happy, healthy adult wizard?

Either way, Harry resolved to watch his step around the headmaster in future. And if Dumbledore was false, then who else might have ulterior motives... no. He couldn't go down that road, or he'd drive himself crazy wondering who he could trust.

Remembering what Farlig had said about learning to sense his magic, Harry eventually managed to find a book about magical cores when he went back to Flourish and Blotts, and he had notes on that now, too. It would take time, but apparently wizards could learn to sense their own magic, which was how wandless magic became possible. Harry liked the idea of being able to perform spells even if he didn't have his wand on him, though hopefully now he'd bought that holster that wouldn't be a problem.

Eventually, however, Harry's brain began to hurt from the influx of new knowledge. Though he certainly found it easier to sit and read than he ever had done since starting Hogwarts — it was like being back in muggle primary school, when he'd spent most of his breaktime sat in the library reading and hiding from Dudley and his friends, taking refuge in the written word and spending hours buried in books. He wondered if the recent lack of attention span was due to the curse that made him more impulsive. He hoped so; he was used to having to pretend to get lower grades so as not to make Dudley angry, but at Hogwarts he actually struggled to keep up average grades on his homework. He felt a pang in his chest when he realised he'd have to go back to pretending, or Dumbledore would definitely know something was up.

Leaving his books securely hidden in the bottom of his trunk, Harry made his way back out to Diagon Alley, blinking at the bright sunshine. Maybe he had spent too much time indoors.

Hands in his pockets, he wandered aimlessly down the alley, intending on picking up where he left off the day he went to Gringotts. Wiseacre's was hardly the end of the alley, and there was so much more he hadn't explored.

Harry bought a glass bottle of cold pumpkin juice and sipped from it as he walked, eyes roaming the shop fronts with mild interest. Being thirteen, there were a lot of places in

Diagon that he had zero interest in — offices and specialty stores and places selling furniture — but every now and then he came across something interesting. The toy shop caught his attention, though he only looked through the window; he was too old for toys, even if part of him did wonder what it would have been like to grow up with the magical ones. There was a tattoo parlour as well, which he was *definitely* too young for, but looking at the artwork was fun. Maybe when he was older, he'd get a tattoo. The wizarding ones *moved*.

The further he went, the more the shops seemed to cater for a different clientele; they were more off the beaten path, not the kind of things families shopping for Hogwarts supplies would need. He stopped outside of a blue-painted shop with the words '*Silverling's Wizarding Fashion*' above the door. The window held mannequins wearing both regular robes and the more muggle-style clothing that younger wizards and witches wore on a day-to-day basis.

Harry looked down at himself. His jeans were only held up by his belt, rolled up several times at the ankle so he didn't trip over them, and his t-shirt hung halfway down his thighs. All his clothes were the same; at one point in time, they had all belonged to Dudley. Harry at thirteen could fit into clothing that Dudley hadn't worn since he was seven.

He could change that, now.

When he stepped inside the shop, his palms were sweaty and his nerves racing even more than they had been in the back room of Gringotts. He pushed the anxiety away, striding resolutely towards the menswear side of the shop. He had no reason to wear Dudley's cast-offs now. He was a respectable young wizard with plenty of money, and he could buy himself clothes that *fit*.

It looked like the kind of place that the cool pureblood and half-blood kids at Hogwarts would shop. Perhaps Parvati and Lavender had been in there. The clothes were definitely wizarding wear, but it wasn't anything like his school uniform. Many of them had in-built charms according to the labels; dirt repelling, or self-mending, or size-adjusting. It was all a bit overwhelming for Harry, who had barely been shopping in the muggle world, let alone the wizarding one.

At that, he had a thought that *almost* made him wonder if the spell making him impulsive hadn't been removed after all. A slow grin spread across his face; it was about time, really.

He only bought a couple of things at Silverling's — a pair of jeans that promised to be self-mending, a pair of comfortable black dragon-hide boots, and a jacket with in-built warming and cooling charms depending on the weather. When he left the shop, he turned back in the direction of the Leaky Cauldron, already pulling together a plan in his head.

When he made it to Gringotts, he stepped inside, his stride far more confident than it has been the last time. To his delight, he saw Farlig behind the same desk as before, and approached. "Good morning, Farlig! I hope your gold is flowing rapidly," he greeted, remembering what he'd read in his book about goblins. Farlig blinked for a moment, surprised, then gave a smile that showed all his teeth.

"Good morning, Mr Potter. My gold flows well, and I guard yours faithfully," he returned the greeting. "How can I help?"

“Can I make a withdrawal? But, in muggle money, this time?” he requested. Surely Gringotts had to do some sort of currency exchange?

Farlig nodded. “Of course, Mr Potter. If you would consent to a scan?” Harry nodded, letting Farlig check his identity through his magic. “Excellent. And how much will you be withdrawing today?”

“Um. Let’s say... five hundred pounds.” He’d never even seen that much muggle money in his life, except for when Dudley opened his birthday and Christmas cards. But he knew the rough exchange rate, and he hoped it would be enough for what he had in mind. Besides, after the portfolio the goblins had sent him detailing all his assets, he wasn’t exactly worried about his future spending rate.

Farlig didn’t bat an eyelash at the amount. “As you wish, Mr Potter. One moment please.” He typed something into his old-fashioned typewriter, then pulled a lever. Crisp muggle bank notes began stacking on the desk in front of him. “Here you are, Mr Potter. Five hundred pound sterling.” He passed the substantial stack to Harry, who shoved it securely in his pocket. “If I may make a suggestion, Mr Potter?”

“Absolutely,” Harry replied. The goblin hadn’t steered him wrong yet.

“Twilfitt and Tatting makes a bottomless bag, which can carry far beyond its usual capacity, yet never weighs more than its empty state. I believe it’s popular among young people these days.” Farlig gave a shark-like grin, his words casual but his gaze knowing. Harry grinned back.

“Thank you for the recommendation, Farlig. May your vaults ever be full.”

“And yours, Mr Potter,” Farlig replied, bowing his head in acknowledgement.

Harry took a detour to Twilfitt and Tatting, purchasing a bottomless bag in the style of a black leather messenger bag, fairly unremarkable but stylish in its simplicity. Twilfitt assured him it would hold up to thirty times its natural capacity in size, and up to a hundred kilos in weight. Harry couldn’t ever imagine needing to carry a hundred kilos worth of *anything*, but it was good to know for the future.

His plan in place, Harry returned to the Leaky Cauldron, waving a cheerful hello to Tom behind the bar on his way up to his room. There he deposited his purchases and changed into his new clothes.

“Oh, that’s much better, dear,” the mirror in his room complimented, making him beam despite himself. The only clothes he’d ever had that fit him before were his school robes, and the few items of Dudley’s clothing that Hermione had once experimented with Shrinking charms on. He’d never had brand new jeans before in his life. He actually looked his age for once, rather than a ten year-old playing dress-up.

His smile couldn’t be dislodged as he grabbed his new bag, the wad of muggle cash, and his invisibility cloak. Briefly, he remembered the warnings about not venturing into the muggle world, and a pang of guilt surfaced. But he pushed it away.

Unlike most wizards, he was perfectly comfortable navigating the muggle world. And he was long, long overdue some time there.

.-.-.

It was almost insultingly easy to sneak out into muggle London using his invisibility cloak, ducking into a public toilet to take the cloak off and stuff it in his new bag. From there he walked to the nearest tube station, his heart thudding with adrenaline at his blatant breaking of rules, and bought a travel card for the day. He glanced at the tube map, checking his journey, and stepped confidently through the barriers to join the flow of people going about their day. No one looked twice at him. No one did a double-take at his forehead, or whispered about him from several feet away, or did any of the other things he'd gotten used to in the wizarding world. It was refreshing, to say the least.

When Harry was next above ground, it was to step right into the hustle and bustle of Oxford Street. It was all a little overwhelming, and he took a deep breath to calm himself, remembering his plan. This was likely the only chance he'd get to do this — he had to make it count.

Harry looked up at all the shops, bearing names he recognised from the Dursleys' clothing, and he smiled. He could do this.

.-.-.

Four hours later found Harry sat outside a cafe in Covent Garden, drinking a chocolate milkshake, not a trace of his earlier anxiety in his body.

It turned out, he *liked* shopping. Once he got the hang of it, of course.

Figuring out what sort of clothes he wanted to wear — given entirely free rein, no restrictions, no outside influence — had taken him a little time, but once he started to find things that made him happy, he was off. In London, no one questioned a thirteen year-old boy by himself with seemingly endless amounts of cash. No one questioned anything in London.

He was down to his last thirty pounds, which surprised him; he hadn't expected to get quite so carried away. But he couldn't help himself once he started. Years of living in hand-me-downs had him yearning for a full wardrobe of his own choosing, his own style. He knew he'd grow out of it all sooner rather than later — if he ever actually got around to having that growth spurt — but that's what spells were for. Besides, there was plenty more money in his vault.

If he didn't get back to the Leaky Cauldron soon, Tom would start wondering where he was, so Harry finished off his milkshake, shouldered his bag and set off back to the tube station. He made a mental note to give Farlig some kind of present or reward for the tip about the bag; he dreaded to think what it would be like trying to sneak back into the Leaky carrying his purchases the muggle way.

Thanks to his invisibility cloak, Harry easily made it back up to his room with none the wiser, and there he emptied all his purchases onto the bed, staring round-eyed at his new clothes.

His gaze shifted to his school trunk, which was already messy and overflowing from over a week of living out of it. Sighing to himself, Harry ran a hand through his hair. He'd better tidy up, then.

As tempting as it was to have a ceremonial burning of all things Dursley in the fireplace of his room, Harry knew he'd have to keep up appearances if he didn't want anyone — namely Dumbledore — getting suspicious. Still, he was unable to help himself from burning the most offensive items of clothing. Some of Dudley's old things sort-of fit, and they weren't *that* bad, so Harry kept them. Hopefully if he gradually mixed in his new clothes, no one would notice the difference. He hadn't bought anything enormously flashy, anyway.

With all his new clothes folded up and piled with the older ones he was keeping, Harry looked at the stack on the bed. For the first time in his life, he might actually struggle to fit all his possessions in his school trunk. The thought made him smile.

Perhaps Twilfitt and Tatting did bottomless trunks, too.

.

It turned out, Farlig didn't need a present — all he wanted was for Harry to get his family money moving once again.

While the Potter and Black accounts had ongoing investments made by previous heads of the family, the Peverell and Slytherin vaults had been stagnant for decades. Between the four houses, Harry's Gringotts portfolio was several inches thick; and Farlig was determined to make it thicker, once Harry made him account manager.

If he'd known what would follow, he might have reconsidered that. With the lure of getting to learn what artefacts and interesting objects lay within his possession, Farlig had beckoned him into his office and immediately sat the young wizard down in front of an enormous stack of parchment.

"I'm going to regret this, aren't I?" Harry declared warily. Farlig's returning grin showed all of his teeth.

"The top parchment lists all the current investments and regular transactions within your holdings," Farlig explained. "While prolific, it would do you well to invest more of your money in a wider range of businesses. I've included a list of the current businesses our investigations show will make good investments; including a few in the muggle world, if you aren't opposed."

Harry glanced down at the list, grimacing at some of the dark-sounding investments under the Black family name. Yes, it was going to be gruelling, but it would be worth it.

As the Gryffindor got to work, scrawling numbers and rifling through Farlig's list of suggested investments, the goblin watched with something akin to pride.

Young Harry Potter might be off to a late start, but if he carried on with this determination, he'd take the pureblood wizarding circles by storm and give them a much-needed shake-up.

And if he could make as much money as his accounts projected, Farlig's wife would be very happy indeed with his new position. After all, he now worked on commission.

.-.-.

About done with adventures for the summer, Harry decided to spend the rest of his time in Diagon Alley actually behaving — somewhat. He made no more jaunts into muggle London, but he did make a few more reckless purchases, taking advantage of having no one around to question his spending habits. A new trunk with more space than the old one, even more books, and a small Wizarding Wireless so he could listen to quidditch matches sometimes.

If he was being *really* foolish, he told himself, he would have bought a Firebolt. But he didn't, so no one could begrudge him a little shopping spree. No one had to know how much he'd really bought.

The start of the school term was drawing ever closer, and Harry was keen to make the most of his remaining freedom, wandering around Diagon in his new clothes, getting used to actually wearing things he liked. As the week went on, he spotted more people he knew from school, all there to buy their things for the upcoming school year. He stopped and spoke to some of them, but most he just observed with a small smile, keeping his head down. Until one.

Harry was wandering past Twilfitt and Tatting when he — quite literally — bumped into someone. “Watch where you’re going, you filthy— Potter!”

He looked up into the steely grey eyes of Draco Malfoy. Harry winced. “Sorry, I wasn’t looking.” He’d been too busy thinking about a passage in one of the books he’d been reading, about the history of the Wizengamot and why the fifty houses had originally been chosen. “Malfoy,” he greeted, bowing his head briefly, keeping his palms open at his sides like the etiquette book had said, to show that he wasn’t holding a wand. That seemed to throw the blond boy for a loop, and he blinked, before his eyes narrowed.

“Looks like you’re finally learning how to dress yourself, Potter,” he retorted sharply, though he too showed empty palms. “Where’s your usual entourage? They finally got sick of you?”

“They’re on holiday,” Harry told him. “I’ve been at the Leaky Cauldron for a while.”

“Alone?” Malfoy’s pale eyebrows shot up. “I find it hard to believe Dumbledore’s letting you wander around without a babysitter, all things considered.”

“What do you mean, all things considered?” Harry asked, bracing himself for some kind of insult or remark about how he was too stupid to survive by himself.

In reading his new books, Harry had discovered that he’d actually been enormously insulting in refusing Malfoy’s hand before the sorting back when they’d started Hogwarts, and it was probably that that got Malfoy’s back up around Harry all the time. That and Ron constantly antagonising him. He’d decided to try and be civil instead, and see where that got him; if he could take Malfoy off the list of things he had to worry about, it would make all the other things — like Voldemort, potential danger, and exams — a lot easier to bear.

"You mean no one told you? Merlin, it's like they *want* you to die," Malfoy muttered disparagingly. "Sirius Black? Ring any bells?"

"Wait— The escaped criminal? What's he got to do with anything?" Malfoy sighed impatiently.

"Do those glasses even work, Potter? The man's face is up on wanted posters all over Diagon! He broke out of Azkaban."

"Yeah, I know that," Harry replied slowly, wondering why he should be any more scared than anyone else.

"He was one of the Dark Lord's most loyal supporters. And, rumour has it," Malfoy gave a vicious smirk, "he's after you, Potter."

Harry's heart stuttered. "What?"

"He's coming for you. Talking in his sleep, the same words — 'he's at Hogwarts'. He wants revenge for his Lord, so you'd better watch out, Potty."

Malfoy sounded gleeful, but he actually looked a little disturbed that Harry had been left alone under the circumstances. Harry thought about all the times he'd been alone and unguarded — his trip to muggle London, his forays into the emptier parts of Diagon Alley. No wonder Fudge had been waiting for him when he'd arrived. He probably thought Black had got him.

But in that case, why *hadn't* he been given a guard?

Shaking his head and figuring it was probably all part of some scheme of Dumbledore's, Harry turned back to Malfoy. "Well, he's not likely to come into the middle of Diagon Alley, is he? I'm perfectly safe."

"Are you?" Malfoy retorted with a smirk. "I suppose at least you can defend yourself here. If you were capable of that, anyway," he added disparagingly. Harry stared blankly at him again. "Sweet Salazar, they really don't tell you *anything*!" He pulled his wand, and Harry automatically took a step back, but all the blond did was send out a trail of green sparks that formed a hissing snake before fading out. "Underage magic can't be traced in Diagon Alley," he informed Harry smugly. "There's too many people around for them to tell who cast what. As long as no one sees you, you can cast what you like."

"Well I wish I'd known that *before* I got here," Harry muttered, thinking of all the spells in *A Hundred Spells Every Wizard Should Know* that he'd been desperate to try out for days. Two whole weeks, wasted! "Why are you telling me all this, Malfoy? I bet you'd love to see Sirius Black get me."

"There's something different about you, Potter," Malfoy remarked, eyeing him over with his arms folded over his chest. "I feel like it's going to make the year... interesting. It'd be a shame if you died before I could see how Weasley's going to react to your new look. Silverling's isn't cheap." Harry was wearing his new jacket, but he hadn't expected Malfoy to

notice that, much less where he'd bought it from. Still, it made him wince; if Ron noticed, would he start thinking Harry was trying to rub his money in his face? He was always so sensitive about that sort of thing.

"Draco!" The call could only come from his mother, Narcissa Malfoy, and Malfoy jerked his head to see her at the end of the street. "Draco, dear, we have an appointment."

"See you at school, Potter," Malfoy spat.

"Malfoy!" Harry called, and the blond turned around with a raised eyebrow. "Thanks. For the information. I'll see you at school." He smiled and Malfoy seemed baffled by it as he went to catch up to his mother. Harry turned away, feet leading him back towards the Leaky Cauldron.

He had some spells to practice. He wouldn't worry about Sirius Black, for now — like he'd said, the man was hardly going to pop up in the middle of Diagon Alley to grab Harry. If no one else seemed to be worried enough to have someone watch Harry, then he wasn't going to worry about it.

He *was*, however, going to worry about what Malfoy meant by the year being interesting. He was weirdly happy about having had an entire conversation with the other boy without either of them threatening to hex the other, but the blond's words about Ron settled heavy in his chest. The last thing he wanted was to make his friend feel uncomfortable, but he wouldn't do that at the expense of his own happiness.

Harry shook his head, trudging back up to his room and trying to keep his mind on the spells, and which to practice first. He'd deal with Ron when he got there. As for Malfoy — maybe he'd misjudged him.

Time would tell, he supposed.

Chapter 3

According to the books, the easiest way to become familiar with your magical core was meditation.

No wonder the spells on him had made him impulsive, restless. He never would have been able to do it, even if he'd had the urge.

With the spells gone, however, Harry found it easy to sink into his own mind, his breathing steady and his eyes closed. It was a little like the days back in his cupboard; falling into his imagination to pretend he was literally anywhere other than crammed under the Dursleys' staircase. Pretend he wasn't in pain, wasn't starving, wasn't cold.

Except the difference here was that he wasn't creating anything — his mind was empty and still. At least, he tried to be. It was hard, shoving away every little thought that crossed his mind. But after several days of dedicated practice before bed, he was starting to get the hang of it.

He relaxed his shoulders against the headboard, trying to sink deeper into his body. He could almost feel it, a warmth running through him, a spark. The book said he had to find that spark and follow it back to his core.

The book also said it was incredibly difficult, and took time.

Somewhere, Harry thought he could see a faint glow of light in the corner of his vision; a strange concept with his eyes closed. He tried to focus on it, draw it closer — and then, outside the room, there was a loud bang and a grumbled curse.

Harry's concentration was lost.

He scowled to himself, opening his eyes. When he glanced at his watch, he realised it was already nearly midnight — too late to try again. He'd just have to accept that progress for now, and keep trying tomorrow.

It wasn't going to happen overnight, he reminded himself. These things took practice.

But he couldn't help but feel like there was an hourglass somewhere, grains of sand running out far too quickly, counting down to the day when he would no longer have the freedom for practice and time.

Dumbledore — if it truly was Dumbledore, though he couldn't think of any other options — would eventually find out that Harry not only knew about the spells, but had broken them. He highly doubted he'd be able to play dumb until he was seventeen. Sometimes he doubted he'd be able to play dumb for more than a week after getting back to Hogwarts. But if there was one thing he knew, it was that he couldn't reveal his hand too early. He needed more information.

He needed to make sure no one could ever stifle his magic in the same way ever again.

Shuffling down to rest his head on the pillow, Harry closed his eyes, determination still tight in his jaw. It was too early for a plan yet — he still didn't know for sure who he was planning against — but he had time to prepare. He was only thirteen. No one would be expecting much of him yet.

That would be their mistake.

.-. .

At long last, Harry's peace was broken by the arrival of the Weasleys and Hermione on the morning of August 31st. He found them outside of Fortescue's, ice creams in front of them while Harry wandered over from having just been in Flourish and Blotts again. Ron had even more freckles than usual, and Hermione's brown skin seemed to have darkened several shades.

They beamed at him, Hermione grabbing him in a tight hug as soon as he was close enough. "We wondered where you were, mate!" Ron exclaimed, patting him on the back as Harry sat down. "We went to the Leaky Cauldron, but Tom said you'd already left."

"I was just wandering," Harry said with a shrug. "Got all my school things last week, so I haven't had much else to do lately." He wasn't ready to tell his best friends about what he'd been up to in the last three weeks. Not until he knew who he could trust. "How was Egypt? And France?"

"Never mind that," Hermione waved off. "Did you *really* blow up your aunt, Harry?"

"I didn't exactly do it on purpose," Harry replied, rolling his eyes. "She's fine now. The ministry got it all sorted out." Of course Fudge wasn't going to expel him when some sort of madman was after his skin.

"It's not funny, Ron!" Hermione insisted, while Ron roared with laughter. "Harry could've been expelled!"

"Yeah, but he wasn't," Ron retorted, still grinning.

"What's with all the books, Hermione?" Harry asked, quickly changing the subject. She had a huge stack of books by her side; far more than should be on her school list.

"Oh, well I'm taking more new subjects than you, aren't I?" she replied, pointing out which subject each book was for. Harry's jaw dropped.

"How is it even possible to take that many?" The form McGonagall had them fill out asked for two additional subjects, three at maximum. Hermione was taking five.

"I've got it all sorted out with Professor McGonagall, don't worry," Hermione said dismissively. "Now, Ron and I were just talking — I've still got some money left over from my parents, for an early birthday present, and I was thinking about getting an owl."

"There's a creature shop over there," Harry replied, pointing to the Magical Menagerie. He'd spent quite a bit of time in there, talking to the snakes.

"Perfect. I want to get something for Scabbers, too. He's been off since Egypt," Ron added, patting the lump in his front pocket. They all got to their feet, Harry helping Hermione with some of her many books.

"Are those new boots, Harry?" Hermione asked, making him glance down and realise he was wearing the dragonhide boots from Silverling's. He grimaced, hoping Ron didn't notice.

"Yeah. I got a bit bored around here, did some shopping. Dudley's shoes are never gonna fit me."

"They're very nice," she complimented. Luckily, Ron was already on his way to the menagerie.

"Are you two coming or not?" he called impatiently. Harry and Hermione hurried to follow, Hermione's books banging into their knees.

Perhaps Harry would buy her a bag from Twilfitt and Tatting for Christmas.

.-.-.-.

They returned to the Leaky Cauldron with Ron's rat tonic and Hermione's new cat — or maybe small tiger, Harry wasn't sure — and both Ron and Hermione in foul moods. Harry was already thinking longingly of his solitary days gone past. Of course, the rest of the Weasley family were there when they arrived, and Harry was sucked into the chaos like he'd never left. It was good to see them again, but it was all a bit much after so long by himself.

Harry was glad to head back to his room after dinner, sleepy from both the food and the social interaction. He could hear the muffled sounds of Ron and Percy finishing their packing next door, and just as he went to unbuckle his boots, his door swung open. Fred and George slipped in, quickly shutting it behind them. "Hiya, Harry, old chap. Don't mind if we hang out in here for a minute, do you?" Fred asked, sitting on the bed beside him while George took the other side.

"What've you done?" Harry asked flatly. Both twins put a hand to their heart as if struck.

"Us? Do something? *Never*," they said in unison.

"You're not going anywhere til I've found my badge!" Percy's indignant voice drifted through from next door. The twins shared a look, and Harry raised an eyebrow.

"...We might've stolen Percy's Head Boy badge," George admitted.

"But we've been improving it," Fred added, rummaging in his pocket. "Look!" He showed Harry the red and gold badge, which now read 'Bighead Boy'. Harry snorted.

"He's gonna kill you," he remarked, but didn't toss the twins out.

Gathering up all the miscellaneous things that had sprawled all over his room in his three week stay, Harry forgot about the book he'd been reading before bed until Fred picked it up off the bedside table. "'*Wizarding Traditions and Pureblood Rites*', hmm?' he read the cover, brows furrowed as he flicked it open. Harry's heart stopped. 'Not your usual bedtime reading.'

"I, uh," Harry started, frantically fumbling for some kind of excuse. George smirked, plucking the book from his twin's grasp.

"Is little Harrikins learning about his place in the world? Noble and Most Ancient Heir of Potter," he added teasingly, making Harry flinch.

"How do you know about that?"

"Not like there are any other Potters about, is there?" George replied. "We just didn't think you knew."

"The, uh—the goblins told me. When I went to Gringotts," Harry said eventually, praying the twins didn't dig any deeper than that. Surely that was a normal thing, right? The goblins informing someone about their inheritance.

Neither redhead seemed perturbed by it, nodding as if it made total sense. "They're probably keen to have the Potter vaults open again," Fred mused. "Don't worry, Harry," he added, clearly sensing the fear rolling off the younger boy. "We won't tell Ron. Our little brother's a mite sensitive about these things."

"We can write to Bill and Charlie, if you like," George suggested. "They're the ones doing all the lordship stuff in our family. Although Weasley and Prewett might be Sacred 28, but we've let a lot of the traditions die, so I don't know how helpful they'd be."

"Sacred 28?" Harry had seen references to that in his books, but never had it actually explained to him.

"The 28 wizarding families who were *true* purebloods back in the 30s," Fred explained with a roll of his eyes that showed exactly what he thought of that. "As decided by some ponce who wrote a book about it. There's others, of course—the Potters are as pure as it gets, but they're not on the list because the author had it out for them. Said they don't count because they're not technically English pureblood. As if they're any less English than the Shafiqs or the Shacklebolts. But it's basically a bunch of old-blood wizarding families. You can probably find a book about it if you like. A better book than the original; there's bound to be one that tells you all of the old-blood families. All the Wizengamot seats. You can owl-order it to school."

Harry, who had been trying to find a book exactly like that, looked up hopefully. "I've never owl-ordered anything before."

"Oh, it's easy," George assured. "You just get the reference number off the catalogue, owl off with the money and they'll send it back to you. Angelina's got a Flourish and Blotts catalogue, I'm sure she'd let you borrow it at school."

"And if you ever want to order something without putting your name on it," Fred said.

"In case it's not something little Harry Potter should be looking at," George supplied knowingly.

"We'll be happy to put our names down for you," Fred finished, grinning. He glanced at his twin. "People have given up questioning what we buy."

Before Harry could answer, the door swung open again. Quick as a flash, George had the book shoved behind his back. "There you are, boys," Mrs Weasley greeted, sounding harassed. "Have you seen Percy's badge?"

"Not since he was flashing it around earlier, Mum," Fred said earnestly. Mrs Weasley eyed her sons with suspicion.

"I haven't seen it, Mrs Weasley," Harry piped up. "But I can help you look, if you like?" He went for wide-eyed innocence, and Mrs Weasley softened her smile.

"Oh, that's alright, Harry dear. You finish packing and go to bed, you've got a long day tomorrow! Fred, George, you as well. The Ministry is sending cars, so we can't be late!"

"Be out in a minute, Mum," George promised, and the Weasley matriarch left them be. George smirked. "Nice one, Harry."

"Seriously though, mate, if you ever need anything, just ask," Fred insisted, squeezing Harry's shoulder. "We're good at keeping quiet. When we need to," he added, no doubt thinking of the many explosions they regularly made.

"Thanks, guys. You too. Always happy to be an alibi." Harry winked, making the twins grin widely as they stood.

"Knew we could count on you, little brother!"

The twins bid their goodnights and left Harry by himself, a warmth brewing in his chest. It was nice to know he had at least two people on his side.

.-.-.-.

Harry was surprised the next morning when Mr Weasley pulled him aside in all the chaos at the platform to tell him about Sirius Black. He pretended it was new information, appropriately wide-eyed and fearful at the confirmation that oh, by the way, the mass-murderer that broke out of the most secure prison in the wizarding world? Wants you dead. He promised not to do anything rash — only half-meaning it — and then they were on their way. Harry wondered what he would have done if he hadn't bumped into Malfoy the week before. Why did Dumbledore think it was okay to keep something like that from him for so long? From what Mr Weasley said, the headmaster didn't even want him to know to begin with!

Ginny and the twins quickly ditched them to find their own friends, and when they were secure in the compartment with the sleeping new professor, Harry told his two best friends

about Sirius Black. It was only fair, after all; if they were going to be hanging around him, they were in just as much danger. He was a little insulted at Hermione's assumption that he'd go seeking Black out, but then he remembered the compulsion charm the goblins had removed, and realised that before he probably would've done exactly that.

Conversation soon turned to Hogsmeade, making Harry remember for the first time since getting to Diagon Alley that he never got his permission slip signed. He probably wouldn't be allowed to go even if he had.

As Ron and Hermione tried to cheer him up about not being able to go — well, Hermione tried, Ron mostly gushed about how great Hogsmeade was supposed to be — Harry let his thoughts wander, his gaze drifting to the man asleep opposite him. Professor R J Lupin. He looked familiar. Perhaps Harry had seen him around Diagon Alley? He couldn't place it, it was just a feeling, like he *knew* this man. Even as he got dragged back into conversation, he couldn't look away from him for long. Part of Harry hoped the professor would wake up, then he might be able to find out if they knew each other.

Then the dementor attacked, and Harry stopped caring about Professor Lupin at all.

He was still shaking when he finally got Madam Pomfrey to let him go back to the feast, barely sparing a thought to the sorting he'd miss, or even Hagrid's new teaching job. All he could think about was that awful, awful scream...

"Is it true, Potter? You *actually* fainted?" Malfoy jeered as they all headed for their dorms.

"Shove off, Malfoy," Ron said with a scowl. When Harry looked up, Malfoy's eyes met his. For the briefest moment it looked like he was actually *concerned*.

"I'm fine, Malfoy," he retorted acidly, turning away towards the staircase. No, he was seeing things. Just because they'd had one half-decent conversation, didn't mean Malfoy suddenly gave a damn about him.

.....

When the feast was finally over, Remus rose from his seat at the head table, thinking longingly of his bed in his new quarters. First, however, he had to make one stop. He couldn't help himself.

His feet led the way seemingly without his consent, his eyes roaming the all-too-familiar corridors. He never thought he'd be back at Hogwarts again. Certainly never thought he'd be allowed to *teach*. It was a dream come true.

He ignored the ache in his chest, the voices of times past — of *friends* past — echoing in his ears as he walked. Every corridor, every classroom, they all held memories. Even the good ones made him want to howl with pain.

He stopped outside a nondescript black door, taking a steady breath before knocking. "Enter," a voice drawled, sending another stab of pain through Remus' heart. He pushed the door open, meeting stony black eyes. "Lupin." His name was spat like a curse, but he refused

to flinch. If anything, it made him smile a little. Some things never changed. “What do you want?”

Remus edged into the office just far enough to shut the door behind him. Severus was sat behind his desk, a potions journal open in front of him. He didn’t look particularly pleased to have been interrupted.

All throughout the feast Remus had forced himself not to look down the other end of the staff table. Now he couldn’t bring himself to look away.

He hadn’t seen Severus in over a decade. The other man had certainly aged far better than Remus had — going grey at the grand old age of thirty-three. Considering... everything, Severus looked good. Older, harder, his hair a little longer, but still Severus.

“Did you come here just to stare at me, or did you need something?” The words were biting, but Remus didn’t avert his gaze. Severus was scowling at him, a familiar expression but for the lines a little deeper in his face. Remus tried not to think about the last time they saw each other. He definitely wasn’t ready for that yet.

“I just wanted to thank you,” Remus replied, his voice still a little hoarse. The last moon hadn’t been a particularly pleasant one. Hopefully it’d be the last like that for a while. “For agreeing to provide the Wolfsbane potion while I’m working here. It means a lot to me.”

“Dumbledore insisted,” Severus said, lips pursed. “Don’t think I did it out of the kindness of my own heart.”

Remus actually chuckled. “Of course not, Severus,” he replied easily. “I know you don’t have one of those.” The words could’ve been harsh, but they were fond if anything, and it made the Slytherin’s scowl deepen.

“Is that it?”

“I’m going, I’m going,” Remus assured. Even after all this time, the Potions Master’s sharp tongue didn’t quite cut the way it was supposed to. Not to say it didn’t hurt, but... it was a different hurt. “I just thought I’d stop by and let you know how grateful I am.” He paused, screwing up his Gryffindor courage for the minute. “It’s good to see you again, Severus.”

“Goodnight, Lupin,” Severus replied flatly. He looked away, jaw clenched. Remus took a step back, knowing when he’d pushed too far. It had always been a delicate game, that. He could hardly believe he was playing it again; could hardly believe he *wanted to*. He hadn’t been sure, until he’d seen the man. But yes, he wanted to. After all these years, he couldn’t quite shake Severus Snape.

He left the office, finally retreating to his quarters, letting out a sigh of relief when he stretched out on his mattress. He closed his eyes, thoughts turning to the incident on the train. To the one student he hadn’t been truly ready to meet yet.

He was so *small*. Certainly bigger than the last time Remus saw him, but still. James hadn’t been that small at thirteen. Even Lily had been taller, he was pretty sure. Still, Harry Potter

seemed happy enough. When he wasn't being attacked by dementors, at least.

Remus sighed, rolling over onto his side. The hollow spot in his chest ached, the faint howling in the back of his head mournful, and he squeezed his eyes shut as if that would make it go away.

"I don't know if this was a good idea after all," he murmured to himself, knowing he'd be having nightmares that night.

It was going to be a long year, full of old memories and broken pack bonds in so many ways. Remus just hoped it would be worth it.

.-.-.

The start of term was certainly eventful.

Between everything with Buckbeak and Malfoy, and adjusting to his new classes, Harry hardly found any time by himself to work on his extra curricular studies. True to their word, the twins had borrowed Angelina's Flourish and Blotts catalogue, and Harry had sent off for a book about all the old pureblood families, as well as one about the duties of a pureblood heir. It was so much easier to find what he wanted when he had a nice handy list of them in the catalogue. He should've done this *ages* ago!

The night after his new books arrived, Harry left Ron playing chess with Ginny and scurried up to the dorm; if he was lucky, he'd have at least an hour before everyone started wanting to go to bed. He dug his new books from the side compartment in his new trunk, wondering which to read first.

The one about the duties of an heir was shorter, so he went with that. It was dry, as most of the books about pureblood stuff seemed to be; they certainly didn't want to make it easy for people to learn about it all!

"Harry?"

He jolted at the sudden noise, shoving his book under his pillow in a move that wasn't remotely subtle. Neville backed up a step, holding his hands out soothingly. "It's okay, I'm sorry, I thought you heard me come in."

"Sorry, Neville. You startled me."

"You're taking up your family seat?" Neville asked, and Harry blinked. Neville gestured at the book.

"What? How do you know about that stuff?"

Neville's answering smile was somewhat crooked. "Neville Longbottom, Heir to the Ancient and Most Noble House of Longbottom, at your service," he declared, bowing in the way Harry had read was formal when one heir addressed another. Harry gaped.

"You... *really*?"

“Really,” Neville confirmed. “My gran’s got my proxy right now, but she’ll pass things to me as soon as I’m old enough. Oh, this is great, Harry! The others will be so happy to hear you’re taking up your heirship; we weren’t sure, you see, when you never said anything.”

“Wait, no!” Harry went wide-eyed in alarm. “You can’t tell anyone, Neville.” He didn’t even know who these ‘others’ were, but if Dumbledore got wind of any of it...

“Harry, whatever Ron’s told you, it’s nothing to be ashamed of,” Neville replied, sounding defensive. “The House of Potter has a great history, and being an heir is a huge honour.”

“No, it’s not that, I—“ Harry faltered, letting out a sigh. Surely he could trust Neville, right? Especially if he was also an heir. Maybe he’d be able to help Harry out. “Come here.”

He scooted up the bed to make room for Neville to sit opposite him, then closed the curtains, putting up one of the privacy charms he’d learned from *A Hundred Spells Every Wizard Should Know*. Neville’s eyebrows rose. “What I’m telling you, Neville, you can’t tell *anyone*, okay?”

Neville nodded, brow furrowing in confusion. And Harry told him — all about his trip to Gringotts, and the block on his magic, and who he thought was responsible.

“I’ve been trying to learn everything I can since I found out,” he said, gesturing to the books. “Bought a load of books. But there’s so much I don’t know, and I can’t make things too obvious or Dumbledore will know I found out about the block.”

“He blocked your family magics?” Neville’s voice came out in a horrified whisper, his face pale. “He could get sent to Azkaban for that! That’s *so many* different kinds of illegal!”

Harry winced. “Who’s gonna believe me over him, though?” he said plaintively. “Even if they did, he’d find some way to convince everyone it’s all for my own good, or some rot.”

“That’s awful.” Neville squeezed Harry’s shoulder supportively. “Do Ron and Hermione know?”

Harry shook his head. “I can’t be sure they won’t go to him over it. Or he might get to them somehow anyway.” He couldn’t speak quite so plainly as he wanted to, but Neville got the idea; he couldn’t trust them yet.

“I’ll write to my gran,” Neville assured. “She taught me everything I know, she can help you too. Obviously she won’t know all the stuff that’s specific to the Potter family, but there’s probably a book in your vault about that. Or for, uh, any of the other families. Merlin, Harry, Slytherin? That’s *insane*! And Black, too — the House of Black is one of the oldest known pureblood lines in the world! How’d you get that one?”

“No idea,” Harry said with a shrug. “I guess someone down the line named me their heir. Do you really think your gran could help?”

“She’d be honoured,” Neville replied. “She loves all that stuff — can’t wait til I’m old enough to get more involved. She can keep a secret, too.” Neville paused, having a thought.

"Harry, have you ever heard of Occlumency?"

"Can't say I have," Harry replied, running the strange word over in his head. "What is it?"

"It's a form of magic, just about every pureblood kid is taught it growing up. It protects your thoughts. See, there's this magic called Legilimency — that's reading peoples' thoughts. Getting into their minds, seeing their memories, all that. Occlumency is the prevention of that. It forms shields around your mind so that no one can get in and steal your secrets."

Harry's jaw dropped in horror. "People can *read my mind*?"

"Not everyone," Neville hastened to assure him. "It's a really rare skill. But Dumbledore is famous for it. There's rumours that Snape is really good at it, too. If you're going to be keeping secrets from Dumbledore, you'll want to learn Occlumency. I'll write to gran tomorrow, get you some books."

"Do you know it?"

"Oh, yeah, I learned before I came to Hogwarts," Neville said. "Every family needs to be able to protect their secrets. I'm not amazing at it — if someone was really trying, I probably wouldn't be able to keep them out. But, well, no one has needed to really try. Not yet, anyway."

"But what if Dumbledore's already read my mind?" Harry thought of all the times that could've been possible — during mealtimes, or even in lessons. How close did someone have to be to read minds?

"Legilimency needs eye contact. As long as you don't look him in the eye, you should be alright."

Harry let out a sigh of relief. Don't look him in the eye. He could do that. That also explained why the book said eye contact was a show of trust. "Thanks, Neville. God, there's still so much I don't know. It's gonna take me forever to catch up."

"You'll get there, Harry," Neville said supportively, squeezing his shoulder again. "D'you mind if I, uh, go? Only I've got homework, and..."

Harry belatedly realised his wards were still up, and waved his wand to cancel them. He pulled his curtains aside, and froze when he saw Ron sat on his own bed beside him. The redhead eyed the pair suspiciously. "What've you two been up to?"

Harry and Neville shared a look. "Studying," they both said eventually, Neville heading back towards his own bed. Ron stared at Harry for a bit longer, but let it go.

"Whatever. Harry, d'you think Scabbers has lost more weight? It's that bloody cat of Hermione's, he's got it out for him I swear." Scabbers was laid out on the bedspread in front of Ron, and Harry had to admit he'd definitely seen better days. Privately, he thought that was more due to him being old than anything Crookshanks was doing, but Ron wouldn't hear a word of it.

"Just keep up with the rat tonic," he replied. "I'm sure he'll perk up."

Ron didn't look entirely convinced, but he didn't say anything more as Harry started getting ready for bed. Harry only felt guilty for a minute for excluding him. Ron wouldn't understand.

.-.-.

Everyone was excited for their first Defence Against the Dark Arts lesson. From what they'd heard around the school, Professor Lupin actually knew his stuff; no chance of another duffer like Lockhart. Harry hadn't properly spoken to him yet, but he still couldn't shake that strange feeling like the professor was familiar. It made something in his chest tie itself in knots, and had Harry squirming when he was sat behind his desk staring at the new professor.

The feeling was pushed aside when they were led to the staff room, Lupin gently suggesting that Snape vacate the area. The Defence professor seemed incredibly amused by Neville's boggart transformation. Maybe Snape had already pissed off the new staff member. Harry wouldn't put it past him.

Wand in hand, Harry braced himself to face the boggart, only for Lupin to step in front of him. The boggart turned into a floating silver orb, shining mysteriously — until Lupin turned it into a cockroach. Was that the moon? Why was Lupin afraid of the moon?

No one seemed to notice that Harry hadn't faced the Boggart, too busy chattering about their own vanquished fears. Harry almost said something to Lupin, stayed back and demanded answers, but he decided against it. Maybe he was overthinking things. Possibly class was just about to run over, and Lupin wanted to wrap things up.

Harry kept to himself as he walked down to dinner, letting Ron and Hermione's bickering wash over him. Professor Lupin hadn't said anything about seeing Harry before, or knowing him from anywhere. Harry was probably imagining things.

Still, something didn't feel right. There was *something* about the man that Harry couldn't put his finger on.

Chapter 4

As Ron and Hermione continued to fight over their pets, Harry found himself spending less and less time with the pair. It was giving him a headache, and both of them expected him to take their side — it just wasn't worth the hassle. Instead, he spent time alone, or with Neville. He was surprised at how close he was becoming to the shy Gryffindor since he'd revealed his secret. He was easy to get along with; much easier, Harry thought guiltily, than Ron and Hermione.

True to his word, Neville had sent an owl to his gran explaining Harry's circumstances. She'd responded with a long letter about what she'd like to do and say to Albus Dumbledore, but also with several rolls of parchment with notes for Harry to study about proper etiquette and behaviour, and a book called *Occlumency For Beginners*. Thanks to her, Harry was now in the habit of trying to clear his mind and organise his thoughts before bedtime. He wasn't sure if it was helping, but Neville insisted it was the best starting point.

Harry and Neville were in the school library — where for once, Hermione was not — looking at some of the books that wouldn't be too suspicious for him to be seen studying in public. Just in case anyone came across them. Harry should've known there would be plenty of books in the Hogwarts library.

"So technically, none of us are responsible for anything until we come of age," Neville was explaining. He sounded more confident than Harry had ever heard him, except perhaps for when he was talking about Herbology. "We're just heirs — it's not until you're the head of your house that you really have any influence. For most people that wouldn't happen for ages. Usually a Lord or Lady will keep their seat until their heir is married and has kids — just in case they need to change the line of succession, y'know? If they don't like who their heir has married or whoever. But, well, we don't have any other options," he added with a bitter smile. Harry bit his lip. He knew Neville was raised by his gran, but he'd never asked what happened to his parents. He didn't really know how to bring it up.

"Then why do all the books make it sound like such a big deal from birth?"

"The family heirs are the ones responsible for securing good family ties for the future," Neville told him. "Everything relies on the heir. If the head of the household is awful, sure, that's not great. But the future lies on the heir, so if they're not great, that's another generation of bad to deal with. Say one heir offends another heir when they're like, twelve, right? That grudge will carry through the family for the next fifty or sixty years, however long it takes for the next heir to take over. And Merlin help them if the grudge has been passed down. Some families have had grudges going on for centuries."

"Like the Malfoys and the Weasleys," Harry realised. That bad blood was far too deep to have started with Lucius and Arthur. Neville nodded.

"Exactly. And family grudges can make politics really difficult, especially when there's only fifty seats on the Wizengamot at any one time. If you piss off one family, and they tell all

their allied families—“

“You end up with a lot of people who vote against you just to spite you,” Harry surmised. Neville nodded.

“Exactly. So our behaviour is really, really important.”

Harry looked back down at the next paragraph in the book, and as such didn’t notice they had company until a throat was cleared. Susan Bones and Hannah Abbott stood beside their table; Susan eyed Harry warily for a second before turning to Neville. “Ernie wants to know if you’ll help him with his Herbology homework on Friday.”

“Of course, yeah. Why didn’t he ask me himself?” Neville paused, then sighed. “Don’t tell me he’s *still* hiding after the butterbeer incident?” Both girls giggled, and Hannah nodded. “Idiot. It’s completely fine, my gran even thought it was funny. Tell him I’ll meet him in the usual spot after dinner.”

Susan turned as if to leave, but then she glanced down at the book open in front of the two boys. Harry fought the urge to cover it up. “No,” she murmured, a slow smile creeping across her face. “Really?” The question was directed at Neville, who grinned, nodding.

“Really. But it’s all hush-hush for now. Reasons,” he added, as if that was in any way helpful. Harry had officially lost the plot of the conversation.

Susan and Hannah both looked at Harry, studying him like they hadn’t seen him before. Eventually, Hannah bowed her head with open palms. “Well met, Heir Potter.”

Susan repeated the greeting. Harry spluttered. Neville kicked him in the shin, giving him a pointed look. “I, uh, well met, Heir Bones, Heir Abbott,” he returned, bowing his head at each of them. “You two as well?”

He knew Abbott was one of the Sacred 28 lines, but he hadn’t seen anything about the Bones family. He really had to read that book on all the pureblood families.

“We were starting to think you’d never take your title,” Hannah said, keeping her voice low. “What took you so long?”

“I— It’s a long story,” Harry said, running his hand through his hair. “How many are there at Hogwarts?”

“Oh, loads,” Susan replied with a dismissive wave of her hand. “Basically all the Slytherins in our year. Ernie MacMillan. Sully Fawley, in the year below. Anthony Goldstein. Cassius Warrington, that tall bloke on the Slytherin quidditch team. Loads more, too.”

“They do it on purpose. Our parents, I mean,” Hannah explained. “They all try and have kids the same age so that we all meet at school and start early. There’s a few outliers — the Weasleys have always been off-cycle, and the Flints duffed up a bit — but for the most part, it’s all our lot. Good to have you in the ranks.” She grinned, winking briefly. “We’d love to hear that long story of yours, one day.”

They made to leave, and Harry reached out for a second. “Wait! Don’t— don’t tell Dumbledore. Don’t let him know.” They shared a glance, then looked back at him.

“Dumbledore holds too many seats that aren’t rightfully his,” Susan said darkly, a knowing glint in her eyes. “Don’t worry, Harry. Your secret’s safe with us.”

Watching the girls walk off, Harry blinked, bewildered. “When you said there were others, I didn’t realise there were that many.” Neville grinned sheepishly.

“Yeah, well. We’re the year for it. Like I was saying, it’s our job to secure the family future. They want to make sure we have the best opportunities to start networking. Have you ever noticed how most of the Slytherins leave me alone? Even Malfoy’s not as bad with me as he is with the rest of you. Though this year, he only really seems to be after Ron.”

Harry had noticed that, too; Malfoy barely said anything to Harry unless Ron started the fight. Instead he’d taken to giving Harry calculated looks across the room, like he couldn’t quite figure him out.

“If this whole heir thing keeps the Slytherins off my back, it could be worth it after all,” Harry teased, pulling the book a little closer. Neville laughed.

“I don’t think even being the Potter heir could fix that completely.”

.

When Gorvak had warned Harry to be wary of his magic in the months following the removal of the block, Harry hadn’t expected it to be quite so itchy. He constantly felt like he was vibrating out of his skin, his magic building and begging to be used. He was picking things up in class faster than he’d ever done before — faster than Hermione, even, sometimes. He’d have to get a handle on that, or he’d be found out in a second.

For some reason, walking seemed to help. Most nights Harry put on his invisibility cloak and slipped out of the common room, strolling the halls of Hogwarts in the darkness. For once, he wasn’t even up to something. It just felt like the walking was soothing him — the castle was soothing him. Deep down, he wondered if it was something to do with being the heir of Slytherin, if the castle recognised him somehow. It sounded stupid, but people always said Hogwarts felt like it was alive.

He’d taken his cloak off as he walked through the courtyard, wanting to feel the wind ruffling his hair. He knew he was being foolish. There was a murderer out looking for him, and here he was walking around by himself at night. But he just couldn’t stay still. He’d rather walk for an hour or two than spend the whole night tossing and turning. Besides, with the dementors around, Black wouldn’t be getting into Hogwarts.

There was a flash of silver, and Harry swore under his breath as he turned the corner to see familiar blond hair. “What are you doing out after curfew, Potter?”

“I could say the same to you, Malfoy,” Harry argued. Malfoy rolled his eyes.

“I don’t have a crazed serial killer after me,” was his retort.

“Careful, Malfoy, it’s starting to sound like you care.”

Malfoy flinched, then glared. “Just because I hate you, Potter, doesn’t mean I want to see you get murdered.”

That made Harry grin, though he couldn’t explain why. “I was just out for a walk. Feeling restless.”

“*Feeling restless, he says,*” Malfoy said with an exasperated skyward glance. “Just do bloody laps in the common room!”

“Well, what’s your excuse then?”

“None of your business,” Malfoy said immediately. The two boys stared at each other in the beat of silence that followed, at a stalemate. Suddenly, Harry got an idea. It might’ve been a stupid one.

“Well met, Heir Malfoy,” he said, bowing slowly. Malfoy stared, blinking incredulously.

“The rumours are true, then,” he murmured. Ever so slowly, inch by inch, the Malfoy heir sank into a similar bow, though he was hampered slightly by his arm in a sling. “Well met, Heir Potter.”

He straightened up. They stared at each other some more, neither sure what the next step was. Harry had gone and thrown off the rhythm of their usual interactions. “It’s Heir Black, too,” he threw out impulsively, not sure why he was telling Malfoy of all people. The blond’s eyes widened a fraction.

“How— oh, of bloody course,” he muttered, shaking his head. “Heir Potter-Black. I should’ve known.” At the look on his face, Harry was almost tempted to throw out his other two names, as well. “Well, that’ll shake things up a bit. At least it’ll take two of Dumbledore’s proxy seats away. Though I don’t know if it’s worse to let you have them.” He made a noise of disgust.

“It won’t be,” Harry assured. He met Malfoy’s eye for the briefest of seconds, remembering what Hannah had said. “We don’t need any more seats under Dumbledore’s control.”

He was sure he’d actually rendered Malfoy speechless. He wished he had a camera for proof. “You are making things interesting, aren’t you, Potter?” Malfoy’s voice had softened. Harry’s lips quirked in a half-smile. “All the same, it’ll do you no good if you’re dead. Toddle off to your little lion’s den, now, won’t you?”

“Only if you slither back to your snake pit,” Harry retorted, grinning. That actually earned a soft laugh as Malfoy turned away.

Once he was alone, Harry threw his cloak over his shoulders, heading back in the direction of Gryffindor tower with an odd spring in his step. Of all the things he’d learnt since his birthday, one was proving to be more bewildering than all the rest put together.

Maybe, just maybe, he actually quite liked Draco Malfoy. When he wasn't being a prat.

.-.-.-

Everyone in third year was practically falling over themselves with excitement at the announcement of the first Hogsmeade weekend. Except, of course, Harry Potter.

"It's fine, really. You go have fun," he insisted for the hundredth time, shooing Ron and Hermione towards the portrait hole. "Tell me all about it when you get back."

"We can always go next time, Harry, really," Hermione started, but Ron tugged on her arm.

"Look, the man said leave, so we'll leave," he said. "We'll bring you back loads of sweets, Harry."

"See you at the feast tonight!" It was Halloween. Harry's *favourite* day of the year just kept getting better and better.

"You sure you don't want company, Harry?" That was Neville, his scarf already wrapped around his neck. Harry smiled, though it didn't reach his eyes.

"Really, Nev, I'm alright. Probably just gonna hang out in the library." He was getting worse than Hermione on that front. Though she didn't seem to be up to her usual standards this year — probably because her schedule had her in about six places at once.

"If you're sure. Happy Samhain, Harry." Neville had been teaching Harry all about the traditional wizarding holidays; Samhain; Yule; Beltane. Through him, Harry knew that some of the students would be lighting a bonfire that evening in the stone circle. He wished he could join them without giving up his secrets to Dumbledore. Maybe next year.

The path to the library was a familiar one, and Harry headed for a little-used back corner of the enormous room. From an offhand comment Hermione had made, Harry learned that the Hogwarts library kept yearbooks of all the previous classes. From the dust layering the shelves, it clearly didn't get much foot traffic. There were rows and rows of black leather-bound books, each with a decade of dates on the spine. Harry found the one for graduating classes 1970-1980, easing it from the shelf and carrying it to the nearest table.

The section for 1978 was easily found, and Harry gasped at the first page he opened. There, near the bottom of the second page, was a picture of a redheaded teenage witch with luminous green eyes and a bright smile. There was a small amount of text beneath her picture.

Evans, Lily

Gryffindor House

Head Girl

Top of class in Charms, Arithmancy

Harry hurriedly flicked through several pages until he came to the ‘P’ names. His breath caught in his throat. He could certainly see why so many people said he looked just like his father.

Potter, James

Gryffindor House

Head Boy

Quidditch Captain (Chaser)

Top of class in Transfiguration

Gently, Harry ran his finger over his father’s face, eyes burning as he looked at that rakish grin. He was only eighteen, and yet only a few years away from death.

Absently, Harry scanned the rest of the page, remembering what Hannah Abbott had said about all the purebloods trying to have kids that went to school at the same time. He saw a Macmillan — Ernie’s dad, maybe? Or an uncle? — And a Nott, and— wait a second.

Snape, Severus

Slytherin House

Top of class in Potions

Sure enough, there was a picture of a surly-looking teenager with a hooked nose and black hair that hung into his eyes. His Potions Master, age eighteen. He knew, of course, that Snape hated his father — he hadn’t realised they’d gone to school together.

He flicked back to the beginning, curious to see if he’d recognise any other names. The very first page made his jaw drop.

Black, Sirius

Gryffindor House

Top of class in Astronomy

He could hardly believe the winsome, grinning black-haired teenager in the picture was the same hollow-eyed face staring back at him from the wanted posters. Sirius Black had gone to school with his parents? Had been in the same house, even! Had his father known, even then, that he was evil?

The man looked familiar, wanted posters aside, and it took Harry a minute to realise why. The photo Hagrid had given him years ago, from his parents’ wedding. Sirius Black was in it.

Sirius Black had been their best man.

Harry felt sick. He quickly turned the page, not wanting to look into those sparkling grey eyes anymore. He forced himself to look for other familiar names, refusing to dwell on what he'd just discovered. If he thought too hard about it, he'd just work himself up.

Greengrass, Fenella. Lupin, Remus.

Wait.

Harry did a double-take, staring down at the boy with dark blond hair and honey eyes, a bashful grin tugging at his lips, a faint scar across the bridge of his nose.

Lupin, Remus

Gryffindor House

Gryffindor Prefect

Top of class in Ancient Runes, Defence Against the Dark Arts

Professor Lupin seemed far too old to have gone to school with his parents. He was already going grey! Desperate, Harry kept going, wondering who else he'd recognise in there. Who next, Cornelius Fudge?!

When he reached the 1979 graduating class, Harry slammed the book shut, the sound echoing in the empty library. He vaguely heard Madam Pince shushing him from her desk, but ignored it, his heart still pounding.

Before he could really think about it, Harry was stuffing the book back on its shelf and running from the library, ignoring Pince's reprimand. The hallways were practically empty as he ran, only slowing down when he reached Lupin's office. The door was open, and the man looked up, surprise in his eyes. "Harry? Is everything alright?"

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Lupin stiffened. "I, uh, Harry, why don't you come in, shut the door behind you." Harry did so, staring at his professor with a look of betrayal.

"Why didn't you tell me you knew them?" The hurt was clear in Harry's tone. Lupin blinked at him.

"I beg your pardon?"

"My parents. You went to school with them, I saw it in the yearbook. You were all in Gryffindor together. You, and them — and Sirius Black."

Lupin's face drained of what little colour it had, and he put a hand against the desk for support. "Harry," he breathed, looking a little like he'd been shot. "Harry, I thought you knew."

"How could I have known? No one told me! No one ever tells me anything about them!"

"I'm sorry, I assumed someone must've—if they ever told you about your parents at school, well—I thought you just didn't want to know." Lupin truly looked apologetic, and Harry let out a long breath, his temper beginning to cool.

"I've been trying to figure it out since the train," he said softly. "Why you seem so familiar. I knew you, didn't I? Before?"

"Yes," Lupin confirmed, heartbreak clear on his face. "Your parents... your father was one of the best friends I ever had. Your mother, too. I miss them every day — today more than most. I'm sure you know what I mean."

Harry knew all too well. Every Halloween, he woke up with a swirling hole in his gut that he didn't know how to soothe. The aching, gaping chasm where his parents had been. "Tell me about them. Please," he begged, voice cracking. Lupin stared at him for a long moment.

"Sit down," he said eventually. "I'll make some tea."

Harry did as bid, sitting in the chair opposite the desk. Instead of sitting behind the desk, Lupin chose the chair next to Harry, setting the tea tray down on the small table between them. "So what do you want to know, Harry?"

"Everything," Harry said instantly. "Aunt Petunia never says a word; I didn't even know about magic 'til I got my Hogwarts letter." He scowled for a minute, adding under his breath, "she didn't even tell me my name 'til I was five."

Lupin's eyebrows rose a fraction. "Petunia? Lily's sister?"

"Yeah, she won't ever talk about Mum," Harry replied, shaking his head. "What were they like? The yearbook said they were Head Boy and Girl. And Mum was really good at Charms?"

"Beat me to the top spot every year running," Lupin confirmed with a quiet chuckle. "Lily... I've never met a kinder person than Lily Evans, in all my life. Always willing to go out of her way to help people. The only time I ever saw her truly angry was when your father was involved."

Harry looked at him, puzzled, and Lupin laughed. "Oh, it was far from love at first sight, Harry. For the first six years of school, Lily thought James was an arrogant tosspot, and honestly she wasn't entirely wrong. James, of course, thought the sun rose and set with Lily Evans and had done since the very second he set eyes on her at the sorting. But she didn't give him the time of day until seventh year."

"What changed?" Harry asked, teacup clutched tightly in his hands.

"James grew up. Stopped trying so hard to impress her. Stopped hexing Slytherins for fun." From the look on Lupin's face, Harry had a good idea of which particular Slytherin he would hex. "Drove Sirius mad at first — all his fun being spoilt because James was trying to woo a girl." Lupin didn't seem to realise what he'd said at first, but when he did the anguish that crossed his face made Harry wince.

“They were friends, then.”

“The best of friends,” Lupin said softly. “Practically brothers. The four of us were inseparable, but those two... it went beyond friendship.”

“You three, and my mum?” Harry asked, confused. Lupin shook his head.

“Myself, James, Sirius, and a boy named Peter Pettigrew.” Lupin paused for a long moment, staring off into the distance, lost in a memory. Harry cleared his throat quietly, jolting him back to reality. “That was half a lifetime ago, of course. None of us had any idea that Sirius... sometimes, I still can’t believe it myself.”

Harry tried to imagine what it would feel like if Ron or Hermione were to suddenly turn out to be Voldemort supporters. The thought made him nauseous. “What happened?” he asked hesitantly. How could it all go wrong?

“Your parents went into hiding,” Lupin said eventually, not looking Harry in the eye. “Under a very complicated secrecy charm — the Fidelius charm. The charm allows a location or person to be entirely hidden, except from the one person who knows the secret — and anyone they should tell. They chose Sirius to be their Secret Keeper. Trusted him the most out of any of us. Within the week...” He trailed off, squeezing his eyes shut. Harry could fill in the rest. “Peter was furious when he found out. Went after Sirius. But he was never as good with spells as the rest of us, not quite as brave... He was one of the people Sirius killed when he blew up the street. All that was left of him was a finger.”

Harry thought his heart had stopped beating. Silence hung thick in the room after Lupin’s declaration, both of them caught up in horror and grief. “I’m sorry, Harry,” Lupin said abruptly. His shoulders hunched as he sunk in on himself, as if he could hide from his own memories. “That’s more information than you ever needed. I should’ve at least broken it to you gently.”

“No, I’m glad you told me. I— I needed to know,” Harry insisted. Sirius Black, the reason his parents were dead. “He was my godfather, wasn’t he?”

“I— yes. How did you know?”

The words flashed through his mind. *Named Heir to the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black*. He had his answer, now. He opened his mouth, unsure what he would say, but the door suddenly swung open.

Snape stood in the doorway, holding a smoking goblet. “Lupin. Potter,” he greeted. Lupin jumped to his feet, almost knocking over his teacup.

“Ah, Severus. I was just showing Harry my grindylow.” He gestured to a tank in the corner of the classroom that Harry hadn’t noticed before that second. Snape’s expression remained flat.

“Fascinating,” he deadpanned. “Make sure to drink that directly, Lupin. I have an entire cauldronful in my personal lab.”

"Yes, I'll be with you to take more when I need it. Thank you, Severus." He took the goblet from the dark-haired man, who gave Lupin one last unreadable look, then swept from the classroom, shutting the door behind him. Lupin looked at the goblet, then grimaced, knocking it all back in one. "Ugh. Pity he can't make it taste any better."

"Professor, what?"

"Oh, not to worry, Harry. I have an ongoing medical issue, Severus — ah, Professor Snape — was kind enough to brew the only potion that helps. I'll be right as rain. I'm very lucky to be working with him, you know; not many Potions Masters are up to the task, it's a rather tricky brew."

Harry's mind flashed back to the yearbook. "He was top of your class."

Lupin's mouth made a funny half-smirk. "Indeed he was. Though Lily almost beat him to it. I thought he'd have a heart attack when he found out how close it had been."

"You were friends?" Harry asked, eyebrows raised. Lupin almost dropped the goblet.

"Friends? Oh, I don't know if I'd say that. We were... things are complicated, Harry, when you're Gryffindors and Slytherins. Even when you're no longer students."

Unbidden, Harry's mind flashed to blond hair and silver eyes. Heat rose in his cheeks. He understood that kind of complicated.

"I'm sorry, Harry, but perhaps we can pick this conversation up another time? I'm afraid it's taken rather a lot out of me." Lupin set down the goblet, and Harry stood. The professor placed a tentative hand on Harry's shoulder. "I am always happy to talk to you about your parents. I'm sorry I didn't sooner, but I thought someone already had. I... well, I assumed you'd chosen to have nothing to do with me." He gave a small, self-deprecating shrug. "Since that's not the case... you used to call me Uncle Remus once, Harry. I'm not asking you to do so again, but... perhaps we could be friends?"

Harry studied the man; the first person in his life who had offered to tell him about his parents, who had really *known* them. A man who, under different circumstances, Harry would have grown up calling Uncle Remus, loving like family. "I'd like that," he said eventually, offering a hesitant smile.

Lupin beamed.

....

Harry was back in the Gryffindor common room by the time Ron and Hermione returned from Hogsmeade, pockets bulging with all kinds of treats. "Oh, y'know, quiet," he said when Hermione asked him how his day had gone. "Been doing homework."

He could've told them about his visit to Professor Lupin, but he stayed quiet. To do that would have meant explaining the yearbook, and Sirius Black, and *why* he was looking at the

yearbook to begin with... it was better just to not. He was keeping too many secrets from them already; what was one more?

"Anyway, enough about me. What's Hogsmeade like? Where did you go?" As Ron emptied his pockets into Harry's lap, showering him with sweets, the pair gushed about the wonders of the wizarding village. Harry kept up his fake smile the entire time, unwrapping a chocolate frog for distraction. They sounded like they'd had the time of their lives.

"Hey, I'll be right back. Forgot my jumper," he muttered when they all got up to leave for the feast, darting for the dormitory stairs. Up in his room, he leant against his bedpost and took a deep breath. They didn't mean to rub it in. It wasn't their fault he couldn't go. He should be happy they were on good terms; it was an improvement from having them yell at each other about Crookshanks.

"Harry." He jumped, but it was only Neville, a knowing look on his face. "Alright?"

"Yeah, just needed a minute." He grabbed his jumper off his bed just to have an excuse, and so missed Neville reaching into his robe pocket.

"Here, got you something." Neville held out a hand. In his palm was a silver dish, with what looked like a miniature bonfire stacked inside, waiting to be lit. "Figured, since you couldn't join us tonight..."

Harry took the little fire, glancing up at Neville with perhaps the most genuine grin he'd had all day. "Thanks, Nev. This is really great."

Neville blushed, ducking his head. "You're welcome. Now come on, I'm starving."

.-. .

Harry laid awake on the floor of the Great Hall for a long time, surrounded by snoring people in identical purple sleeping bags. He couldn't wrap his head around it.

Sirius Black had broken into the school.

The same Sirius Black who had been his father's *best friend* in school, and was now trying to kill Harry. Who was the reason his parents were dead.

The very same Sirius Black who Snape clearly thought Lupin was helping get into the castle. Harry didn't believe that for a second — no one could fake the grief he'd seen in Lupin's eyes earlier that day. He was still heartbroken by his friend's betrayal.

He remembered the other night, how even Malfoy had been worried about Harry wandering around after curfew. He'd been so sure Black wouldn't be able to reach him then, so confident in his safety. This... this changed things.

.-. .

Remus crossed the corridor, guilt gnawing his gut, when all of a sudden there was a hand on his shoulder and his back was slammed against the stone wall. "Swear to me," Severus

hissed, his near-black eyes narrowed venomously and his wand digging into Remus' throat. "Swear to me you aren't helping him."

Remus went wide-eyed in horror. "Severus, I would never! I'd *never* do anything to hurt Harry. I swear it."

Severus lowered his wand and loosened his grip, but not by much. "Forgive me if I don't trust you entirely, Lupin," he said sharply. "I know what the two of you were like."

"I know what you *thought* we were like, and you've always been wrong," Remus corrected, remembering countless arguments and pointed remarks about the true nature of his relationship with Sirius Black. Back then, he'd found it amusing— sweet, even. Now... the words felt bitter on his tongue. "I would never help that traitor get in here and hurt my cub."

Severus met his gaze steadily, holding it so long Remus began to feel a little lightheaded. Eventually, he nodded, stepping back. Part of Remus wanted to follow. "It's late," he said eventually. "And Dumbledore has called off the search. I suggest you go to bed, Lupin."

Remus bit back the first three responses that tried to leap from his mouth. "You can trust me, Severus," he said eventually. Severus scowled.

"We've both been wrong about that before."

Severus turned on his heel, robes flaring out behind him as he stalked away, leaving Remus alone in the corridor. Remus let out a long, steady breath. "You fool," he murmured quietly, unsure who he was talking to — himself, Severus, or Sirius Black.

He should go to Dumbledore. He should walk up to the headmaster's office and tell him about Sirius' animagus form, about the secret passages he could be using to get in and out of the school. If he were a better man, he'd have told him *weeks* ago.

But he wasn't a better man. He was a guilty, desperate, *lonely* man who still couldn't believe after twelve years that one of his packmates could do something so awful against another. That Sirius — happy, playful, ridiculous Sirius — could be out for the blood of the child he'd loved so dearly. He'd doted on Harry, insisting the boy was basically his since he was never going to have kids of his own. He was the perfect godfather.

Until he'd betrayed them all to Voldemort, of course.

Remus felt like his heart was being torn to pieces, his wolf howling angrily in the back of his head, demanding justice, demanding some other explanation. That just made his rage increase — if not for the wolf, Lily and James might have trusted him to begin with, might have used him as the Secret Keeper instead of Sirius. But no, despite everything, they still doubted his ability to fight against his darker side. Thought that because of the wolf, because of Severus

No. He couldn't go down that road. Not tonight.

For now, all he needed was sleep. And perhaps some of the whiskey he kept in his cupboard. Whatever nightmares he was to face when his eyes closed, he didn't fancy facing them sober.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Few hours later than usual, but it's still Friday! I have been having A Week so I hope you all enjoy this~

When Harry walked into the Defence classroom to see Snape stood at the front, he knew it was going to be a bad day.

When Snape had them open their books to the page on dementors, he realised just *how* bad it was going to be.

Almost everyone in the classroom turned to look at him when Snape introduced the topic. He could hear several of the Slytherins sniggering in the back, including Malfoy. Pointedly ignoring them, he looked down at his textbook, reading the introduction.

Dementors feed off positive emotion, sucking away any happy thoughts or feelings and leaving a person with only their worst memories remaining. Many are driven mad by prolonged exposure to a dementor. Some people can have particularly adverse reactions to a dementor — those with strong negative memories are more sensitive to a dementor's aura.

Harry thought about the sound of a woman screaming, his stomach churning. *Strong negative memories.* That definitely counted.

Much to his surprise, Snape's lesson was actually somewhat informative. When he wasn't busy insulting them, or making thinly veiled comments about Harry's fainting spell.

After dinner, Harry went up to Professor Lupin's office, hoping to catch the man for a talk if he was feeling any better. The office was empty, and Harry sighed. Another time, then.

On his way back down to the dungeon, he walked past a pair of Slytherins in his own year. Ducking his head, he planned to just head straight past them, not in the mood for a fight. His plan was ruined when one of them stepped in front of him. He eyed Blaise Zabini warily, keeping his hand ready to flick his wand from its holster.

Zabini faced him, palms open, and slowly bowed his head. "Well met, Heir Potter."

Harry couldn't believe it. The other Slytherin, Daphne Greengrass, was doing the same thing. He blinked at them in astonishment, but returned the greeting to each in turn. When Greengrass straightened up, there was a coy smile on her face. "Maybe you're not so bad, Potter. For a Gryffindor."

So much for things being secret. How many other people knew? He hoped they were all as good at Occlumency as Neville assured him they must be. “There are more important houses than just Hogwarts ones,” he said eventually.

“And more important enemies than each other,” Zabini said quietly, his dark eyes knowing. Harry’s jaw tightened. Was he talking about Voldemort, or Dumbledore?

They parted ways without another word, and Harry returned to the Gryffindor common room — just in time to hear another explosion from Ron about Crookshanks going after Scabbers.

Honestly, the sooner that rat died, the better it would be for everyone. They could finally get some peace and quiet.

.-. .

Harry should’ve known better than to expect quidditch to brighten his spirits, the way his term was going so far.

He hardly thought it was necessary to keep him in the hospital wing for the whole weekend, but he didn’t argue too hard — it kept him away from prying eyes, at least. And once Neville brought him some books, it wasn’t too bad. He appreciated the attempt at cheering him up, at least.

He hadn’t told anyone about the Grim, yet. He was pretty sure he was actually imagining things. One thing he definitely wasn’t imagining was the voices he’d heard right before he’d passed out, the voices the dementors had brought into his memories. He’d known already, deep down, but know he really *knew*. That was his mother he was hearing — her last words, as she begged Voldemort to spare him. Her dying screams.

Weeks ago, he would’ve given anything to hear his mother’s voice. Now, he’d give anything to make it stop. It was all he could think about, echoing in his ears every time he tried to sleep. The visitors were a nice distraction, but every time he was left alone, the voice returned.

“Potter, are you, uh, alright?” He was snapped from his thoughts by an unfamiliar voice, and looked up into the cautious face of Cedric Diggory, the Hufflepuff seeker.

“Diggory,” he greeted, confusion clear in his tone. Diggory edged closer.

“Hi. Uh, I brought you this. From dinner. Madam Pomfrey never lets me have sweets when I’m in the hospital wing, so I thought you’d like it.” The Hufflepuff awkwardly thrust out a napkin-wrapped bundle, which turned out to be a slightly misshapen slice of treacle tart. “I asked the twins, they said it’s your favourite.”

“Oh, yeah. Thanks.” He took the treat, still entirely baffled by the other seeker’s presence.

“Look, Potter, I just wanted to come say I’m sorry. I didn’t notice what was happening until it was too late — I’d never have caught the snitch if I’d known.”

"It wasn't your fault," Harry assured him, grimacing. Stupid, noble Hufflepuffs. "It's fine, you won. It's just a quidditch match."

"Don't let Wood hear you say that," Diggory retorted, making Harry snort. "Are you okay? You fell so quickly. For a minute, we all thought..." He trailed off, glancing away. Harry knew what he'd been about to say. They all thought he was dead, at first.

"I'm fine. Barely even hurt." He was tired and sore, and still a little shaky, but he'd had worse injuries from quidditch before. "Wish I could say the same about my broom." He glanced over at the pile of splintered twigs, and Cedric winced.

"I heard about that. Merlin, I'm sorry. It was a great broom, that. Hopefully you can get something good to replace it."

Harry couldn't even think about replacing his broom right now, though he knew he'd need to before the match against Ravenclaw.

"Well, anyway, I'm glad you're alright. And I'm still really sorry about the match. I tried to get a rematch, but Hooch wasn't having it. I just... I wanted to beat you fairly, y'know? Not because the dementors made you faint."

The reminder made Harry scowl. "You won fair enough. You were already on your way to the snitch when I fell."

"That doesn't count! I've seen you fly, Potter, you could've easily beaten me to it." Diggory ran a hand through his hair, a frown on his handsome face. "Whatever; I've clearly lost the argument anyway, so it doesn't matter. I just... I didn't want you to think I was happy about the way things turned out."

"I wouldn't blame you if you were," Harry replied. "But thanks. And there's always next year, right?" That made Cedric grin.

"Next year, you're on," he agreed, shaking Harry's hand. "I'll leave you to your evening. Hope you get all patched up soon, Potter. See you around."

"Yeah, see you, Diggory."

"Cedric," the older Hufflepuff corrected, a faint flush to his cheeks. "It's Cedric." It took a beat too long for the two of them to stop shaking hands.

"Then call me Harry."

Cedric grinned, and Harry could see why all the girls got so flustered over him. Something in his gut flip-flopped. "Later, Harry."

The Hufflepuff turned away, and Harry sunk back against the pillows, shaking his head as he processed the bizarre interaction. At least something good had come from the whole disaster; he'd sort-of, maybe, made a new friend?

.-.-.-

If he thought the visit from Cedric was weird, he was utterly bewildered by the person who crept into the hospital wing shortly after curfew. “*Malfoy?*”

“Shut up, Potter! I don’t want to get caught,” the Slytherin hissed, glaring. The moonlight bounced off his hair, making it practically glow in the darkness. He looked almost ethereal.

Harry raised an eyebrow. “If you didn’t want to get caught, why are you here?” There was a long, pregnant silence. “You were worried about me, weren’t you?”

“*Shut up, Potter,*” Malfoy bit out again. Harry grinned. He was! Malfoy was actually *concerned* about him. “Maybe I’m here for Pomfrey. My arm hurts.”

“We both know that’s not true. Your arm is fine.”

“Yes, well. After the way you fell, I’m surprised they weren’t scooping you into a cauldron to get you off the pitch. The girl Weasley is going around acting like you’ll never walk again.”

Harry grimaced, glancing at Ginny’s home-made get well card, wedged firmly shut under his fruit bowl. “I’m fine, really. It’s just the dementors...” Harry trailed off. “You heard what Snape said in class. They’re worse for people with bad memories.”

“Plenty of people have bad memories, Potter. They’re not fainting all over the place. Are you sure there’s not something else wrong with you?” Malfoy eyed Harry suspiciously, like he was about to announce that he actually *was* dying. Harry glared at him.

“Those people don’t hear their mum begging for mercy as she’s murdered, do they?” he snapped in retort, watching Malfoy’s already pale face drain of colour. Harry abruptly remembered who he was talking to. “Don’t you *dare* tell anyone I said that.”

“I hear my father torturing my mother,” Malfoy blurted suddenly, slapping a hand over his mouth and turning red as soon as he’d spoken. Harry gaped.

“Malfoy, I—“

“Don’t,” Malfoy bit out sharply, his eyes flashing. “Goodnight, Potter. Glad you’re not in as many pieces as your broom is.”

Before Harry could say anything more, the blond was gone, and Harry was alone once more, staring wide-eyed at the back of the door.

“Shit,” he breathed into the darkness.

How the hell was he supposed to deal with a revelation like that?

.

He’d never been so glad to go back to classes as he was on Monday, after a whole night of sitting awake thinking about his mother, and the Grim, and Malfoy. He was yawning all through class, and Hermione gave him a concerned look. “Are you sure you’re well enough to be up and about, Harry?”

“Yeah, fine,” he insisted. “Just didn’t sleep well. Too quiet in the hospital wing.”

“I suppose you didn’t even have Professor Lupin for company. I’m glad he’s feeling better, though.”

“Yeah,” Ron cut in. “No more lessons with Snape.”

“Except Potions,” Harry pointed out dryly, earning a wounded look.

“Don’t ruin it, Harry.”

Professor Lupin shot them a pointed look across the classroom, and Harry sheepishly turned back to his work.

After class, Harry made an excuse to his friends and lingered at his desk, waiting for the rest of the class to file out. Lupin raised an enquiring eyebrow. “Can I help you, Harry?”

“So, uh. The dementors. You, uh, saw what happens to me when they come near me.”

“It’s understandable, Harry; there are horrors in your past that others haven’t experienced,” Lupin soothed. Harry shook his head.

“I know, I know, but I still don’t want to be fainting every time I see one.”

“If it helps, Professor Dumbledore was furious with them — I don’t think he’s going to let them get close again.”

“Why did they come the first time?” Harry asked bitterly.

“They’re getting hungry,” was Lupin’s response. “They’re used to being in Azkaban, with all that emotion to keep them going. Being out here, unable to go near anyone, and then feeling all the joy and excitement from the match... they couldn’t resist.”

“When they come close, I can hear my mum dying,” Harry admitted. Lupin froze.

“Lily?” he said eventually, the lines on his facing making him look older than his thirty-three years. “Oh, Harry.” He reached out, hesitating for only a moment before squeezing Harry’s shoulder.

“I want it to stop,” Harry breathed desperately. “When S— when Professor Snape covered for you, he said something about a spell that can be used to ward off dementors. Is that the thing you did on the train?” Lupin nodded. “Can you teach me?”

“Harry, the Patronus charm is an incredibly advanced bit of magic. Many adults can’t do one, let alone a third year student.”

“Try me,” Harry retorted. His magic had been buzzing under his skin since the goblins had removed the block. Maybe some advanced magic was just what he needed.

"I don't want to make any promises..." Harry stared Lupin down, determination in his face, until the man sighed. "Fine. We can work on it over Christmas, if you're staying."

"I am," Harry confirmed. "I always do. The Dursleys don't want me there unless I have to be."

"You live with your muggle relatives in the summer, then, do you?" Lupin asked, an odd tone to his voice. Harry nodded.

"Unfortunately. I usually get to spend some of it at Ron's house, but Dumbledore — Professor Dumbledore, sorry — says I have to be at my aunt's house for most of the summer. I guess it's supposed to be safer." He grimaced, showing exactly what he thought of that. It certainly wasn't going to be safer when he got home in July, and Uncle Vernon decided to teach him a lesson for what he did to Aunt Marge. If only the Ministry had wiped their memories, too.

"I'm sorry, Harry," Lupin said, and he sounded like he truly meant it. "I only met Petunia a few times, and her husband just the once, but they were certainly... difficult people to get along with."

Harry snorted. "That's an understatement." He paused for a moment, thinking. "Professor? If you and my parents were such good friends... why couldn't you raise me, when they died?" Surely that would've been better than growing up with the Dursleys. Anything would've been better than that.

Lupin looked at him, a heartbroken expression in his eyes. "I wanted to," he confessed. "But there were... circumstances. The Ministry never would've allowed someone like me raise a child. And Dumbledore insisted you were in the safest place you could be — not that he ever told me where that was. He said you'd be protected as long as no one magical came near you. I couldn't even write." His voice cracked, just a little bit. Harry wondered what it would've been like — in the space of twenty-four hours, to lose two of your best friends, be betrayed by the other, and then have their child taken away from you forever. His heart twisted painfully.

"I'm sorry," he murmured, wishing there were more he could do. "For what it's worth... I think it would've been pretty cool, living with you. Better than Aunt Petunia."

The smallest smile managed to creep its way onto Lupin's face, though the hurt still shone in his golden eyes. "Thank you, Harry. That — that means a lot, coming from you."

Harry wondered what Lupin meant, that 'someone like him' wouldn't have been allowed to raise Harry, but he didn't dare ask. Not when Lupin looked like the wrong word would set him off crying.

"You should get going, Harry," the professor said eventually, straightening up and releasing Harry's shoulder. "You'll miss lunch, at this rate."

"Right, yeah," Harry murmured. "I'll see you later, Professor. And I'm glad you're feeling better."

Lupin smiled sadly, the light through the window highlighting the grey in his hair. “Thank you, Harry. It’s good to be back on my feet.”

.-. .

Deep down, Harry wished Ron and Hermione had gone home for Christmas. He felt awful for thinking it — they were his best friends, and he’d barely even seen them so far this term! — But so much had changed, and he was keeping so many things from them; the gap was getting harder and harder to bridge. If they were going home, he could just spend the whole break reading his books and practicing spells without any awkward questions. He was getting pretty good at that privacy charm, now.

Neville was going home, though, and he promised to talk to his gran about finding someone to test Harry’s Occlumency progress. Harry thought he was doing an alright job, but Neville was no Legilimens, and they couldn’t risk checking by letting Dumbledore root around in his brain.

He was a little more morose than he let on when they went to Hogsmeade the last weekend before Christmas break. Not because he wanted to go overly much; he just felt so *cooped up* in the castle. It was ridiculous — the last two years, he hadn’t even known about the option of going off the grounds. Now, he felt like he couldn’t survive without it.

Of course, it didn’t help that any time he so much as tried to leave the castle, someone was herding him right back inside. Harry couldn’t even go to quidditch practice unsupervised. He felt like he couldn’t breathe, he was so sick of being monitored. Part of him wanted Sirius Black to just attack him and get it over with.

Deciding to enjoy his time alone and work on some spells, Harry said goodbye to Ron and Hermione in the entrance hall and started the journey back up to Gryffindor Tower.

“Psst! Harry!” A freckled arm reached out, yanking him into a hidden space behind a tapestry. He stared at the twins, eyebrows raised.

“What’s the matter? Need an alibi for something?” he asked, eyeing them over as if he could tell what sort of prank they were about to pull.

“Nah, but thanks for the offer,” Fred said with a grin. “We just wanted to give you a bit of an early Christmas present.”

“Couldn’t stand to see you moping around by yourself!” George agreed. He thrust out a hand, showing Harry... a blank bit of old parchment.

“I don’t get it,” Harry said flatly. Both twins beamed.

“This, dear Harrikins, is the secret to our success,” they said in unison, clearly expecting him to be dazzled.

It still looked like a blank bit of old parchment.

Harry said as much, and George mock-swatted him on the arm. “Don’t be so insulting! It might hear you. Explain, Fred.”

The pair of them told Harry the story of the parchment’s discovery, finishing with Fred whipping his wand out and touching it to the parchment. *“I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.”*

All at once, the parchment exploded with life. Harry watched in awe as the lines of the map unfurled, revealing Hogwarts in its entirety.

“The Marauders’ Map,” he breathed, reading from the greeting at the top of the page. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs... why did that sound so familiar? “Who are they?”

“No idea,” Fred told him.

“Previous pranksters—“

“Masters of mischief long gone from these halls—“

“Absolute geniuses, mind—“

“The map shows every inch of the castle—“

“Every passage, every secret, every person—“

“Everything,” they finished in unison. “Look, there we are.” They pointed at the map, showing Harry three little dots labelled ‘Fred Weasley’, ‘George Weasley’, and ‘Harry Potter’.

“We’ve learned everything we know about the school from this map,” Fred said, voice filled with reverence.

“And now, we’re giving it to you,” George told him. “It’s time to pass on to the next generation.”

“Your need is greater than ours,” Fred agreed. “Not only can you use it to keep out of trouble on your little late night wanders—“

“It shows you all the secret passages into Hogsmeade!”

The twins gave him a run-down of all the options, and Harry grinned up at them incredulously.

“This is amazing,” he declared, watching their grins widen.

“We know,” they agreed.

“All you have to do to clear it is tap it and say *Mischief Managed*,” Fred instructed, doing just that. The parchment cleared quickly, becoming blank once more. George pushed it into Harry’s grasp.

"Use it well, little brother," he said mock-solemnly, winking. "We'll see you in Honeydukes."

"Thanks, guys." They both offered him extravagant bows, doffing imaginary top hats.

"Our pleasure, Heir Potter," they said cheekily, disappearing from the passageway before he could say anything. Harry looked down at the map, blank in his hands. He grinned.

Time to see what Hogsmeade was all about.

.-. .

He didn't look for Ron and Hermione when he slipped out of the Honeydukes cellar, covered by his invisibility cloak. He wasn't sure if he wanted to tell them about the map, yet. Ron would probably get jealous that the twins gave it to Harry and not him. Instead he just wandered, alone and invisible, thinking fondly of his time back in Diagon Alley. He could sort-of see what the fuss was about, but there wasn't anything truly remarkable there. He supposed just the freedom to go there without adults was enough.

He took a brief look in the Three Broomsticks, but it was far too crowded for him to sneak around invisible without getting bumped into. Besides, he couldn't exactly order a butterbeer. He saw Ron and Hermione in there, hands wrapped around their mugs, and smiled softly to himself. They seemed to be having fun.

He looked around the shops for a while, imagining what he might buy if he weren't hiding under his invisibility cloak. Perhaps he'd come back another time. Some of the things in Honeydukes did look delicious.

He was back in the castle before dinner, writing his Charms essay in the common room when Ron and Hermione returned, none the wiser to his little adventure. They practically ran towards him. Hermione's eyes were red, like she'd been crying. "We need to talk to you," Ron said gravely, dragging him over to a secluded corner of the common room. Harry looked at them, bewildered.

Quietly, Hermione explained to him the conversation they'd overheard in the Three Broomsticks, where Fudge and the teachers told Madam Rosmerta about Sirius Black and Peter Pettigrew. Harry scowled before he could help himself — what right did they have to be bandying private information about like that in the middle of the pub? — Then he remembered this was supposed to be brand new information to him, and made himself look horrified. It wasn't hard; he still was, every time he thought about Black too much.

"I'm sorry, Harry," Hermione murmured. "We had no idea."

"Yeah, well, neither did I," he muttered angrily. "I'm going upstairs."

He figured it was something the old, impulsive Harry Potter would do, stomping up the dormitory stairs and throwing himself down on his bed. He reached for his trunk, for the photo album Hagrid had given him, flipping it open to the photo of his parents' wedding. Sirius Black was there, happiness shining in his grey eyes, looking barely older than he had

in his yearbook photo. Was he lost to Voldemort already, then? Did he know what he was planning to do?

Harry tore his eyes away, scanning the rest of the photo. In the background, hiding half out of sight, was Remus Lupin. His dress robes were a little worn at the elbows, but he was young and beaming, his dark blond hair neat and his face clean-shaven, a shallow cut healing across his cheekbone. He certainly had no idea what was coming.

He wondered if any of the other people in the picture were Peter Pettigrew. He vaguely remembered the boy's picture in the yearbook; chubby, mousy-haired, looking a little like he would jump at his own shadow. Harry remembered being surprised he was a Gryffindor, with that kind of fear in his eyes. That cowardly boy had stood up to Sirius, and paid the worst price for it.

The album fell shut with a loud noise, and Harry tugged his curtains closed with a flick of his wand, setting his privacy charm. He wasn't angry at Ron and Hermione. He wasn't sad about his parents, or angry at Sirius Black; they were all emotions he'd processed the first time he'd heard about it.

The main feeling twisting him up inside was the overwhelming sensation of guilt. That was one less secret to keep from his friends, but they still didn't know the truth of how he'd heard about it. They didn't know about the map.

The secrets were just piling up on top of each other, and Harry was dreading the day they all came crashing down.

. . . .

Remus knocked on the door, nudging it open and smiling a little at the scowl that greeted him. "I just got rid of the students, Lupin, and I was hoping to get at least a little peace and quiet. What do you want?"

Easing the door shut behind him, Remus strode towards Severus' desk, perching on the end of it and ignoring the glare it earned him. That had stopped working on him years ago. "What do you know about Harry's home life, Severus?"

Severus raised an eyebrow, unimpressed. "Potter? What does it matter. Albus sent him somewhere safe. Probably some squib family that turned him into a pampered little prince, filled his head with stories of the Boy-Who-Lived, making him think he's something special."

Honey-brown eyes stared incredulously. "You don't know Harry at all, do you?" Remus remarked, shaking his head. Pampered little prince... that didn't sound anything like the Harry he knew. "He's not James, Severus. Believe me. Yes, he has his moments, but...there's so much of Lily in that boy. It actually hurts me to see it sometimes." The way Harry had reached out to him almost immediately, desperate for some kind of connection to his parents, trying to cheer Remus up even when he'd just given the boy some of the worst news of his life. His determination not to let the dementors get the better of him.

Severus leaned back in his chair. It was clear from the look on his face that he had no idea what Remus was talking about. “Watch him,” Remus suggested. “Don’t think about James. Look for Lily, and you’ll see it. You’ll see it in spades. *Merlin*.” Having those green eyes fixed on him sometimes felt like he’d gone back in time. It was almost too much to bear.

“If you insist,” Severus droned. “What does it matter where he lives, anyway? Going to steal him away in the night?”

“Albus sent him to Petunia.” That got Severus’ attention. The Slytherin stiffened, his shoulders hunching the barest fraction just at the woman’s name.

“What?”

“Harry told me he lives with his Aunt Petunia and her family.” Harry had inadvertently admitted quite a bit more than that. Remus’ protective instincts roared when he thought too much about it.

“What in Merlin’s name was Albus thinking?” Severus said, eyes sharp. “Petunia? That woman hated everything to do with magic!”

“He didn’t know anything about his parents. Didn’t know about magic before his Hogwarts letter.” Remus swallowed harshly. “Severus, he said he didn’t even know his *name* until he was five years old. I don’t think he realised I heard him, but—imagine the sorts of things they must have called him instead. You knew Petunia better than I did, and her husband.”

“The worst example of muggles I can think of,” Severus agreed. He looked up, his face unguarded for once, his displeasure clear. “You’re sure? Albus took him to *her*?” Remus nodded.

On the other side of the desk, an inkwell shattered. “Lily must have been spinning in her grave for the last twelve years,” Severus growled, cleaning up the mess with a jab of his wand. “If she were here, she’d kill us both for never checking on him.”

“Albus never let me,” Remus supplied. He didn’t doubt that Severus had never tried. His hatred for James Potter was a strong, strong thing. “He said it was safer if no one magical went near him.”

“Of course he did,” Severus sneered. He met Remus’ gaze knowingly. “Keeping his precious golden boy nice and hidden away and downtrodden, starving for information—probably starving for food, too, by the look of him.”

“Ready for the day that Albus Dumbledore swoops in and takes him away from that awful place, showing him a world of magic and becoming his true saviour,” Remus finished grimly. “Severus, you don’t really think—“

“That Albus would manipulate a boy so young? If it benefited the *greater good*, I have no doubt he would.”

"But *why?*?" Remus asked plaintively. "What does he have to gain from making Harry rely on him?"

Severus grimaced, glanced at his office door, then pulled up the left sleeve of his robe. Remus flinched. Last time he'd seen it, the Dark Mark had been vivid and black, an ugly mar on the pale skin. Now it was so faint it was barely even there unless you knew what to look for. The barest whisper of skull and snake. "If he were dead, it would be gone completely," he declared bluntly. "As you can see, that is not the case."

Remus felt the blood drain from his face as he met Severus' dark eyes. Deep down, behind that icy facade, he could see fear. "No..."

"The Dark Lord will one day return," Severus told him. "And I believe the Headmaster has plans for Potter when he does. Remind me to tell you what happened at the end of Potter's first year, sometime." He shoved his sleeve back down, shaking his head. "Petunia Evans. Salazar, it's a bloody miracle the boy made it to school alive. No wonder he has so little regard for his own safety."

Stomach turning to lead, Remus reached out and gripped Severus' hand with his own, surprised the Slytherin didn't automatically pull away. "We can't let that happen. Whatever Albus wants, whatever he's planning... we can't let him have Harry." Severus met his gaze, and Remus waited, wondering if he would have an ally in this. He'd had questions about some of Dumbledore's decisions in the past, but this... this was too far.

"I promised to protect the boy, for Lily's sake," Severus said eventually. "The afterlife would not be worth reaching if I failed that task."

Remus relaxed, leaning towards Severus for just a moment before he remembered he wasn't allowed to do that anymore. He let go of the man's hand. "Good," he murmured, gripping the edge of the desk to try and ground himself. "That's— good."

"Lupin... Remus," Severus said, sounding like the name caused him physical pain. "Are you well?"

"I'm fine," he insisted, not wanting to get into the specifics of how his heart was shredding itself inside his chest for so many reasons he could barely count them. "I think—I should go. It's late." He slid from the desk, taking an awkward step away from the seated man. "Thank you, Severus. I know we've had our differences, but... Harry needs all the help he can get. Thank you."

"Be careful, Remus," Severus called when Remus had one hand on doorknob. "Changing loyalties is a dangerous game, no matter which side you're on."

Remus grit his teeth. "I can handle it. Goodnight, Severus."

He'd have to handle it. For Harry.

.-. .

Wrapped up in the threads of so many lies and secrets, Harry had entirely forgotten about Buckbeak until he went with Ron and Hermione to visit Hagrid, only to find the man crying into his enormous teacup. The guilt piled higher in Harry's gut. He was being a terrible friend. Hell, the only reason they'd gone to Hagrid in the first place was that Ron and Hermione seemed to think he wanted to go hunting down Sirius Black. The old Harry probably would have, under that Compulsion curse. The new Harry had bigger things on his mind.

Still, he put in a good attempt at helping do the research to start putting a case together for Buckbeak. Ron lasted all of four hours in the library before he made an excuse and bailed out, while Harry stuck around for six. It wasn't the research that was the problem, or even the time spent with his nose in books — Hermione's preferred style of studying was a little... overwhelming for those around her. She was much better suited to independent research. Eventually, Harry got tired of her yanking the book out of his hands every time he said he might have something interesting, and just left her to it.

He didn't see much of his two best friends in the run-up to Christmas. Sure, they were around, and they hung out in the evenings in the common room. But honestly Harry couldn't remember the last time the three of them had had a proper conversation, especially not one that wasn't related to some disaster or another. Sometimes it felt like they only came together to solve problems. Whenever there was quiet time between the three of them, it would promptly get ruined by Crookshanks existing in Ron's presence and Ron going off on one about how the evil cat was out for blood. It was better for Harry to just... not.

Luckily, Professor Lupin had agreed to start Harry's Patronus lessons. Harry was practically vibrating with excitement the first time he approached Lupin's office, and his eyebrows rose at the enormous packing case sitting on the man's desk. It was rattling. "What's that?"

"Another boggart. It's the closest we'll get to a dementor without actually inviting one into the castle, and, well," Lupin said with a wry smile, "this is far easier to deal with."

Harry thought about having to face a real dementor, and his stomach turned over. Yes, the boggart was a much better idea.

He listened attentively as Lupin explained the Patronus charm to him, going over the incantation in his head. "Expecto Patronum," he murmured, wrapping his tongue around the sounds. "It just needs a happy memory?"

"The happiest one you can think of," Lupin confirmed. "When you think you've got one, give it a try."

Harry stood, lips pursed in thought. As tragic as it sounded, he didn't have an abundance of happy memories. He rolled a few through his mind — the moment Hagrid told him he was a wizard, maybe? No, that was mostly just confusion. His first Christmas at Hogwarts? That didn't feel right either.

Eventually, he settled on the first time he ever rode a broom. Simple, uncomplicated, breathless joy. He held the memory in his head, grasping his wand tight. "Expecto Patronum!"

Nothing happened.

He focused harder on the memory. “Expecto Patronum!”

A burst of silvery wisps shot out of the end of his wand, and Harry almost dropped it in shock. “Look! I did it! Sort of.” It wasn’t much, but it was a start.

“Well done, Harry!” Lupin enthused, his grin making him look so much like the young man in the back of the Potters’ wedding photo that Harry’s breath caught for a moment. “Are you ready to try it on a dementor?”

“Yeah,” Harry said, squaring his shoulders and facing the desk. “Let’s do it.” His blood roared in his ears, the happy memory at the forefront of his mind. Only... it wasn’t *entirely* there, the little voice in the back of his head reminding him that he was about to hear her again. His mother. The only time he ever heard her voice.

Lupin opened the packing case, and before Harry could truly brace himself the room went cold, a dark figure looming up above him. Harry’s hand shook as he tried to gather his happy thoughts. “Expecto Patronum!” The dementor grew closer, the world starting to go fuzzy around the edges for Harry, the scream building in the back of his mind. “Expecto Patronum!”

Lily, take Harry and go! It’s him!

It was a new voice. A male voice. White fog filled Harry’s vision. *I’ll hold him off!*

There was a crash, like a door bursting off its hinges.

“Harry! Harry, wake up!” The room was slowly warming. Harry became aware of two things; he was sprawled on the floor of the office, and Lupin was tapping him hard on the face.

“Harry! Merlin, are you alright? I’m so sorry, I should’ve eased you into it more, I—“

“It’s fine. I’m fine,” he croaked, sitting up and running a hand through his hair. He still felt shaky. Lupin thrust a chocolate frog towards him.

“I didn’t expect you to get it the first time. I would’ve been astounded if you had,” Lupin told him, still looking concerned.

“It’s getting worse,” Harry mumbled, thinking about what he’d just heard. That had to be... his father. James Potter’s voice. He’d never heard that before, either.

“If you want to stop, I completely understand—“

“No,” Harry insisted, biting the head off the chocolate frog. “I can do this. Let’s go again.”

Lupin made him wait until his hands no longer trembled, then helped him to his feet and moved towards the packing case. “You might want to try a happier memory,” he suggested. “It’s possible the one you were using wasn’t quite strong enough.”

Harry rolled through his limited stash of happy memories, finally choosing the memory of winning the house cup the year before. He nodded. “Do it.”

The lights dimmed and the room went cold, the now-familiar rattling breath echoing through the office. Harry clenched his jaw, forcing the memory to the forefront of his mind. “Expecto Patronum! EXPECTO PATRONUM!” This time, an enormous silver shadow burst from his wand, sending the dementor reeling back several steps. Harry stood wide-eyed, and Lupin jumped in with a sharp Riddikulus, sending the boggart back into the case in the shape of a silvery orb again. Harry’s patronus vanished. The lamps re-lit, and Harry sank into the chair behind him, panting.

“I did it!” He felt like he’d run a mile, but he was beaming, and Lupin returned the expression.

“Excellent, Harry! Fantastic first start.”

“Let’s go again,” Harry urged, and the professor sighed. “Please, sir. Just one more.”

Once again, Harry managed a silver shadow big enough to cut the dementor off before the screaming started. It probably wouldn’t help against a real dementor, but it was a start. Lupin insisted that was enough for the day.

“It’s a large amount of magic, I don’t want you overdoing it,” he warned. On the contrary, Harry’s magic felt better than it had in weeks, finally able to start levelling out the extra burst from his newly-freed core. But he couldn’t say that, so he allowed himself to be herded into the chair and given a large mug of hot chocolate. “I have to say, I’m impressed. You’re picking it up far quicker than I expected.”

Harry grinned, pride growing in his chest. “Thanks.” He sipped at his hot chocolate, relaxing as the warmth slowly flooded through his body. He glanced up at the man opposite him. “I heard my dad.” Lupin frowned at him, puzzled. “When the dementor... usually I just hear Mum, screaming for Voldemort to leave me alone. This time, before I passed out... Dad was there. He said he’d hold Voldemort off so Mum could take me and run away. I’d never heard his voice before.”

Lupin’s shoulders had tensed. “James would have done anything for you and Lily,” he said eventually. “Since we were kids, he always said he’d never love another soul as much as he loved Lily Evans. Then they had you.” He met Harry’s gaze, tears shining in his eyes. “You were his whole world, you know? You and your mother. He was never so happy as he was when he was with you.”

A lump rose in Harry’s throat, and he drank more hot chocolate. “What— what was it like? When they had me?” The only experience he had of a wizarding household was the Burrow, and that was an entirely unique brand of chaos.

Lupin seemed to understand what he was asking. “At first, James was terrified. He was an only child, see, and he hadn’t had much experience with babies. It took Lily ages to convince him to hold you without her supervising — he kept insisting he’d drop you.” He chuckled softly. “After about two weeks of him putting your nappies on backwards, he started getting

the hang of it. Always said he was no good — told me the cat was actually watching you, he was just helping. But he doted on you, Harry. Every second since you were born. Even when times got dark, and things were difficult, there was so much love in that house.”

Harry’s heart ached when he tried to imagine it. “We had a cat?” he said eventually, not wanting to dwell too much on the thought of being loved. Of being happy.

“Sergeant Pepper,” Lupin told him, lips curling in a smile. “Lily’s cat, from when we were in school. He didn’t like James at first. Warmed up to him eventually. We knew Lily had finally given in to her feelings when Pep started leaving dead mice on James’ pillow. Well, once we realised it wasn’t Sirius doing it as a joke,” he added with a snort. A flash of pain crossed his features when he realised what he’d said. “No one found Pep when... after Voldemort. The house was in quite a state, we never knew if he’d run for it or...”

Harry hoped the cat had run. Hoped he’d found a new home, with a new family who loved him. That would make one of them, at least.

“So Dad wasn’t great with babies?” That made Lupin laugh.

“Not exactly, but he muddled through. Lily, on the other hand, was a natural from day one. Took to motherhood like a duck to water. She, uh, she said she wanted at least one more. Said that being an only child sounded lonely, and even an awful sibling was better than none at all.” Lupin set his mug down. “Sirius said the same, and he hated his brother. The rest of us were only children. Severus didn’t understand it, not after— well. Never mind.” His cheeks flushed, and he ducked his head.

“Why did Snape never tell me he knew my parents?” Harry blurted. That was the second time now that Lupin had talked about Snape and his parents like they knew each other better than just being classmates.

“Professor Snape, Harry,” Lupin corrected automatically. “He... James and Severus never got along. I think it’s safe to say they hated each other, actually,” he said wryly. “I’ll admit, James didn’t help the matter. He was always jealous that Lily and Severus were friends, so he... well, most of the pranks he and Sirius played were on Slytherins, and Severus in particular. I tried to stay out of it, but... things happen. They were my friends.”

Lupin sighed, rubbing at a scar on the bridge of his nose. “It’s a very long story, Harry, that isn’t entirely mine to share. Perhaps one day... Suffice to say, Professor Snape has a difficult relationship with his memory of your parents, and I don’t think you make it any easier. Not that it’s your fault,” he added hastily. “He’s just working under some... mistaken assumptions.”

Harry slowly finished off his hot chocolate, pondering the man’s words. He supposed he could understand it. If Snape and his dad hated each other when they were kids, and then Harry showed up looking exactly like James Potter; no wonder Snape didn’t like him. It was hardly fair, being judged against a man he didn’t even *remember*, but he could get it.

“You loved him, didn’t you,” he murmured, watching Lupin with a knowing gaze. The man choked on his hot chocolate, going wide-eyed. “My dad, I mean. And Mum. And... Sirius

Black, and Pettigrew.”

“I... yes. I loved them very, very much.” Lupin’s voice was hoarse. “They were my family.”

In that moment, a burning hatred flickered deep inside Harry — hatred for Voldemort, and everything he’d taken away from Harry. Everything he’d taken away from all the people he’d hurt. For Sirius Black, and all those like him, who ruined so many lives; shattered so many families.

He wouldn’t wish the dementors on his worst enemy, but Black deserved everything he got.

Chapter 6

Christmas morning started out much like it always did now that Harry was at Hogwarts — with Ron throwing a pillow at him to wake him up, shouting about presents. They were the only two left in their dorm, so there was no worry about keeping quiet.

It still left Harry a little gobsmacked to see a pile of presents that was just for him. This year's pile seemed even bigger than the last. Most of them were wrapped in the same festive paper as half the pile on Ron's bed, so Harry assumed they were from Mrs Weasley. He looked to the others, picking up a small square parcel wrapped in plain brown paper.

Harry-

I've had this for a while, I thought you might like it. Merry Christmas.

- Professor Lupin

Tearing into the paper, Harry sucked in a sharp breath at the framed picture in his hands. It was of his parents, sat in front of a huge fireplace, Christmas decorations in the background and a huge log — a Yule log — burning in the hearth. Lily had green tinsel braided in her hair and a baby in her arms; Harry, dressed in a onesie that made him look like a tiny reindeer, complete with antlers attached to the little hood. He was beaming up at his mother, a little tuft of black hair peeking out under the hood, his arms stretching out towards his father. James sat beside Lily, a sleek ginger cat cradled in his arms like a baby, a Santa hat perched jauntily on his head. They waved out at Harry, and every few seconds James would swoop in and press a firm kiss to Lily's cheek, making her blush.

The bottom of the gold frame was engraved with the words '*Harry's First Yule*'.

It took a minute for Harry to remember how to breathe.

"You alright there, mate?" Ron asked, his mouth half-full of homemade nut brittle, shreds of wrapping paper scattered all around him. Harry shoved the picture under his pillow, offering a false grin.

"Yeah." He reached for the next present on auto-pilot, not wanting Ron to investigate further.

He was surprised to find a book, titled '*The Wizengamot And You: The Wizarding Legal System Explained*'. There was a note attached to the front of it.

Hi Harry,

This is from both me and Gran. She said it's the best book out there for learning about all this sort of stuff. I hope it helps. Merry Christmas!

- Neville

And below that;

Dear Mr Potter,

I'm glad to hear from my grandson that you're finally learning about your place in our world. I have to say, it doesn't surprise me that it was kept from you until now.

I hope this book is of assistance; please don't hesitate to contact me if you have any further questions. Well met, and happy Yule.

Lady Augusta Longbottom

P.S. If you get the chance this summer, I would recommend going to Gringotts and checking your family vault for a book on traditions and magics specific to House Potter. Every family should have one. If you are in need of an adult to escort you, I would be happy to do so.

Again, Harry quickly hid the book and the note from Ron's curious gaze, but a smile tugged at his lips. He was glad now for the Herbology book he'd sent Neville, unsure if they were at the level of friendship to be exchanging Christmas gifts.

Those seemed to be the only unexpected gifts in the pile — at least, until he reached the long, narrow package at the very bottom. His heart clenched at the telltale shape. “Mate!” Ron breathed, barging over and reaching to tear the wrapping paper.

A Firebolt.

This Christmas was just full of surprises.

.-.-.-.

With his spirits high from his pile of gifts, Harry was caught almost entirely off-guard as his name was called. He was having a rare moment alone — with Hermione in the library and Ron kidnapped by the twins — and enjoying taking his time wandering down to Christmas lunch, turning his thoughts over in his mind. At least, until he was stopped, and his heart sank.

“Harry, my boy!” Dumbledore’s fond call rang through the stone corridor. Harry froze, turning on his heel. The headmaster was dressed in festive robes and smiling widely, oblivious to the nausea rolling in his student’s stomach.

Don't look him in the eye, Harry thought to himself desperately, plastering a smile on his face and fixing his gaze somewhere over Dumbledore's left shoulder. “Hello, sir!” he greeted cheerfully, trying to think how he might have acted before the compulsion was removed. Trusting, impulsive, thoughtless. He could do that. Maybe.

“Not spending the day with your friends?” Dumbledore asked, brows furrowing. Harry shrugged.

“Hermione’s finishing an essay. Ron’s with his siblings, I didn’t want to interrupt.”

The reminder of Harry's lack of family turned the headmaster's face sad and pitying in a way that made Harry itch with anger. Perhaps the old man was aiming for empathy, but he missed by a mile. "Ah, of course. Well, you should still be careful, my boy — these days are not the best to be spending time alone. It is hard to protect you if we don't know where you are." His voice was gently scolding, and Harry resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Did he really think Sirius Black would try anything in the middle of the day?

"I'm sorry, sir," he said instead, plastering a contrite frown on his face. "I suppose I didn't think about that. I was just on my way to the great hall for lunch."

"Not to worry, not to worry; I found you, after all," Dumbledore replied with a chuckle. He began to walk, gesturing for Harry to accompany him. "I hear you've been keeping yourself busy over the holidays, my boy. The Patronus charm is a rather tricky bit of magic — I'm quite impressed to see you attempting it. I must admit, I didn't expect for Professor Lupin to offer; with his health the way he is, he tends to value the time he has to rest."

The old wizard's face was friendly, and Harry knew he would've fallen for it easily six months ago. His stomach churned again — did Dumbledore disapprove of Harry learning the charm? Why? Surely any defence he had against dementors was a good thing!

"I — I told him what I hear when a dementor comes close," Harry admitted, carefully choosing his words. He didn't want Dumbledore to think he was hiding anything. "It's... I told him I couldn't listen to my mum dying over and over. Begged him to teach me." He tried not to meet twinkling blue eyes as they surveyed him, trying to clear his mind. "He — he said he was feeling alright, but if he's not well — if I should stop — I... I suppose I can handle it, sir." Poor, brave, orphan Harry Potter. Exactly what far too many people expected to see, but easy enough to give it to them when it suited him.

"Of course not, dear boy. If Professor Lupin believes he is well enough to teach you, then by all means, learn what you can. I can only imagine how difficult it must be to suffer through such a thing." Dumbledore paused, as if in thought. "I suppose mentioning your mother's death would make him keen to see you avoid such heartbreak."

Harry knew what the man was fishing for, and stifled a scowl behind brows furrowed in confusion. "Sir, I don't understand?"

"Did the professor not tell you that he and your parents went to school together?" Dumbledore sounded genuinely surprised. Internally, Harry smirked. Let him think that Harry was still in the dark, oblivious to the family he'd been kept from all this years. Let him think Harry didn't know the truth about Sirius Black.

"He said he knew them," Harry replied. "He never said... were they friends?"

"Indeed they were, my boy," Dumbledore told him. For the briefest moment, Harry thought he saw a pleased look flash across the headmaster's features. "They were all in Gryffindor together. But if Professor Lupin has not mentioned it, perhaps it's best not to bring it up. Grief can do awful things to a man, Harry. You won't want to disturb it once it's settled." He sounded sad, shaking his head with a small sigh.

Beside him, Harry nodded along obediently, while inside he seethed. Imagine if he had never broken the compulsion; he would have allowed Dumbledore to lead him by the nose away from Remus Lupin and all that he entailed — all the memories he could share with Harry, all the support he could offer, everything.

Dumbledore wanted Harry alone. He wanted him with no one to rely on — save those Dumbledore had picked himself. The thought made him uneasy; who in his life could he trust, and who was only there to be another player in the headmaster's game?

More importantly, *why*? What was so special about Harry, that the man had started playing the game so early in his life?

.-.-.-.

Scowling to himself, Severus started the journey back to his quarters, shaking his head at Sybil Trelawney's ridiculous declaration. Why Albus insisted he attend the small Christmas lunch, Severus didn't know; he would have much preferred dining in his own rooms, alone. The only person in the Great Hall he even remotely enjoyed the company of was Minerva. Especially with Lupin—

He shut that thought down before it could finish itself. He refused to think about Remus *bloody* Lupin at Christmas. It was bad enough remembering the sad, regretful look in those honey-brown eyes when he'd realised the full moon was Christmas Eve night, and he'd be missing out on all the festivities.

Severus' scowl deepened.

Muttering the password to his private quarters, he slunk inside and shed his cloak, tossing it to hang itself on the hook in the wall. All he wanted for Christmas was a glass of brandy, a good book, and at least twelve hours without having to see any students, or Albus Dumbledore. The old headmaster was even further from Severus' good graces than he had been at the start of the year.

The embrace of his preferred armchair was a welcome one, and Severus closed his eyes for a moment, letting out a long breath. When he opened them, he paused. There, on his coffee table, was a brown paper wrapped package. It definitely hadn't been there when he'd left for lunch.

He reached for it with trepidation, knowing without needing to look where it had come from. That sodding wolf.

Sure enough, the handwriting across the top was familiar.

Severus,

I know you weren't expecting anything. I highly doubt you've got me anything. Don't worry — I just couldn't resist.

Perhaps we could have a drink when I'm feeling better. I'm going to need help working through the bottle of Glenfiddich Minerva will undoubtedly gift me.

I'm not asking for things to be how they were. I'm just asking for us to move forward.

Merry Christmas,

Remus

Severus almost tossed the whole thing in the fire without opening it, but he couldn't bring himself to do so. Carefully undoing the Spellotape holding it together, he peeled off the paper, expecting some potions book or perhaps something Dark Arts related. It was nothing of the sort.

It was a wooden puzzle box. Muggle in origin, by the looks of it. Interlocking pieces of dark stained wood, intricately carved and fit together in a way that Severus could tell the solution would take time.

He thought about a shelf, in a bedroom in a muggle house he hadn't visited in years, where a small collection of similar puzzle boxes resided, no doubt covered in dust by now. A collection that had begun when a nine year-old redheaded girl eagerly gifted him one for his birthday, gushing about the trip to Turkey she'd taken with her family, and how she'd seen the box and just *had* to get it for him.

Long fingers brushed carefully over the wood, his brain already beginning to look for next possible moves, keen to see if there was anything inside the box. From Lupin, it could be anything. Severus didn't know what he was hoping for.

Perhaps the box would be better off empty.

Cursing under his breath, Severus screwed the paper up into a ball, throwing it into the fire, note and all. The puzzle box remained in his lap, taunting him.

Move forward. He scoffed. That was easier said than done. They'd barely been able to figure things out the first time around, when they were young and naive and so bloody *hopeful* — at least, Remus was hopeful. Thinking about the werewolf back then made a sharp ache pierce Severus' ribcage.

Remus was right. They certainly couldn't go back to how things were. Everything had changed far, far too much for that.

He shook his head, tearing his gaze away from the puzzle box and staring into the flames as they turned the wrapping paper to ash. He'd been well on his way to fucking things up for good, before Merlin only knew why the idiot wolf was still trying.

Moving forward. Severus wondered what that would look like.

He cursed the corner of his shrivelled up heart that was desperate to find out.

.-.-.-

Ron was itching for a fight.

That much was obvious to Harry. Between his worry for Scabbers and his anger at Hermione turning the Firebolt in to McGonagall, Ron was a tightly wound ball of rage that would explode at any moment. Harry himself wasn't even mad about the Firebolt; he, too, was suspicious of its origin. He just hoped he could have it back before the match against Ravenclaw.

"Parkinson's looking at you funny," Ron muttered as the two of them walked to the greenhouses for Herbology. Harry glanced over his shoulder — Pansy Parkinson was indeed looking at him, but it was more calculating than anything, arm in arm with an oblivious Tracy Davis. Harry thought back to his odd meeting with Zabini and Greengrass, before Christmas. Perhaps word was spreading further. Or maybe Malfoy had said something, after one of their mostly-accidental late-night meetings.

"She's not doing anything, Ron," Harry assured, grabbing Ron's elbow and tugging him forward, away from the Slytherins. "It's fine." If Ron was going to pick a fight, he didn't want to be part of it.

"I swear, Malfoy hasn't given us a good reason to hex him in ages," Ron groused. "It's like you don't even exist to him anymore."

"Maybe he feels guilty about Buckbeak." Malfoy wasn't completely ignoring Harry in public these days, but he wasn't quite as eager to mock him as he used to be. Harry was honestly surprised this was the first time Ron was bringing it up.

"Doubt it. Git's probably just waiting til after the trial so he can rub it in our faces some more. Oh, look, there's Zabini!"

"Leave him alone, Ron," Harry said with a scowl, blocking him from going after the tall Slytherin.

"What's with you, lately?" Ron asked, a dark look on his freckled face. "You getting chummy with the Slytherins or something? You never get back at them anymore."

"Maybe I've just got bigger things to worry about than the Slytherins." The Slytherins weren't really bothering him anymore, he had no reason to be angry with them. Besides, the whole house rivalry thing had sort of lost its shine. Sirius Black was a Gryffindor, after all. Houses clearly didn't mean much.

"That doesn't mean you can just let them go around acting like they own the school!"

"Oh, grow up, Ron," Harry snapped before he could help himself. The redhead recoiled, shocked, before a venomous look crept in. "I didn't mean it like that," Harry hastened to soothe his friend. "I just... it all feels a bit petty, doesn't it? To be going after someone just because they're in a different house. It's stupid."

"Petty and stupid, am I?" Ron asked biting. "You've changed, Harry. I figured it was just about Black, but you're weird this year. Always off by yourself, doing Merlin knows what."

Making friends with Slytherins. I'm not sure I like it.”

Before Harry could say anything more, Ron ripped his arm out of the green-eyed boy's grasp and stalked off to the greenhouses, leaving Harry alone in the courtyard. Suddenly, Hermione appeared at his side. “What was all that about?” She seemed a little breathless, which was odd, because they'd just come from Transfiguration and it wasn't that far a walk.

“Nothing. Ron being a git,” Harry muttered, shoving his hands in his pockets and carrying on his way. He knew the redhead didn't really mean it — he just wanted to take his anger out on someone — but it still made the ever-present guilt rise like a snake, twisting in his belly. He really had been neglecting his friend this year. He just... the older he got, the more he found Ron's personality hard to deal with. Especially after getting used to spending more time around people like Neville, and even Malfoy.

Ron was his first friend at Hogwarts, and he'd always be grateful for that. But did that make him the best choice?

.-. .

After that argument, Ron avoided Harry just as much as he was already avoiding Hermione.

“I'm sure he doesn't mean it,” Neville said one day, after Ron had grabbed him to partner up in Potions to avoid having to work with either Harry or Hermione. The result was a melted cauldron, and a scorch mark on the dungeon ceiling. Snape had not been impressed. “He's just got a quick temper.”

“Yeah, well maybe I'm sick of it,” Harry replied. “I keep feeling awful about having all these secrets, but how am I supposed to trust him when the wrong word sets him off? And the way he talks about the Slytherins, like they're not even *people*...”

“They *have* been pretty awful to you in the past, Harry,” Neville pointed out cautiously. “Malfoy especially. Most of them are alright, yeah, but there are some.”

“Oh, there are definitely some Slytherins that would happily see me dead,” Harry agreed. “But I don't think Malfoy's one of them. Not anymore. Things have been different, this year.” Neville knew that Malfoy knew about Harry being the Potter heir. He didn't know that Malfoy had started being actually civil to him, if not outright friendly, when it was just the two of them around. It wasn't often they crossed paths in the middle of the night, but it was frequent enough to possibly be considered a habit. One that Harry wasn't entirely sure he wanted to break.

Harry told him. Neville's eyebrows shot up to his hairline. “Malfoy? Really?”

“He's actually alright, when he doesn't have Crabbe and Goyle breathing down his neck,” Harry confided. The other Gryffindor boy frowned.

“But he's still being a prat in classes. And the whole Buckbeak thing.” Everyone in the school knew that Lucius Malfoy was trying to get Buckbeak killed.

"That's more his dad than him. I think he actually sort-of feels bad about it. And yeah, he's a prat, but he's not as bad as he was before. People would start asking questions if he was suddenly nice to me." Snape might have a heart attack. Ron, too, for that matter. And Merlin only knew what would happen if word got back to Lucius Malfoy that his son was being friendly to the Boy-Who-Lived.

"I s'pose," Neville said with a shrug.

Harry gave the password to the Fat Lady, and the two of them stepped into the common room. Harry came up short when he saw Hermione and McGonagall there, the older woman holding—"My Firebolt!" He looked up hopefully. "Does this mean I can have it back?"

"You've got a very good friend, somewhere," McGonagall declared. "We've done everything we can think of, and there doesn't seem to be anything wrong with it." She held it out, and Harry took it with reverent hands. "I daresay you'll need to get the feel of it before Saturday's match. Just don't go out flying after dark without a professor. And, Potter—" She smirked, meeting his eyes. "Make sure you win, won't you? It's been far too long since I've had the Quidditch Cup sitting in my office."

Harry beamed at her. "I'll try my best. Thanks, Professor." He turned to the dark-skinned girl at the woman's side. "Thanks for looking out for me, Hermione," he added. His friend had been beating herself up over the broom since Ron had exploded on her about it, but Harry didn't blame her one bit.

"It's what I'm here for." She grinned back at him. "I'm glad it turned out alright."

As soon as McGonagall left, a crowd started gathering around Harry, his housemates clamouring to get a closer look at the international-standard broom. Harry let them, keeping a careful eye out to make sure no one damaged it. It would be just his luck to get it back only for some careless Gryffindor to break it.

"You got it back!" Ron shoved his way through the crowd, squeezing in at Harry's side like he'd forgotten he was mad at the bespectacled boy. "See, told you there was nothing wrong with it!" This was said smugly to Hermione, who huffed.

"There *could've* been. Aren't you glad that we know now?"

Ron rolled his eyes. "Can I ride it, Harry? Just for a bit? I'll be really careful."

"Maybe tomorrow. It's too dark now. I should go put it away." Ron's hands clamped around the broom.

"I'll take it. I've got to give Scabbers his rat tonic, anyway. I'll be right back." Before Harry could argue, he was off up the stairs, broom in hand.

"Well," Hermione muttered, glancing first at Harry, then Neville. "Now you've got your expensive broomstick back, we're his best friends again, I suppose." There was a bitterness to her voice that made Harry wince. "Hopefully we can put all this behind us, now. Honestly, he's giving me whiplash this year; I can never keep track of whether he likes me or not."

Neville snorted. He opened his mouth to say something, but was cut off by a strangled yell from up in the boys' dormitory tower. The whole common room went silent. Harry flicked his wand free of its holster, tensing.

There were hurried footsteps, then Ron burst into view, dragging a bedsheets in his wake. "LOOK!" he roared, stalking straight for Hermione, pointing at her with the fist that held the bedsheets. "LOOK!"

"Ron, what—?"

"SCABBERS!" Ron yelled, shaking the sheet in her face. "THERE'S BLOOD ON THE SHEETS, AND HE'S GONE!" Harry looked closer, his heart sinking at the small, rust-red stain on the fabric. "YOU KNOW WHAT ELSE WAS THERE? THIS!" Ron thrust out his other hand, opening it to show a handful of long, ginger cat hairs. "YOUR BLOODY CAT KILLED HIM!"

"Ron, I'm sure he's just missing, he's probably hiding under one of the beds," Hermione started. Ron took an angry step forward.

"Yeah, bleeding to death!" he spat. The rest of the Gryffindors, realising that it wasn't another Sirius Black attack but actually just Ron being dramatic, promptly went back to their previous business. Harry shared an uneasy look with Neville.

"I'm sorry, Ron!" Hermione actually had tears in her eyes, but Ron was red-faced with fury and didn't seem to care. "Cats chase rats, I can't keep him locked in my room all the time! You don't even know he was in there, those hairs could've been there from Christmas!"

"You never should've bought that bloody menace in the first place! Tell her, Harry!"

"I'm staying out of this," Harry insisted, shaking his head. "I've got homework to do." He turned away, beckoning Neville to follow with a jerk of his head, ignoring Ron yelling after him. He wasn't going to start taking sides, even if Scabbers was really dead. He was an old rat, it would've happened eventually.

"So much for all being friends again," he muttered with a glance to Neville, who grimaced apologetically.

At least he had a broom now. That was one problem sorted.

.-. .

Even a ride on Harry's Firebolt after quidditch practice couldn't cheer Ron up. He was taking the loss of Scabbers hard, and outright refusing to talk to Hermione unless it was to argue with her. It was a toss up on any given day whether he'd speak to Harry, either, but the Firebolt seemed to be the deciding factor. Up until they saw Crookshanks in the grass, the cat almost giving Harry a heart attack. He could've sworn it was the Grim again. He wished he'd never taken bloody Divination.

Still, Ron's bad mood couldn't dampen Harry's spirits after the win against Ravenclaw. He felt like he was walking on air — he had one of the best brooms in the world, he'd caught the snitch, *and* he'd produced a decent Patronus. Even if the dementors hadn't been real.

His heart did a funny sort of squeezing feeling when he thought about what Malfoy had done. He'd thought things were getting better between them. Was he just so desperate to win the Quidditch Cup that he'd sabotage Harry?

The party in the Gryffindor common room raged for hours, especially once the twins brought back their Honeydukes haul, winking at Harry when they entered the common room with arms full of sweets and butterbeer. Harry let them drag him into the celebration, their arms flung around his shoulders and beaming grins on their faces. Even Ron was having a good time — though he was pointedly not looking at the corner of the common room, where Hermione had her nose buried in her Muggle Studies book, her hair getting increasingly more wild as she tugged on it anxiously. Harry had already tried to get her to join the party, but she wasn't having any of it. Apparently, the only reason she wasn't up in her dorm was that Fay Dunbar and Sophie Roper were having some sort of boy-related crisis up there. Considering that pair of her dorm mates had even less patience for Hermione than Parvati and Lavender, Harry didn't blame her.

Eventually, it all got a bit much for Harry. While the others were distracted by the twins letting off some Filibuster's Fireworks, Harry slipped out of the portrait hole, heading off down the corridor. He didn't have a destination in mind, but his feet seemed to be taking him somewhere regardless. He wasn't entirely surprised when he rounded a corner to see a familiar blond head.

"Shouldn't you be celebrating?" Malfoy asked as Harry approached. He reached out, dusting a bit of red and gold confetti off of Harry's shoulder. "Surely the party isn't over already."

"Needed some air. It's loud in there," Harry replied. He went over to the window ledge, sitting on it and staring out at the darkening grounds. "Why'd you do it? Pretend to be dementors?"

"It was Pansy's idea," Malfoy replied with a faint grimace. "She thought it would be funny. I thought it would be good practice of that spell Lupin's teaching you." He edged closer, but didn't sit on the ledge beside Harry, leaning against the wall instead. "People are starting to ask questions. Questions that might get back to my father. The excuse of my arm hurting only worked for so long," he added dryly.

Harry thought back to his conversation with Neville the other day. Of course; he was being stupid. Malfoy had to keep up appearances. "Your father wants you to pick fights with me?"

"My father wants me to act like a *proper* Slytherin," Malfoy corrected. "Including showing I'm better than Gryffindors. Especially Golden Boy Gryffindors." The nickname was almost fond, and Harry's lips twitched.

"I suppose I can toss a few spells your way between classes," he replied magnanimously. "Ron keeps telling me I'm being too nice to Slytherins these days."

"Appearances must be upheld," Malfoy agreed. Harry's mind flashed back to the terrified look on the blond's face all those months ago in the hospital wing, when he'd admitted what the dementors made him see. He was starting to think maybe Malfoy had more on the line than Harry himself did.

Slowly, Harry reached out a hand, looking into silver-grey eyes. "No one needs to know about this, though. Not in private." He tilted his head, lips curving in a smile, remembering two boys; smaller, younger, entirely oblivious to the truth of the other.

Malfoy hesitantly extended his own hand, but his grip was firm when his fingers curled around Harry's. "Draco Malfoy," he said, as if introducing himself for the first time. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Harry Potter," he returned, grinning. "I think we're going to be great friends, Draco Malfoy." Letting go of the other boy's hand, Harry glanced at his watch. "Speaking of appearances, I should get back to the party before someone notices I'm gone." He got to his feet, stifling a sigh. If only he could stay in the quiet with Malfoy a little longer. "Hey, can we start doing this on purpose?"

Malfoy stared at him blankly. "Are you saying you just befriended me by accident?"

"No," Harry snorted, rolling his eyes. "I meant meeting up. Instead of just randomly bumping into each other. We'd have to be careful, obviously, but... I feel like a Slytherin perspective to all this heir stuff is exactly what I need. No one ever taught me how to be a pureblood." And if he wanted the excuse to spend more time with his new friend, well, Malfoy didn't have to know that.

"I suppose. Someone has to make sure you don't embarrass yourself once you start representing your houses," Malfoy replied drily. Harry read between the lines, and grinned.

"Great. I'll, uh, see you around. Draco."

The blond blinked at him, taken-aback. A small, reluctant smile flittered across his face. "See you, Harry. Good luck with all your adoring lions."

Harry went back to Gryffindor tower with a spring in his step and a smile on his face, that couldn't be dragged down even when Ron started making snide remarks about Hermione.

.....

Remus watched the flames in his fireplace fade from green back to orange, as Professor McGonagall bid him a harried goodnight. The entire castle had been searched, and there was no sign of him. Whatever had happened in the Gryffindor common room, Sirius was gone.

His hands shook. His cup of tea had long gone cold, and he heated it back up with a wave of his wand, hoping it might calm his nerves. His eyes strayed to the door, wondering if Severus was going to come bursting in, accusing him of helping Sirius break into the castle. Remus honestly wouldn't blame him if he did.

Sometimes it felt like he was as good as helping, just by not saying anything. There was no doubt in his mind that Sirius was hiding out in his animagus form. If Remus told someone about it, they'd probably catch him within the week.

But he couldn't bring himself to do it.

Deep down, in his heart, his pack instinct was screaming that Sirius would never, *could never*, hurt Harry. Even after tonight —standing over Ron Weasley with a knife, what the *hell* was Sirius thinking?? — he had to believe there was some other explanation.

Reaching for the photo album on the coffee table, Remus flicked it open to the page he'd spent more than a few nights looking at since the week before Christmas, when he'd unearthed all his old photos to find the one for Harry. This photo was from the same day.

Arms wrapped around each other and beaming smiles on their faces, the four Marauders looked up at him, all wearing festive jumpers and laughing. Merlin, they'd been so *young*. He watched as photo-Sirius ruffled photo-Remus' hair, while photo-James blew a kiss to Lily, who was the one behind the camera, and photo-Peter jumped as the cat brushed between his legs. In the corner of the photo, you could see the moses basket where baby Harry slept peacefully, little reindeer antlers peeking over the edge. James had been so proud of himself for finding that onesie.

Remus could remember that day like it was yesterday. Lily and James' first Yule in the new house, the first — and only — with the baby. They'd thought it was the best thing ever, starting their own family traditions — the second generation of Marauders. It had driven Lily nuts to hear her son referred to as such, but she'd had a smile on her face nonetheless. James had good-naturedly pestered the rest of them about settling down and making some playmates for little Harry, insisting he couldn't carry their legacy entirely on his own back. Sirius had laughed and promised he was in no rush to have kids, but he'd treat Prongs' like his own. Peter had blushed and stuttered and made some mention of a date he was going on in the new year. Remus had pretended not to hear Lily dropping hints about a certain Slytherin; they'd had a fight a while before that Christmas. It had been months before they'd spoken again. Again, Lily's doing. No wonder he was a mess without her.

His gaze kept drawing back to those familiar grey eyes, shining with so much life and love and joy. He still didn't understand how everything could go so wrong. Maybe he never would.

"Why, Padfoot?" he murmured to the photo, a question he'd asked thousands of times in the last twelve years. "You could've had everything. *We* could've had everything." Even with Voldemort's growing power, they still had so much hope in that little family of theirs. Now, it was all gone. Except Harry. The only hope he had left, the shining light in the darkness. He couldn't believe Sirius capable of snuffing that light out.

Maybe he was fooling himself. Time would tell.

.-.-.-

When the letter from Hagrid arrived at breakfast, a few days after Black broke into the tower, Harry knew something was up. The way it was addressed to just the two of them, not Hermione...

With a sinking realisation, Harry checked the calendar. Buckbeak's trial was at the end of the week. He had completely forgotten about his promise to help with the research; and from the look on Ron's face when Harry mentioned it to him on the way down to meet Hagrid at the entrance hall, so had he.

"We're really sorry, Hagrid," Harry said once they were inside the cabin. Buckbeak was curled up in the corner, snuffling at what looked like half a dead stoat. "We should've been helping more with Buckbeak's case. We've just been so busy lately—"

"I'm not angry abou' that," Hagrid assured, pouring them tea and offering a plate of Bath buns, which neither boy touched. "Yeh've had a lot on yer plate, practisin' quidditch all hours o' the day an' night. I wanted to talk t' yeh both about Hermione."

"What about her?" Ron asked, a scowl coming to his face at the name. He still wasn't over Scabbers' assumed death.

"She's bin down 'ere a lot since Christmas, helpin' with Buckbeak an' all. Cried a fair few times — she's goin' through a bit of a rough time at the minute. Bit off more than she can chew, I think, with all those classes o' hers. But more'n that, I think she's lonely. I've barely seen the three o' you together these days."

Harry winced, glancing at Ron.

"If she'd just get rid of that bloody cat, I'd speak to her again!" he insisted. "But she won't hear a word against it!"

"Ah, well, people can be a bit stupid abou' their pets," Hagrid said, looking over at Buckbeak with sad eyes. "I jus' thought yer friendship was worth more than rats, or broomsticks," he added with a glance to Harry.

"I had no problem with her handing the Firebolt to McGonagall!" he said defensively. "I'd happily spend more time with Hermione, but I can never bloody find her. It's like you said, she's taking a million classes at once. And I'm at quidditch every free hour I've got." He knew he was making excuses, but he didn't want Hagrid to think he was purposefully ignoring Hermione, or taking Ron's side. He wasn't spending much time with Ron lately, either. "We'll talk to her, Hagrid, I promise." He elbowed Ron in the side until the redhead nodded, though he didn't look happy about it.

They spent the rest of their visit discussing Gryffindor's chances at the Quidditch Cup, and when they made their way back up to the castle, they found a cluster of students around the notice board in the Gryffindor common room. "Hogsmeade, next weekend. Brilliant! Oh, sorry Harry," he added belatedly. Harry bit his lip. He still hadn't told Ron and Hermione about the map yet. Maybe it was time to start mending some bridges.

Harry nudged Ron over towards Hermione. "Can I talk to you two for a minute? Privately?"

Ron scowled at Hermione, but let Harry move them to a secluded corner. He put up his privacy ward. “Don’t get mad at me,” he started, reaching into his bag and pulling out the map. “A little bit ago, the twins gave me this.”

He explained the map, not letting on exactly how long he’d had it. Ron beamed at him when he realised what it meant. “You can come to Hogsmeade with us! Brilliant! Mate, you’re gonna love Zonko’s—“

“This is really dangerous, Harry! If you get caught in Hogsmeade — if *Sirius Black* catches you—“

“Lighten up, Hermione!” Ron cut in with a roll of his eyes. “Black’s hardly gonna come after him in the middle of a crowd of students, is he?”

“How can you say that, after what he almost did to you?” Hermione hissed. “You should stay in the castle, Harry.”

“Why, it’s not like it’s any safer,” Harry pointed out. “Black’s already broken in here twice.”

That took a little of the wind out of Hermione’s sails, but she still didn’t look happy. “If you had any sense, you’d give that map to McGonagall.”

“Are you mental? This thing is genius! I can’t believe Fred and George never told me about it.” A dark look briefly crossed Ron’s face, but it faded in favour of telling Harry all about Zonko’s and how great it was. Hermione huffed, gathering her books and stomping back to her previous table, where her half-finished essay awaited. “So you’ll come, then?” Ron asked eagerly.

“Yeah. But I’m taking my invisibility cloak.”

No need to go borrowing trouble.

Chapter 7

That Saturday morning, Hermione kept shooting Harry suspicious looks across the table at breakfast. “I know what you’re planning,” she muttered. Harry grinned at her.

“It’ll be fine, Hermione. Trust me.” Maybe a little rule-breaking as a trio was just what Harry needed to stop feeling out-of-sorts. In the last few months, things had changed so much. Mostly for the better, but it was overwhelming at times. Some good old-fashioned mischief was just what the doctor ordered.

Harry pretended to see Ron and Hermione off at the Entrance Hall, then made his way towards the third floor, Marauder’s Map in his pocket. As he reached the statue of the one-eyed witch, he checked the map quickly, cursing under his breath at the small dot labelled ‘*Neville Longbottom*’ rapidly approaching.

“Hiya Harry!” Neville greeted cheerfully. “I forgot you weren’t going to Hogsmeade. Fancy a game of Exploding Snap?”

“Sorry, Neville,” Harry said, keeping his voice casual. “I’ve, uh, got some work to do.” He gave the other boy a pointed look, and Neville’s mouth made an ‘o’ of understanding.

“Did you want any help with it?” Neville asked quietly. Harry made to reply, but they were interrupted by sharp footsteps approaching. Neville gasped, shuffling behind Harry.

“Potter. Longbottom,” Snape greeted, staring Harry down with suspicion. “What are you two doing here? An odd place to meet.”

Harry refused to let his eyes drift to the one-eyed witch statue, even when Snape’s did.
“We’re not meeting here. We just— met here.”

“Then I suggest the two of you return to Gryffindor tower, where you belong,” Snape drawled, running his hand over the statue. Harry held his breath.

“Right. We’ll, uh, do that, sir.” The two of them left, and Harry told Neville he was going to the library, only to double back as soon as he saw the dot labelled ‘*Severus Snape*’ securely in his office.

“Dissendium,” he whispered, tapping the witch’s hump and climbing in as soon as it opened. He was running late.

..

Hermione wasn’t with Ron when Harry found him. It was clearly too much to ask for the two of them to make up, even after Hagrid spoke to them. Harry was starting to regret going — all he was doing was following Ron around, letting the redhead show him all the things he’d seen when he’d visited by himself before Christmas, when Ron didn’t know about the map.

Exploding Snap with Neville would've been more fun. At least Harry got Ron to buy him some stuff at Honeydukes, slipping him money from beneath the cloak.

Ron led the way up towards the Shrieking Shack, telling Harry all about the rumours of it being haunted, when he heard a voice from the other side of the hill. As the voice drew closer, Harry's stomach sank. "Father had to go to the hearing, of course, to tell them about my arm." It was Draco, flanked by Crabbe and Goyle, laughing over Hagrid and Buckbeak. It sent a sharp pain through Harry's ribs, but he shook it off. Draco had made it pretty clear that those two were as much his babysitters as his bodyguards, keeping an eye on Draco and reporting back to their fathers, who would turn to Draco's father if he didn't like what he heard. They weren't as dumb as they looked.

"What are you doing, Weasley?" Draco's voice cut through Harry's thoughts, and he saw Ron's hands clench into fists at his sides. Draco looked up at the shack. "Bet you'd love to live here, wouldn't you? Practically a palace compared to that hovel you live in now." Crabbe and Goyle both laughed, and Harry had to grab the back of Ron's robes to stop him from charging at Draco.

"Leave him to me," he hissed under his breath. Ron would never forgive him if he didn't take the opportunity. Besides, Draco *was* being a bit of a prick. Even if it was an act.

Sneaking off to the side, he flicked his wand from his holster, levitating a particularly gross patch of mud up. SPLAT!

It slammed into the back of Draco's robes, covering all three Slytherins in foul-smelling muck. Draco yelped. "What was that?"

SPLAT!

Harry sent another ball of mud flying from the other side, hitting Goyle clean in the face. "Who's there?" Crabbe called, whipping around with his wand in his hand. He started lumbering forward, half-blinded by mud, and Harry stuck a foot out to trip him as he passed. The enormous Slytherin went crashing to the ground — and on the way down, his foot caught on the corner of Harry's cloak.

Suddenly, his head was exposed, and all three Slytherins and Ron were staring at him with varying degrees of fury and horror. Harry stumbled back, quickly pulling the hood back up, and without saying anything to Ron he sprinted back towards Honeydukes.

If it had just been Draco, Harry wouldn't have worried, but Crabbe and Goyle saw him too. There was no way they wouldn't tell a teacher. *Shit*, he was in so much trouble.

When he reached the passage in Honeydukes' cellar, he did a quick cleaning charm to get the mud off his boots and scrambled back up to clamber out of the one-eyed witch, hoping he didn't look as out of breath as he felt. If anyone asked, he could just say he'd been out flying. He left the cloak and his bag in the passageway and shut the witch's hump behind him, hoping to slide right back into the trickle of students going about their day. He could come back and get them later. Quick footsteps echoed down the corridor. The blood drained from Harry's face.

“Potter!” It was Snape, his features set in a harsh glare, though there was a gleam of triumph in his eyes. Harry was well aware of his sweaty face and messy hair. “Come with me.”

“Where are we going, sir?” Harry asked, playing innocent as he fell into stride beside the long-legged Slytherin, having to practically jog to keep up. Naturally, they ended up in Snape’s office.

“Sit.” Harry did so, trying not to stare too closely at the gross things in jars lining the shelves. “Mr Malfoy and his friends came to me with a rather interesting story.”

“Sir?”

“Apparently, Potter, they came across Weasley in Hogsmeade. And he wasn’t alone.”

“Was Hermione with him, sir? I’m glad they’re talking again.” Snape’s glare could’ve melted a cauldron.

“Mr Malfoy states that someone invisible was throwing mud at him and his two friends, while they were stood talking to Mr Weasley. And then, Mr Crabbe saw a very *curious* apparition. Do you know what that might be?”

“Can’t say I do, sir.”

“Your *head*, Potter. Floating in the middle of Hogsmeade.”

“Perhaps he should go to Madam Pomfrey, sir, if he’s seeing things,” Harry replied neutrally. He thought Snape might explode with rage.

“Your head does not have permission to go to Hogsmeade. No part of your body has permission to go to Hogsmeade.”

“I know, sir. I’ve been in Gryffindor tower all day, like you told me.”

“Can anyone confirm that, Potter?” For a moment, Harry almost threw Neville’s name out there. But as good as the boy claimed to be at Occlumency, he couldn’t lie for shit, especially to Snape. Instead, he stayed quiet. Snape smirked. “I thought so. How very like your father you are. Believing yourself to be above the rules. Everyone from the Minister for Magic downwards is trying to keep you safe from Sirius Black, and you’re just gallivanting off about Hogsmeade, because of course, Famous Harry Potter goes where he wants, with no thought to the consequences. Do you have anything to say for yourself, boy?”

Harry flinched. “Don’t call me that, sir,” he begged, his shoulders curling in to protect his ribs on instinct.

“I’ll call you what I like, you arrogant little brat. Really, the resemblance is uncanny — James Potter also strutted about the castle with his friends, his head so swollen—“

“Shut up!” Harry yelled before he could stop himself. “Shut up about my father!” Lupin had told him Snape and his father didn’t get along, and that James had been a bit of a prick in school, but to hear Snape talk about him like that...

“What did you say, boy?” Snape’s voice was a venomous his. Harry took a step back.

“I asked you not to call me that, sir,” he said weakly. His knees were starting to shake, his eyes darting about, expecting fists to fly at any moment.

“I hate to think of the stories Lupin’s been filling your head with. Acting like James Potter was the best thing to ever happen to this school, telling you tales of glorious heroism. Did he tell you about the time your father and his *saintly* friends played a prank on me that almost cost me my life? Your father got cold feet at the last minute, but if he hadn’t, they all would’ve been expelled.” Snape smirked. “No, I don’t suppose he did share that tale.”

Snape straightened up abruptly. “Turn out your pockets, Potter!”

Harry startled, but didn’t move.

“I said, turn out your *pockets!*”

Mentally cursing, Harry did as bid, setting a handful of Fudge Flies and the Marauder’s Map on the table in front of him. “Ron gave those to me,” he said hurriedly. “After the last Hogsmeade weekend. I was just— saving them.”

“How touching. And this?” Snape held up the Marauder’s Map. Harry swallowed, refusing to make eye contact with the man.

“Just a spare bit of parchment. I was doing my Charms essay earlier.”

Snape turned the map over in his hands, studying it closely. “Rather *old* piece of parchment, isn’t it? I should perhaps just throw it away.” He made as if to throw it in the fire, and Harry lurched forwards. “Aha! What is it really, Potter? Another present from Mr Weasley? Instructions on how to get into Hogsmeade? Or— something else.” He pulled his wand, placing the tip to the paper. “Reveal your secrets.”

Harry watched in growing horror as the map’s creators took turns insulting Snape, the man’s face growing more enraged by the word. “I should’ve known,” Snape murmured. He strode across the office, tossing a handful of floo powder into his fire. “Lupin!” he called into the green flames. “I want a word!”

Within moments, Professor Lupin was in Snape’s office, looking pleasantly baffled as he stared between Harry and Snape. “Severus,” he greeted. “Harry. What can I do for you?”

“This,” Snape said, shoving the map in Lupin’s direction. “I found it in Potter’s pockets.”

For a moment, Harry could’ve sworn Lupin looked surprised. He read the words still on the map’s surface. His lips twitched. “I’m not sure what you want me to do about it, Severus.”

“Oh, you know exactly what I want, you—“ Snape cut himself off, glancing back at Harry. “It’s clearly some sort of dark magic. This is supposed to be your area of expertise, Lupin. Where do you suppose Potter got such a thing?” He had his eyebrows raised pointedly. Lupin’s lips twitched again.

Harry got the distinct feeling there were two different conversations happening at once.

"It seems like some sort of joke parchment, Severus. Designed to insult whoever tries to read it. Probably a Zonko's product."

"Really," Snape replied flatly. "There's nothing... familiar about it, to you?"

"Should there be?" Lupin asked, seeming utterly unfazed by Snape's anger.

Was Snape trying to imply that Lupin gave him the map?

"I *will* have answers, Lupin," Snape growled. Calm as you please, Lupin plucked the map from Snape's hands, offering the man a genial smile.

"Oh, I'd be delighted to give them to you, Severus, once I've studied it further. But I'm sure it's just a harmless prank parchment. Now, if we're quite finished here, I'm sure Harry has other places to be, don't you Harry?"

He wanted to ask for the map back, but he couldn't do that with Snape in the room.

"Right. Yeah. I'll just be going then..." He didn't dare look at Snape as he left the office, his heart pounding as he made for the third floor to go get his bag. Somehow, he'd escaped. He just had to ask Lupin for the map back, and then he'd be good.

"Harry!" His head snapped up, and he saw Ron sprinting down the corridor towards him, red-faced. "I tried... to get here... fast as I could... couldn't find you... you alright?" He was panting, having clearly just run the entire way from Hogsmeade.

"Fine. Had a run in with Snape, but... it's fine. I'll tell you later," he added, not wanting to linger too long in the corridor. He walked with his friend back towards Gryffindor Tower, his thoughts still back in Snape's office.

The Slytherin clearly expected Lupin to recognise the map. But why?

.-.-.-.

As soon as the door shut behind Harry, Severus rounded on Remus. "We both know what that is," he said bluntly. "I am *astounded* that you gave it to Potter, under the circumstances."

"I didn't give it to him!" Remus insisted, taking the map back out of his pocket and staring at it. "I had no idea Harry had it. I didn't even know it still existed! Peter got it confiscated by Filch a month before we graduated."

The words were still floating across the page, the familiar sets of handwriting making his heart ache softly. "I'm, uh, sorry about the nose comment," he added cheekily. "It was fifth year. After— y'know." The fight he'd thought would break them — until a year later, when Sirius almost ruined everything.

Severus' face shuddered for a moment. "Then it seems rather tame, considering," he remarked dryly. "You swear you didn't give it to Potter?"

"On my life, Severus," Remus vowed. "I have no clue how he managed to get a hold of it. Foolish boy. If he'd left this lying around..." He swallowed thickly. If the map got back in Sirius' hands, it was all over.

"Potter has never been particularly good at using his brain," Severus retorted acidly. Remus gave him a reproachful look.

"He's thirteen, Severus. How much did you use your brain back then?" He shook his head, running a hand through his hair. "I suppose he was in Hogsmeade, then?"

"Somehow. Malfoy said it was just his floating head. I seem to recall several similar instances from our school years." Severus' gaze was pointed, and Remus chuckled.

"James' cloak. I didn't know he had that, either." He thought it over for a second. "That one must have been Dumbledore. James let him borrow it for an Order thing before he..."

Severus scoffed. "Of course. The headmaster does love to encourage Potter to get himself into trouble." With a sigh, Severus reached up for the hidden bottle of whisky on his top shelf. Remus' stomach warmed when the man summoned two glasses. "I take it Potter has no idea about the origin of the map?"

"If he does, he hasn't asked me about it." Remus accepted the whisky with a grateful look. "I'm going to have to tell him, if he asks. He'll need a good reason why I'm not giving it back." He perched in his usual spot on the edge of the desk, setting his glass down and stroking a fond hand over the map. "Why didn't you open it in front of him? I can't see you passing up a chance to terrorise the poor boy."

Severus' pale cheeks flushed faintly. "Despite many attempts, I never learned the password."

Remus barked out a laugh. "Really? I always assumed you must've heard us, one of those times. You always talked about it like you knew exactly how it worked." He pulled his wand from his pocket, setting the tip against the parchment. His gaze met Severus'. "*I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.*"

Watching the ink flow out over the map was like a physical punch to the gut, and he had to close his eyes for several moments at the fresh wave of grief. Cool fingers touched the back of his hand for a brief moment. Enough to ground him in the present. "Our pride and joy," he breathed, opening his eyes again and looking over the map. Several floors above them, the dot labelled '*Harry Potter*' walked alongside the dot labelled '*Ron Weasley*', walking away from the statue of the one-eyed witch. Remus stifled a smile. Legacy of the Marauders, indeed. "Merlin, James would be thrilled. His little boy, using the map and cloak to sneak to Hogsmeade. That's all his dreams come true."

"Yes, I'm sure he'd be *delighted* to hear his son put himself in danger with a mass-murdering lunatic skulking about the place," Severus retorted sharply. Remus' smile faltered. "The map could be useful. If Black decides to return."

He wasn't sure what he'd do if he ever saw the little dot labelled '*Sirius Black*' reappear on the paper. But he owed it to Harry to keep an eye out, just in case. "I'll keep it with me.

Check it when I can.”

“Not going to take it to Dumbledore?” Severus’ voice was taunting, and Remus shot him a look.

“We both know that would be a terrible idea.”

Silence grew between them, and Remus sipped his whisky, his eyes returning to the map. Merlin, that felt like a lifetime ago, enchanting that thing. He hadn’t thought he’d ever see it again.

“He asked me not to call him ‘boy’.” Severus’ quiet words made Remus jump, caught up in his memories.

“Pardon?”

“Potter,” Severus explained at Remus’ wrinkled brow. “I called him ‘boy’. He had... quite the adverse reaction. I’ve never seen him like that before.”

“When you say ‘adverse’...”

“He acted like I was going to hit him.” The words were resigned, and the bottom fell out of Remus’ stomach. In the back of his mind, Moony growled.

“Petunia,” he spat, grip tightening around his glass. “If she or that brute husband of hers have laid a *hand* on my cub.”

“Calm yourself, Remus,” Severus urged, his fingers brushing Remus’ hand once more. He looked displeased as well, his lips curled in a sneer. “There will come a time when we will talk to Petunia. See how she’s been respecting Lily’s memory.”

That didn’t satisfy his inner wolf, but Remus knew he couldn’t just run off to wherever Petunia lived and give her a piece of his mind. “I’ve failed him in so many ways, Severus,” he breathed in anguish. “Ways he doesn’t even realise.”

“Dumbledore is the only one who has failed him,” Severus corrected, “and we will do our best to rectify that.”

Remus stared at the map, watching the dozens of dots flood the Entrance Hall as they returned from Hogsmeade.

He wasn’t sure his best would be enough.

.-. .

That evening after dinner found Harry knocking on the door of Professor Lupin’s office, biting his lip anxiously. The professor had a knowing look in his eyes when he answered the door. “Professor Lupin, about that, uh, parchment that Professor Snape took from me. I was hoping I could have it back?”

"No, Harry, you cannot have the map back. Yes, I know it's a map," Lupin added when Harry's jaw dropped. "I'm incredibly disappointed in you, Harry; not only did you sneak into Hogsmeade unsupervised, where anything could've happened to you, but you've had this map for Merlin knows how long with Sirius Black on the loose and you never turned it in."

The way Lupin looked at him made him feel about three inches tall. "I'm sorry, sir. I didn't think it was that important."

"Not that important? Harry, you've already seen what Black can do with things left lying about!" Neville was only just allowed to be told the password to the common room, even now.

"But he wouldn't know how to use it! It'd just insult him, like it did to Snape!"

"Are you so sure about that?" Lupin pulled the map out of his pocket, laying it flat on his desk. "*I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.*"

Harry gaped at him as the map jumped to life. "But... how..."

"When I told you months ago that you used to call me Uncle Remus, I suppose I was lying to you a little," Lupin told him, making Harry blink at the change of subject. "Remus is a little hard for a one year-old to say, after all. You much preferred to call me Uncle Moony. Well," he added, smiling wryly, "it came out more like 'Uncle Mooey', you struggled with your N's, you see."

Dragging his eyes down to the greeting at the top of the map, Harry stared back up at his professor in dawning shock.

"Remus Lupin, Peter Pettigrew, Sirius Black and James Potter. Also known as Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs. The Marauders," Lupin announced, offering a little bow. "At your service. Well, what's left of us, at least."

"What?" Harry could hardly believe it. "The map was my dad's?"

"Not solely his. It took all four of us to figure the spells out. Three, really; Peter was never that great with a wand. We finished it early in our fifth year, to help aid in our mischief-making ways. It got confiscated in our seventh year. I hadn't expected Filch to keep it." Lupin looked at him curiously. "I have to ask, Harry — how did you come to own the map?"

"A friend gave it to me," he said evasively, not wanting to get anyone in trouble. Lupin stared him down for a long moment, then smiled.

"The Weasley twins, I presume? That would explain an awful lot about them. Well, I suppose I can't ask for a much better successor. Some of their work is really quite fantastic. I thought Severus would never get his hair back the right colour after that little prank they pulled before Christmas."

"They worship you," Harry blurted. "The Marauders, I mean. Think you're the best thing ever." He wondered what the twins would do if he told them they were being taught by a real

live Marauder.

That made Lupin chuckle. “I’m glad our good work is being continued. But that doesn’t mean you can tell them, Harry,” he added. “I’m telling you because it’s James, and because I need you to understand why it’s so dangerous to have this map. Sirius Black helped create it. If it ended up in his hands, he could find you anywhere in the castle. I can’t let you have it back, I’m sorry.”

Harry winced; if he’d known, he never would have kept the map. Suddenly, a thought occurred to him. “Don’t take it to Dumbledore.”

“Beg your pardon, Harry?”

“Don’t take the map to Professor Dumbledore. Please.” If Dumbledore found the map, if he had another way of monitoring Harry... he was screwed. Lupin’s brow furrowed.

“I wasn’t planning on doing so. But why don’t you want it going to the Headmaster?”

Harry glanced down at the map, then back up at Lupin, deciding to throw caution to the wind. Lupin had been good about being honest with him so far. “Professor Dumbledore put a curse on my magical core to block me from my family magics.”

Lupin’s eyes went wide in alarm. Harry blurted out the whole story of his trip to Gringotts, including the Compulsion charm, explaining why he thought Dumbledore was the one who did it. “And I shouldn’t have told you that, because he can read minds, and if he finds out then he’ll know I know, and I’m done for!” he finished, somewhat panicked. Lupin’s hands came down on his shoulders, squeezing gently.

“You’re fine, Harry. Your secrets are safe with me. I have... let’s call them natural mental defences. Dumbledore has never been able to read my mind.” Harry let out a sigh of relief, and Lupin let him go, turning to pace the length of the desk. “Of all the things... I knew he was bad, but I never thought... Merlin, to block your family magics!” He turned to Harry abruptly. “You’re sure the block is gone?”

“The goblins said it was, yeah.”

Lupin sighed in relief. “Good. Good. When James turned seventeen, the boost in magic from his family line just about cracked all the windows in the dorm. That combined with the Black family — and Slytherin! Good grief, to have that sort of power surge trapped inside you with a magic blocker could level the school when you come of age!” His head snapped up, colour draining from his face. Harry’s heart skipped a beat, his blood turning to ice.

Was that what Dumbledore wanted?

“Who else have you told?”

“Neville knows about almost all of it. The twins know I’m taking up my family seat, but they don’t know about the block. And a few other kids — apparently word got around amongst the heirs that the House of Potter is back on the playing field.”

"You have to be incredibly careful, Harry. If the wrong person should find out what you know... I don't have to tell you how badly that could end up for you." Lupin's words made Harry's stomach churn. No, he was well aware of the line he was treading.

"I don't know what to do," he admitted in a meek voice. "I've been reading up as much as I can about the old bloodlines, and what it means to be an heir, and family magic, but... I don't know what I'm doing, and I don't know *why* Dumbledore wants to keep it from me, and I don't know who I can trust and if I tell the wrong person I could die!"

All of a sudden, Lupin's arms were wrapped around his shoulders, pulling him in close. Harry couldn't help the way he buried his face in the man's robes, eyes squeezed shut against the tears threatening to spill forth. "Easy, cub, easy. It's alright," Lupin soothed, one broad hand rubbing across his shoulders. It was a hug unlike any Harry had experienced before. Lupin looked like a strong wind would blow him over, but there was wiry muscle in his arms, and it made Harry feel safe. Secure. Like... like a parent would. Not even like Mrs Weasley hugging him, where she tried to crush the life out of him. Just... warm.

"Albus Dumbledore is not going to hurt you anymore, I promise you that," Lupin vowed fiercely, his lips pressed against Harry's hair. "You've done so well, cub. You've been so brave. But you don't have to do this alone anymore."

"I'm always alone," Harry muttered bitterly. Lupin pulled back enough to look Harry in the eye, and he could've sworn the man's eyes flashed gold for a second. It was probably just the light.

"*Not anymore,*" he growled firmly. "Never again. I've let you down for far too long." He seemed as reluctant to break the hug as Harry was, but they parted nonetheless, Lupin unsuccessfully smoothing Harry's hair down. "That's a lost cause," he said ruefully, making Harry snort. "Just like James'."

Stepping back, Harry took a breath. "I'm sorry I didn't tell anyone about the map."

"I'll forgive you, but know in future you can come to me about anything, okay?" Lupin told him, brown eyes serious. "Absolutely anything. You can trust me, Harry." He glanced down at the map. "You should go. Your friend Miss Granger is on her way up here, no doubt looking for you."

"Right, yeah." Harry had told Hermione what happened. She seemed to think it served him right to get the map confiscated. Ron was less pleased by it. "I'll, uh, see you later, then. Thanks."

"Have a good evening, Harry."

Harry left the office with his hands in his pockets, his emotions so jumbled in his head he could barely make sense of them all. At least one person — one adult — knew the truth, now. One person was on his side.

He bumped into Hermione in the corridor, expecting her to scold him again about the map. Instead, she had tears in her eyes, her hands trembling. "Hermione? What's wrong?" Had Ron said something awful to her?

She wordlessly handed over a crumpled piece of parchment, and Harry's heart sank. Buckbeak lost his trial.

"They can't do this," he murmured, taking her arm to lead her back to Gryffindor Tower. "Buckbeak isn't dangerous."

"Malfoy's dad thinks he is, and he's got the whole committee in his pocket," she retorted, wiping at her eyes.

Ron was in the common room when they entered, and he scowled at first, before he realised Hermione was crying. "Don't tell me she told on you, mate," he hissed, glaring at the curly-haired girl. Hermione's lip quivered, and she bit back a sob.

"I did no such thing," she bit out. "I just thought you might like to know, Hagrid lost the case. They're going to execute Buckbeak."

Ron's freckles stood out stark against his pale face as it drained of colour. "What?" Harry passed him the letter. "But that's not fair! Buckbeak did nothing wrong, it was all Malfoy!"

"We know that, but the committee doesn't care! There'll be an appeal, there always is, but... I can't see how it will help. Nothing will have changed."

"Yeah it will," Ron said fiercely. "You won't have to do all the work alone this time. I'll help."

"Oh, Ron!" Hermione flung herself into Ron's arms, sobbing on his shoulder, and Ron sent Harry an alarmed look as he patted her awkwardly on the top of the head. Through her sobs, she managed to stutter out an apology for Scabbers, and Ron shook his head, entirely out of his comfort zone.

"He was old, y'know—and a bit useless. It's alright." He kept patting Hermione's head until she finally drew away. She met Ron's eyes, offering him a tentative smile, which he returned. Another small sob escaped Hermione's lips.

Harry could only hope they were *finally* done fighting. They had more important things on their mind, now.

. . . .

As a cold and dreary February rolled into a slightly less cold and dreary March, Harry was beginning to feel like he was almost as busy as Hermione. His curly-haired friend was drowning under her workload, always doing some sort of work and looking increasingly hysterical while she was at it. But Harry had his classes, plus a truly absurd amount of quidditch practices — they were so close to the cup they could *taste* it, and Wood wanted them at their best. Add in his patronus lessons, his private study and his secret late-night

meetings with Draco, he barely had time to sleep. And after knowing Sirius Black could get all the way up to his dorm... well, even when he did have time to sleep, it was hard.

True to their word, he and Draco had resumed antagonising each other in public. It was actually sort of fun, now that Harry knew it was just a game. It certainly made Ron happier, having ‘the old Harry’ back. That made the guilt rise up again, but Harry shook it off.

They managed to meet about once a week, never in the same place twice, arranging meetings by dropping little notes in each other’s pockets or school bags whenever they had one of their ‘fights’. It was harder now Harry didn’t have the map, but he was managing. Tonight, they were in one of the old Charms classrooms on the fourth floor, chairs pulled up to the desk as Draco taught Harry a wizarding card game called Warlock’s Bluff. The rules were somewhat complicated, but Harry was starting to get the hang of it. He’d actually won the last round, much to Draco’s surprise.

“It’s better with four players,” Draco told him, using a spell to shuffle the deck for the next round.

“By better you mean harder.”

Draco smirked at him, eyes flashing in challenge. “Struggling to keep up, Harry?”

He dealt again, and Harry picked up his cards, keeping his face blank. Not a bad hand. He could win this one. “So what does being a good pureblood have to do with playing cards?”

“You can get a good measure a person by playing Bluff with them,” Draco replied, making his move. “Often business meetings will include a game or two, to keep conversation flowing. It shows logic, strategy, how many risks a person is willing to take. A little like chess, but quicker.”

Of course, even games had an ulterior motive with purebloods. Harry said as much, and Draco scoffed. “Not *every* game has an ulterior motive. Sometimes we play for fun. Just don’t ever play against Daphne, especially not for money. She’ll rob you blind with a smile on her face, the girl is a menace.”

“When would I ever play cards with Daphne Greengrass?” Harry asked, bewildered.

“You never know.” Draco shrugged. “The future holds many opportunities. There may come a time where we don’t have to put on quite so many masks.”

That was one thing Harry was learning, spending more time with Draco. Just about everyone in Slytherin — and many in other houses — was playing a part, to some degree. Draco wouldn’t say why it was so important, but he’d made it pretty clear that nobody could be taken at face value. It sounded exhausting to Harry.

Outside in the hallway, they heard a door slam shut. Both boys froze.

“It’s getting late,” Draco said eventually, flicking his wand and sending all the cards neatly back into their box. “We should go.”

They tried not to stay out too long past curfew, both because they needed to sleep, and because they were both painfully aware that Sirius Black could be roaming the castle at any time. Harry knew he was being foolish, but he couldn't bring himself to care. He *liked* spending time with Draco. The blond boy was funny when he wasn't being scathing; and sometimes even when he was. Spending time with him made Harry wonder if he'd made the wrong choice when he'd begged the sorting hat not to put him in Slytherin.

"I'll see you later." Harry watched Draco leave — Draco always left first. He waited several minutes, then made to swing his invisibility cloak over his shoulders, only to freeze when the door swung open. He stared guiltily into the honey eyes of Professor Lupin.

"Harry," the professor greeted neutrally, taking in the scene in front of him. "Did I just see Draco Malfoy leave this room a few moments ago?"

"...Maybe?"

"You don't look like you've been fighting," Lupin started, and Harry shook his head.

"We weren't fighting! We were, ah, playing Warlock's Bluff."

"A card game," Lupin said flatly. "With Draco Malfoy."

"We're maybe, kinda, friends now?" Harry replied, voice rising an octave as he shrugged helplessly, waiting for the outburst about not trusting Slytherins and being more carefully running about after dark.

"Merlin," Lupin muttered under his breath, glancing skyward in exasperation. "History repeats itself indeed." He cleared his throat, looking back at Harry. "Fifteen points from Gryffindor for being out after curfew."

"What! Aren't you going to take from Slytherin? Draco was out too!"

"Draco had the good sense not to get caught," Lupin retorted. "Also, he doesn't have a murderer looking for him. You're playing a dangerous game, here, Harry." His eyes flicked down to the fabric bunched in Harry's hands, and he smirked. "Ah, of course. How long have you had James' cloak?"

Harry looked down at the invisibility cloak, then back up at his professor. "You know what this is?" Lupin laughed.

"Know what it is? Harry, I spent half my school career hiding under that thing," he replied ruefully. "That cloak got the four of us out of many a sticky situation. It's reassuring to know you have it, but that doesn't mean it's okay for you to be out after dark. Let me walk you back to your common room. Put the cloak on."

With a sigh, Harry didn't bother arguing. He swung the cloak over his shoulders, noticing how amused Lupin looked as he disappeared. "You're not entirely Lily's boy, then," the professor remarked, leading the way out of the classroom. "Plenty of James in you yet. Not sure if that's a good thing."

It was the first time someone had told Harry he was more like his mother than his father, and it made a warm, fluttery feeling appear in his chest. He smiled, obediently following Lupin all the way back up to the Fat Lady, bidding the man goodnight before he murmured the password. One person in his life knew about his friendship with Draco, and hadn't condemned him for it.

Harry slept better than he had in weeks.

Chapter 8

“...And Jones whacks a banger of a bludger right at Mayweather, nearly takes his head off! Mayweather drops the quaffle—and Greengrass has it, Harpies are back in possession...”

Harry’s lips curled in a faint smile, his attention half on the quiet commentating of the quidditch match drifting from his Wizarding Wireless. He was up in the dorm, the curtains around his bed drawn and warded, his password-protected notebook in his lap while *Never Unarmed: The Theory of Wandless Magic* lay open on his left.

Hermione was off in the library, as always; Ron was either with her, helping with Buckbeak’s case, or had given up and sought out Dean and Seamus. Harry had been with them for a while, but when their bickering became too much he made the excuse of needing to talk to Lupin about his Patronus lessons. The pair may have banded together in the face of the Ministry’s stupid creature laws, but that didn’t quite make them friends again.

Either way, it meant that he had at least an hour of free time, and it was perfect timing for the Holyhead Harpies match against the Ballycastle Bats. It was also perfect timing for Harry to go over some of the notes he’d been making the last few months.

It was a good thing his notebook was charmed to add pages as it became necessary; it was full to bursting with scrawled notes and diagrams and half-hearted attempts at family trees as Harry tried to figure out the complicated world of British pureblood families. If he were more like Hermione, he’d have some sort of organisation system to separate his spell-related research from his history-related notes — but he wasn’t, and chaos seemed to suit him perfectly fine, so he continued to write on whichever page he pleased.

Currently, he was comparing notes he’d made from reading *Reaching Your Core: A Guide to Understanding Your Magic* to the text within *Never Unarmed*, quill tapping thoughtfully against his lower lip. Since he’d entered the wizarding world, wandless magic had been spoken of as the absolute pinnacle of magical power and talent — only extraordinary people could manage it, like Albus Dumbledore.

But why then did children have so many bursts of wandless magic?

Many of the books he read talked about how the immature core was more volatile, and training it with the focus of a wand helped to direct it, with the downside of making it harder to access without a focus. They explained that for all but the most powerful, the trade-off for control over your own magic was the need for a wand to use it. Sure, in times of great stress or need, a person could perform wandless magic, but it was rarely intentional.

That made little sense to Harry, when all the books on inheritance magic suggested that many talents inherent to certain families were innate and wandless; metamorphmagi powers and soothsaying, an affinity to mind magics or animagi magics. Some were bloodline-only, but many were available to any wixen willing to work for it, and family magics just made it easier.

A wand wasn't needed for Occlumency. A wand wasn't needed for an animagus to transform, once they'd mastered the initial transformation process. They channelled magic directly from a person's core.

That had to be the connection. *Never Unarmed* talked about being in tune with your magic, about using your fingers instead of your wand, learning to push the magic through your body rather than your focus. Even to Harry, whose magic had been buzzing under his skin since the moment the goblins had released the blocks, that felt exhausting. He'd tried all the exercises the book offered, holding his wand in his off-hand and trying to cast through the fingers of his dominant hand, but it just felt like trying to push concrete through a sieve.

The book was wrong, he was sure of it. *Reaching Your Core* had taught him a lot of things, as had the books on core blocks and family magics. Wandless magic wasn't about turning your fingers into your focus — it was about bypassing your focus entirely and just letting your core *breathe*.

"...And the Harpies score! Owens had better hurry up, or even the snitch won't save the Bats today! Quaffle is back with Fawley, and to Kinnock..."

Harry tuned out the quidditch match, shutting his eyes and taking a steady breath. Between all the various meditation exercises he'd been learning, it was easy to sink deep into the corner of his consciousness that housed his core, the magic humming softly. He wondered absently if it was like that for everyone, or if he was an exception. He was only thirteen, surely he couldn't be *that* powerful?

None of his teachers had ever said anything about focusing inward on your magic, or any sort of humming or buzzing sensations. Perhaps it was just an uncommon practice, and if everyone tried it they would feel the same. Maybe he'd talk to Neville about it sometime, see what the other boy thought.

He delved deeper, surrounding himself in the humming, the warmth of his magic like rays of sunlight against his skin. Even now, months after the blocks had been removed, it felt... unsettled. Like it was housed in a space too small, crammed into his body like he had been crammed into the cupboard under the stairs at the Dursleys'. Harry hoped he'd grow a few inches, maybe put on some muscle; that might make his magic feel better. Dumbledore was pretty tall — was that because he needed to contain more magic?

Drawing his focus back to the task at hand, Harry kept breathing, raising his right hand slowly. He opened his eyes. His fingertips were glowing.

"Wingardium Leviosa," he whispered, gaze turned on the hefty book at his side. The humming grew more urgent. His veins itched.

Then, slowly, the book began to rise off the bed.

A slow grin tugged at Harry's lips — suddenly, a door slammed, and the book fell back on the mattress. The connection was gone, the humming almost silent.

"Harry, are you back yet? Hermione's a *nightmare*, honestly." It was Ron. Harry scowled to himself; he'd been making progress there!

Hurriedly stuffing his book and notebook under his pillow, Harry dropped the wards around his bed and pulled the drapes back, offering the redhead a smile he hoped was sincere. "Couldn't make it to curfew?" he asked wryly, watching Ron's disgruntled frown deepen. The other boy opened his mouth to respond, when his eyes flicked to the Wireless.

"Owens is diving, but Griffiths is hot on his tail; who will reach the snitch first? They're neck and neck — if they keep going, they'll hit dirt! Griffiths is pulling level, and— Merlin's beard, what a catch! In a remarkable show of speed, Griffiths has caught the snitch! The Harpies remain undefeated for another day!"

"Since when do you have a Wireless?" Ron asked, an unreadable look on his face. Harry turned the volume down, shrugging.

"Bought it over the summer, when I was stuck in Diagon. I had no idea before that there was so much wizarding radio." The Weasleys had a Wireless, but they only seemed to turn it on when Mrs Weasley wanted to listen to Celestina Warbeck.

"They're expensive, those portable ones. Charlie bought one in his sixth year, but he took it with him to Romania."

The expression on Ron's face suddenly made sense; discomfort at Harry's wealth. Before, Harry might have let it bother him; might have offered to give his to Ron, and buy himself a new one later. Back when he'd been under Dumbledore's spells, and desperate to have friends by any means necessary. But things had changed. He could sympathise with Ron, of course — for most of his life, Harry hadn't had two pennies to rub together — but he wasn't going to let the other boy make him feel guilty for inheriting money when Harry's parents had died in order for that to happen.

He reached out, turning the Wireless off and offering Ron a half-smile. "Well, the Cannons match is next week, if you want to listen to it with me."

Ron grinned, only a hint of a shadow in his eyes. Harry ignored it; he could hardly keep up with Ron's mood swings this year, and it wasn't worth trying.

Letting the redhead grumble all about the work Hermione had forced him to do in the library, Harry couldn't stop his attention returning to the faint tingle still running through his veins.

He had done wandless magic. Intentional, focused wandless magic.

How much more could he do, with a little practice?

.-.-.-.

With the security in the castle amped up after Black's second break-in, the trio couldn't visit Hagrid in the evenings anymore. The only chance of getting to talk to him was during their Care of Magical Creatures class. Days later, and Hagrid still seemed to be in shock.

"There's always the appeal," Ron said, when it looked like Hagrid might burst into tears, walking the class back up to the castle. "Don't give up hope yet, Hagrid. We'll figure something out."

They bid goodbye to Hagrid at the castle doors, and the large man blew his nose loudly, thanking them again for offering to help. It was clear he was expecting the worst.

"You'd think he could pull it together!" The voice made Harry's heart sink. Just inside the doors, Draco stood with Crabbe and Goyle, watching Hagrid leave. The two huge boys were sniggering. "It's not like it's his bloody dog or anything. It's just a beast." Behind the false sneer, Harry could see the regret in Draco's eyes. As if he could've done *anything* to stop Lucius Malfoy on a crusade.

"How *dare* you!" Hermione roared, stalking across the entrance hall towards Draco. His grey eyes widened in alarm at her ferocity, and Harry hurried after her. "You foul, evil little—"

SMACK!

Harry wasn't fast enough. Before he could do anything, Hermione had reeled back a fist and punched Draco square in the jaw. He fell back into Goyle, blinking dazedly. "Don't talk about Hagrid like that." With that, she turned on her heel and left. "Come on, boys. We'll be late for Charms."

Harry sent an apologetic glance back at Draco, who seemed utterly stunned, and hurried after Hermione, Ron hot on his tail. "Hermione!" Ron exclaimed. "You just punched Malfoy!"

"He deserved it," she declared firmly. "Harry, make sure you beat them at quidditch, won't you? I couldn't stand to see him win."

"Uh, yeah, Hermione," Harry said after a beat. He shared a look with Ron, both of them thinking *did that really just happen??* "I'll try my best."

She huffed, continuing on the way to class. Harry eased the door open to the classroom, praying they weren't late, and Professor Flitwick smiled up at them. "There you are, boys! Settle down, now, take your seats."

Harry looked over his shoulder — Hermione was nowhere to be seen. Where had she gone?

"She was just behind us," Ron muttered, just as confused as Harry. "Maybe she dropped something?"

But Hermione didn't reappear. She was absent for the entire class. Harry frowned; what was going on with her?

. . . .

Clearly Hermione was on a roll, Harry thought as he watched her storm out of the Divination classroom. When the class finished, he turned to Ron.

"She's having a bit of a day, isn't he?" the redhead remarked. "Blimey."

Hermione wasn't at dinner, but the hall was abuzz with the story of her talking back to Professor Trelawney. Luckily, Draco didn't seem to have told anyone about her punching him, though there was a fairly impressive bruise rising on his pale cheekbone. Harry winced; would Draco be mad at him for it? They weren't supposed to meet for another few days. Harry would have to wait to ask if he was alright.

"I'm gonna take some food up to Hermione," Ron said once he'd eaten his fill, which as always was an impressive amount. He wrapped some roast beef and potatoes in a napkin, grabbing another one to fill with parsnips. "You coming?"

"Can't. Patronus lesson with Lupin," Harry replied apologetically. He had the spell down pretty well, now — it hadn't taken shape yet, but he could get a fairly solid shield up against his boggart-dementor.

"Oh, right, yeah. Well, have fun." Ron grabbed as much food as he could in his large hands, and the two parted ways, Harry headed up the familiar route to Lupin's office. He dragged his feet a little, feeling a little awkward about seeing the man again after basically breaking down on him. Lupin didn't seem to hold it against him, though.

"I hear Miss Granger had quite the eventful afternoon," Lupin remarked once they'd put the boggart away for the evening, sat in their usual chairs with tea in their hands. Harry winced.

"You heard about Divination, then?" Lupin nodded. "I mean, I don't blame her, really. She's doing about fifty subjects at once, and Divination's a bit..." Harry trailed off sheepishly, not wanting to insult one professor in front of another. "I wish I could drop it, too. Is there any way to switch your elective subjects if you realise you don't like them?" Truthfully he'd love to drop Care of Magical Creatures, too, but he couldn't bear to do that to Hagrid.

"I'm afraid not. Not this late in the year, anyway. You'll have to stick it out until your OWLs, I'm afraid." Lupin sounded truly apologetic. Harry sighed.

"I figured as much."

"You could always independent study for a different elective? Arithmancy, or Ancient Runes, or even both. You don't have to be enrolled in the class to take the OWL, if you contact the ministry about it. Your mother took an OWL in Muggle Studies without ever going to a single class. She said it was an easy O," Lupin informed him, a smile tugging at his lips.

Harry hadn't realised that was possible. "It'd be harder to teach myself Runes and Arithmancy, though. Muggle Studies is easy, especially if you grew up with them." A memory popped into his head. "You were top of your class in Runes, weren't you?" The yearbook had said so.

"Indeed I was. And third in Arithmancy — only your mother and Sirius beat me there. I'd be happy to help however I can if you chose to go down that route. No disrespect to any of my colleagues, but Divination and Care of Magical Creatures aren't the most... useful subjects in the world."

A thoughtful hum escaped Harry, and he leaned back in his chair. “Maybe after quidditch.” The match against Slytherin was drawing ever closer, and he had little free time as it was.

“Naturally. You just focus on beating Slytherin, for now,” Lupin agreed with a chuckle. “I know we’re not supposed to play favourites, but I bet Severus five galleons you’d win. He seems to think Mr Malfoy can pull it out of the bag, even after his time off for injury.”

Harry tried to imagine Professor Snape placing a bet on the quidditch, even if it was in Slytherin’s favour. “Y’know, Professor; I think the Snape you know and the Snape I know are two very, very different people.”

That made Lupin laugh, the sound clear and somewhat raspy, unexpectedly loud in the quiet office. “I should certainly hope so, Harry,” he agreed, a strange sort of look in his eyes. “Severus really isn’t as bad as he makes out to be, though. He just has a reputation to uphold.”

Harry made a face to show exactly what he thought of that. “If you say so, Professor.”

“Speaking of reputations to uphold,” Lupin drawled, sitting forward in his chair a little. “Draco Malfoy. Care to share?”

Harry’s cheeks grew hot, and he almost spilled his tea. “What? I don’t know what you mean. We’re just friends.”

.-. .

Remus stared at the teenage boy in front of him, red-faced and staring at his hands, squirming evasively. *Oh, no.* “I’d say that ‘just friends’ is baffling enough in itself.” Harry blushed even brighter. “You can tell me anything, Harry. There’s no judgement here.” *Even if you’re dating a Malfoy,* he added in his head, trying to imagine what Lily would do in this situation. *Just act the same way she did when she found out about Severus.*

“There’s not much to tell, really. I bumped into him in Diagon before school started, and he was... civil. I think, really, we just got off on the wrong foot as first years. Ron’s always been worse at antagonising him than I have. And now there’s no compulsion on me, I just... don’t want to fight him? Then he found out about the whole heir thing — okay, he found out because I told him — and he’s actually been really helpful with all that. Obviously, he was raised about as pureblood as it gets, he knows all about the old traditions, even more than Neville does. So we were civil, and then we kept bumping into each other, and we kinda just... became friends? Now we meet up when we can, which isn’t that often because there’s no way we could do it during the day when someone might walk in, but I promise I’m really careful when I’m out after curfew. I’m always wearing the cloak.”

Remus’ eyes grew wider as Harry rambled, hardly taking a breath, and the whole situation became inordinately clear. *Oh, cub, you have no idea, do you?*

Forget what Lily would do in the situation. Prongs would laugh himself sick at his oblivious little boy.

"I'm glad to hear you're not letting all those prejudices about Slytherins get in your way," he said eventually. "More students could stand to do that. But Harry, you must be careful. He is still a Malfoy after all."

"That doesn't make him evil," Harry retorted angrily. Remus held up a placating hand.

"I didn't mean that. All I meant was, he's still Lucius Malfoy's son. You need to be careful for his sake as much as yours."

Harry's face fell, his green eyes darkening. "His father... his father is an awful man. I don't know much about his mum, but his dad..." Harry trailed off, shaking his head, and Remus wondered what sort of horrors Lucius Malfoy had inflicted on his poor son.

"Narcissa was never as cruel as Lucius. She was a Slytherin, and certainly no Light witch, but she was never needlessly cruel. And she always thought very highly of family." All the Blacks did, whatever the rest of their faults. Blood was important in the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black, in a number of ways.

"Draco really loves his mum," Harry agreed. "But... I think he's scared of his dad. I think she is, too."

Harry was much too young to have those sorts of shadows in his eyes, Remus thought sadly. But so were many children at the school. A generation that only knew the aftermath of war — for the state they lived in couldn't truly be called peace, not yet.

"I think your friendship with him is a good thing," he encouraged gently. It was certainly too late for him to do anything about it; Harry seemed to be in far, far deeper than even he realised. "I'm not saying you shouldn't be friends with him. Just have caution. There are any number of people out there who would be happy to hurt Mr Malfoy as a means to an end." The headmaster was one of them, no doubt.

"I won't let that happen," Harry declared stubbornly. The set of his jaw was every inch Lily Evans. Remus smiled at him.

"Tell me about him," he urged. "The Draco Malfoy that you know. Not the one that everyone else sees."

If he was reading things right, Remus was going to be getting to know Draco Malfoy quite well in future.

. . .

Later, when Harry was no doubt tucked up in Gryffindor Tower — hopefully not having late-night liaisons with Draco Malfoy — Remus flooed down to Severus' quarters, pleased when the Potions Master gave him permission to enter. The man had shed his teaching robe, leaving him in just a white button-up and black trousers, his feet bare. Remus' throat went a little dry. "Evening, Severus."

“To what do I owe the pleasure?” Severus retorted, aiming for exasperated and falling just a touch short. Remus stifled a smile, sinking into the comfortable black leather sofa. Severus was in the armchair, a glass of white wine at his elbow. He summoned the bottle and a second glass, directing it over to Remus before the man could even ask.

“Draco Malfoy is your godson, correct?” Remus asked once the wine was safely in his grasp. Severus raised a thin eyebrow.

“Yes. Why, what has the little whelp done now?” Again, he wasn’t quite reaching exasperated; the fondness was creeping through.

“Befriended Harry Potter, apparently.” Remus laughed when Severus almost spilled wine over himself at the proclamation.

“He *what*? ”

Remus relayed what he’d heard from Harry — some, not all of it. He didn’t want to go spilling his cub’s secrets. “It seems they’re quite close now. I daresay Harry even has a bit of a crush.” Oh, it was definitely more than ‘a bit of a crush’, but he didn’t want to give Severus a heart attack.

The dark-haired man stared at him for several long seconds, before his eyes fell shut, his hand coming up to pinch the bridge of his nose. “Merlin help me,” he muttered. “The children of today have no sense, do they? Meeting in secret in Albus Dumbledore’s castle, sweet Salazar.”

“I don’t recall us having much more sense when we were thirteen, Severus,” Remus pointed out dryly, biting back a laugh when Severus’ ears reddened at the tips. “I told Harry to be careful. He understands Lucius is not to be reckoned with.” That brought Remus to the point he’d been considering ever since Harry had left his office. “You know them far better than I do, Severus. Do you think Narcissa could be turned?”

There was a pregnant silence. Remus waited patiently. “Narcissa will do whatever will keep her son the safest,” Severus said eventually. “She’d lay down her life for him in a heartbeat.” He pushed his long hair back from his eyes, propping his feet up on the coffee table. Butterflies erupted in Remus’ stomach, that the man was so comfortable around him, but he pushed them down with years of practice. “I have often wondered if there was a safe way to remove Narcissa and Draco from Lucius’ care, should the worst come to pass. She follows him out of fear, not love. Time and time again I have tried to convince her to have a contingency plan in place, but she won’t hear of it, just in case Lucius finds out and decides to punish her for it.”

“And if her son chose to fight at Harry Potter’s side?” Remus asked. Would Draco ever be so brave as to openly do so? People had done stupider things for love.

“Then she would be wherever she needed to be to protect him from the fallout,” Severus replied. “With any luck, the scenario is a long time coming, but... that Potter foolhardiness might be exactly what’s needed to push Narcissa’s hand. She will follow wherever Draco

goes, and if that means turning to Potter... she'll never come to Dumbledore, though. The only flaw in our plan."

"Harry won't come to Dumbledore either," Remus revealed. He still felt sick when he thought about what the headmaster had done to his cub. If the goblins hadn't scanned him... Severus raised an enquiring brow, but Remus shook his head. "His secrets aren't mine to share. But safe to say, Harry trusts the headmaster about as much as we do, these days. Perhaps even less."

"Interesting." The word was barely a murmur, Severus' low voice making Remus' spine tingle in a way he couldn't turn off, even after all these years. "There's no point in planning too far ahead now. The things we fear may never come to pass, or at least not for a while."

"We should be so lucky," Remus returned, draining his wine glass. He was tempted to top it up, but that would be a foolish move. Between the warmth of the fire and the buzz of the wine, he was too comfortable already. It wouldn't do to push too hard and lose all his precious gained ground.

"These brats will be the death of me, Remus," Severus declared quietly, his words hanging ominously in the fire-lit room.

"On the contrary, Severus," Remus replied, thinking of the sparkle in Harry's green eyes when he spoke of his budding friendship with Draco Malfoy. "I believe they might be the saving grace for all of us. If we play our cards right."

Harry was young and foolish and naive in so many ways, but not as many as he should be at his age. And despite all that, everything he'd been through; he had so much *hope* in that young heart of his.

That sort of hope might be just enough to get them through.

.-.-.-.

Things were tense in Gryffindor tower the night before the match against Slytherin. Even Hermione claimed to be too nervous to study. Half an hour before curfew, Harry got to his feet. "I'm going for a walk," he said quietly. Hermione shot him a worried look.

"Harry, it's late."

"I'll wear the cloak," he promised. "I just... I can't stay here. I need some air if I'm gonna get to sleep."

She didn't look pleased, but she kept any further protests to herself. "Just be careful," she murmured, watching him sneak up the stairs just enough to put on the invisibility cloak in privacy. He only had to wait a few minutes for the portrait hole to open as a couple of seventh years came through, and then he was slipping out into the corridor.

He'd told Hermione he just needed air, but really he had somewhere to be. His heart was pounding so loud he was sure anyone could hear him as he walked, but none of the few

people he passed noticed. They were all too focused on getting to their rooms before curfew.

Eventually, Harry turned into an empty Transfiguration classroom, and took the cloak off, stuffing it in his bag. He waited.

The door creaked open just wide enough for a blond head to duck through, shutting just as quick as it opened. “I can’t believe we’re doing this,” Draco muttered. “Going to curse me before the match?”

Harry laughed quietly, his heart light — Draco had come. Harry wasn’t sure he was going to. “I don’t need to curse you to win,” he teased, sinking into a chair. Draco chose the chair opposite, digging the deck of cards from his pocket.

“Just because you’ve got that fancy Firebolt doesn’t mean you’ll win,” Draco retorted, shuffling the deck and dealing hands.

“I could beat you on a Cleansweep, Malfoy.” Harry stuck his tongue out playfully, and Draco shot him a look of mock-disgust.

“Are all Gryffindors this childish?”

Harry just laughed, playing his first card.

For all Draco had promised to give Harry pureblood lessons, they usually never got around to that. They would just sit, and play cards, and talk; about quidditch, about school, about the future. Harry had told Draco things he hadn’t even told Ron and Hermione. Draco didn’t judge when Harry said something selfish, or a little bit cruel. It was... nice, not having to guard his language like that. “So what do healers do, anyway?” he asked, remembering what Draco had said last time they’d met. Everyone expected him to become a Potions Master, but he wanted to be a healer when he grew up.

“They heal people, Potter,” Draco replied with a roll of his eyes. Harry shot him a chastising look.

“I figured *that*. I just meant — muggles have loads of different types of doctors that specialise in different things. So, like, one doctor would just be for kids. Or just a brain doctor, or a stomach doctor, or whatever. They have GPs — all-round doctors, who help diagnose when people need to see a specialist doctor — but then mostly it’s all split up. Surely a healer can’t heal *everything*? ”

“For the most part, yes. They have their strengths; St Mungo’s is split into different wards — spell damage, illness, physical injury, all that stuff. But a good healer should be able to deal with just about anything they come across.”

“What kind of healer would you want to be?” Harry was curious. Draco swore as he saw the card Harry played, glancing down at his own hand. He bit his lip as he thought about his next move, and Harry couldn’t tear his eyes away from the reddening flesh. Draco played his card, snapping Harry out of his daze.

“As long as I’m good at it, I don’t really care,” was Draco’s dismissive reply. “I’d probably specialise in spell damage. Counter-curses are always fascinating to me, and I bet there’d be lots of challenging cases. I wouldn’t like to end up delivering babies all day or something.”

Harry made a face; he couldn’t see Draco delivering babies, either. Not that he was completely sure how that all worked, but he couldn’t see Draco doing it.

“Well, at least you’ll get plenty of practice, when we’re older,” he declared. “I’m in the Hospital Wing all the time. I think Madam Pomfrey is considering giving me my own personal bed.”

With a snort, Draco played the card that won him the round, triumph shining in his silver eyes. “It’ll be a while yet before I know the spells to put your sorry arse back together again. Do try not to get yourself killed before then.”

“Alright, I’ll wait,” Harry agreed. He glanced down at his watch; it was getting late, and tomorrow would be a big day. “We should go to bed. I want to be at the top of my game on the pitch tomorrow.”

“Damn right you do, if you’ve got any chance of beating me,” Draco agreed, sending the cards into their box with a wave of his wand. Before he left, he paused, looking back at Harry. A stray lock of blond hair fell into his eyes, and Harry was struck with the strangest urge to push it aside. “Just... be careful tomorrow, Harry. The Slytherins *really* want to win this.”

Harry, who had been fending off low-level attacks from Slytherins for the last two weeks, gave Draco a deadpan look. “Y’know, I’d figured that out.” Hurt flashed in Draco’s eyes, and Harry softened. “I know. I’ll be careful. I’m used to having snakes out for my blood,” he added dryly. “No hard feelings, whatever happens, yeah?”

He held out a hand, and Draco shook it. “No hard feelings when my team crushes yours to dust,” he agreed, yelping when Harry made to jab him in the side. “You’re a barbarian, Potter.”

“That’s what I’ve got you for; keep me civilised,” Harry retorted teasingly. Draco huffed, scowling one last time, then disappeared from the classroom. Throwing his cloak over his shoulders, Harry followed after a few minutes, making the short trek back to Gryffindor Tower.

The light from the half-moon streamed through the large windows, guiding his way back. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry caught a flash of movement, and froze.

Down in the grass, skirting the edge of the Forbidden Forest, was an animal. Harry’s heart leapt into his throat — not the Grim, not now, not tonight — but it was much too small a form for that. He stepped closer to the window, squinting to get a better look. The moonlight passed over dark ginger fur. Crookshanks. Relief flooding through his form, Harry made to turn away, only... Crookshanks wasn’t alone. A huge, shaggy black dog trotted across the lawn, approaching Crookshanks. It pressed its nose briefly against his, then turned back

towards the forest, Crookshanks following close behind. Harry watched until the pair were no longer visible.

What on Earth did that mean? Could it really be an omen of death, if Crookshanks could see it too? Maybe it was just a regular dog after all. Or maybe Crookshanks could see death omens too, and this quidditch match was about to be Harry's last.

He forced himself away from the window, wiping his clammy hands on his trousers. It was probably nothing. Cats couldn't see Grims, even cats as smart as Crookshanks seemed to be. There were all sorts of creatures living in the forest, why couldn't there be a dog, too?

Chapter 9

They'd done it. Gryffindor had won the Quidditch Cup.

Harry didn't think he'd ever stop grinning, the joy bubbling in his chest and threatening to burst out at any moment. He felt a little bad for the smallest moment when he'd seen how heartbroken Draco looked when the Slytherin team landed, but the blond had caught his eye for a second, just long enough to flash half a smile in congratulations. No hard feelings.

Lying in bed now, the celebration party finally dispersed, Harry could feel the bruises on his ribs and shoulders from the Slytherins' more underhanded tactics. Draco had played a fairly clean game, but the rest of his team hadn't been quite so courteous. Harry didn't care. Bruises would fade. They were *champions*. Even the knowledge that he'd be getting his exam timetable in the morning couldn't dampen his spirits. They'd won the cup, and he would get through his exams, and the school year would be over — maybe if Sirius Black was still loose, he'd be able to stay in Diagon Alley again, if being at the Dursleys' was dangerous. They couldn't exactly station dementors in Little Whinging.

A dreamy smile crossed his face at the thought. Maybe, if he was lucky, he'd get his wish.

.-. .

Trying to get out of his quidditch-induced euphoria and focus on his upcoming exams was a bit of a stretch, but Harry managed it. He was a little concerned about Hermione, though; every time he saw her she was buried in parchment and books, the dark circles under her eyes getting bigger every day, muttering runes and charms and potions under her breath. He was starting to wonder if she'd crack before exams could even happen. Not to mention her timetable — how could she take two exams at the same time? Even Hermione wasn't that good! She snapped at him every time he asked, though, so Harry left her to it and focused on his own books. Ron made a solid attempt at studying, but his attention span was that of a flobberworm. Harry definitely didn't miss the days where his was the same. For the first time since starting Hogwarts, he felt like *himself* when he was studying. He felt confident in his knowledge. He could focus.

At least, he could until the note about Buckbeak's appeal came through. "I can't believe they're bringing an *executioner*," Ron muttered, scowling at his Potions textbook. "It's like they've already made up their minds!"

"With Malfoy's dad paying them, I'm sure they have," Harry muttered derisively. He might be friends with Draco, but he still hated Lucius Malfoy with a passion. "I'll be back in a minute, I need to go to the library." He'd somehow lost his notes on Cheering charms, and the section in the standard textbook wasn't nearly helpful enough for Harry's liking. To his surprise, Neville fell into stride with him on the way out of the common room.

"Did you say you're going to the library, Harry?" he asked casually. Harry shot him an odd look.

“Yes... why?”

“Would you mind coming with me for a minute? It’s important.” Neville wouldn’t meet his eye, a curiously determined look on his face. Harry was intrigued.

“Yeah, sure.” Wondering what he was about to get himself into, he let Neville lead him past the library and behind a tapestry, into a room Harry had never seen before. To his surprise, they weren’t alone.

Susan Bones was there, and Hannah Abbott; but so were Ernie Macmillan and both the Patil twins; Anthony Goldstein; Sullivan Fawley in the year below; and even, to his utter shock, a trio of Slytherins in the corner. Cassius Warrington, looking somewhat uncomfortable. Daphne Greengrass and Blaise Zabini. All of them had their palms open, and all of them bowed their heads when Harry and Neville entered. Murmurs of ‘well met’ echoed through the room, and Neville ducked his head formally.

“Well met,” he greeted. When he straightened up, it was with square shoulders and a confident stance that was entirely at odds with the shy, fumbling Neville Longbottom that Harry knew.

“Well met,” Harry followed, keeping his palms out as he was supposed to. “What am I doing here?”

“We thought we’d all introduce ourselves properly,” Ernie Macmillan drawled. “Before the school year’s over and we all leave for the summer. There’s been all this talk about the Potter heir finally stepping into society, we thought it’d be nice to welcome you in.”

Harry froze in alarm. “What talk?” he asked sharply. “You can’t be talking. Dumbledore can’t know I know about my inheritance.” He winced as soon as he said it — giving away way too many of his cards at once there — but no one in the group looked all that surprised.

“Relax, Potter,” Greengrass called across the room. “We keep our talk safe within the right circles. Dumbledore doesn’t know a thing.” She folded her arms across her chest, eyeing him coolly. “Am I to assume that he wouldn’t take well to the news?”

“That’s... an understatement,” Harry sighed.

“Professor Dumbledore has taken some pretty strong measures to keep Harry away from us. From this,” Neville said, studying the gathered teens.

“I can’t say I’m surprised,” Goldstein muttered.

“Regardless, welcome,” Hannah Abbott said with a smile, gesturing to a couple of empty chairs. Harry and Neville both sat down. “Harry, this is all the heirs currently at Hogwarts — well, most of us. There’s a few more — Slytherins we don’t trust, and the Carrow twins are due to start next year, but for now, this is us.”

“Isn’t Malfoy an heir?” Harry asked, glancing at the other Slytherins. How could they be trusted, but not Draco?

"He is. So are Crabbe and Goyle, and Theo, Pansy, and Millicent," Zabini confirmed. His voice was deep; he'd hit puberty at the end of first year, and even the fifth and sixth year girls were paying attention to him by now. Harry didn't know much about him, except that he kept to himself, stayed out of fights, and was incredibly good-looking. "Draco's situation is complicated."

Harry snorted; he'd bet he knew about as much about Draco's situation as Zabini did, by now. "So what's the point of this little meeting, other than introductions? Is there some sort of induction ritual, or a test I need to pass? How do you know you can trust me?"

"You're Harry Potter," Susan said flatly, rolling her eyes. "Also, Neville vouched for you. That's good enough for us."

"No ritual, no test. Just a bit of conversation," Padma Patil piped up, smiling prettily.

Harry looked between the sisters, brow furrowing in confusion. "How can you both be heirs? If you don't mind me asking. I mean, surely one of you is older."

"I am," Padma confirmed. "But our family magic will decide which one of us is fit to be heir once we come of age, so for now we both train for the position. Lots of families work that way with twins — it hardly seems fair to decide just because of a few minutes of extra life."

"Different family magics have different conditions for inheritance," Greengrass explained, her tone surprisingly free of condescension. "Some go for boys over girls, some have magical strength take precedence, some have bizarre and obscure inheritance laws. Not every family makes their public."

"So how do I know I meet those conditions?" Harry asked, wondering if it had all been some big mistake.

"If the Gringotts Line Test says you're an heir, you're an heir," Warrington told him. "Otherwise it would just say you're a potential heir. I have an older brother, but the family magic passed him over due to an... incident when we were kids." His lips twisted in a sour expression, and Harry didn't dare ask for details.

He looked around the room, studying faces carefully. "So this is what the Wizengamot is going to look like in ten years, hmm?"

"Maybe not ten," Hannah said, shrugging. "Some of us still have parents or guardians happy to keep their seats for another fifteen years or so, if all goes well. But eventually, yes."

"This isn't even half of the Wizengamot seats, though. What about the rest?"

"Just because most purebloods try and have children at the same time, doesn't mean it worked out for everybody. Accidents happen," Susan said with a cheeky wink. "The rest are either too young for Hogwarts or already graduated."

"There's twenty-one of us at the moment that we know of," Warrington cut in. "But there could be more; not everyone makes their heir's identity public knowledge."

"And of course, there's all the vacant and proxy seats. And some people hold two seats. Like Nott," Susan continued.

"Theo holds the Nott seat, and the Avery seat on his mother's side," Zabini explained.

"Is it unusual for someone to hold two seats?" Harry asked nervously, thinking of the four he had waiting for him when he came of age. Zabini shrugged.

"It's rare, but not unheard of. Family lines inter-mix fairly well, but most pureblood lines try not to merge too many heirs into one family, or if they do they'll spread the seats out amongst siblings, like the Weasleys. The mix of family magics can be a little... volatile."

Great. Even in the pureblood world, he was a freak.

"I read that some of the seats have been vacant for decades," Harry said. Like the Slytherin seat, and the Peverell seat. Harry didn't understand why his father hadn't been Lord Peverell, only the proxy to it — surely it didn't come through his mother's line?

"Sometimes lines die out," Neville informed him. "If the family magics can't find a suitable heir, they'll sit in proxy until one steps into the Wizengamot hall. There are probably a few heirs to the older lines who don't even realise it, but without a Line Test they'll never know, and that's not exactly common these days. If a line has truly died, once confirmed by Gringott's, then the seat stays empty. Some lines are just waiting for a valid heir to come of age, and those seats are held in proxy to whichever family was allied the closest to them when the last heir was in session. Except the Founders' seats; those always belong to whoever's head of Hogwarts."

"The Founders' lines are different, though," Goldstein said. Harry eyed him questioningly. "There's been plenty of legal heirs to the Hogwarts founders in the last few centuries, but their family magics are fussy. If you don't fit the bill, you can't claim the seat. And they don't necessarily make that decision when you come of age. Usually it happens when there's great conflict in the wizarding world, and the heirs are needed to bring guidance. Also, they're interlinked — you either get all four, or none at all. So of course, it's really rare circumstances for the Founders' seats to be occupied by actual heirs. Hasn't happened since 1783. Most of the time, even if you're a legal heir, the family magic just kind-of... sits there."

Harry's shoulders relaxed a fraction. That was one less thing to worry about.

"So between us in this room, we hold almost a third of the seats of the Wizengamot. Or we will, once we all take our seats. That's why it's important to play nice in these early stages, so we can make fair and just decisions for the good of wizard-kind." Hannah's words were accompanied by a sweet smile and a pointed look in the direction of some of the Slytherins.

"Don't expect us to be nice to you, Potter," Greengrass said plainly. "We all have roles to play. But good heirs don't hold grudges. The Dark Lord almost won because his followers had too many Wizengamot seats, and we're worse off for it, regardless of what our elders say. I refuse to let that happen again." She held her head up proudly, daring someone to comment,

but everyone was nodding in agreement. Harry wondered how many of them had parents who had followed Voldemort, who had given him their Wizengamot seat.

He was starting to think he'd judged the Slytherins too harshly all these years, then remembered that Dumbledore's compulsion spell was supposed to make him do exactly that. He scowled internally; how many of these people could have been his friends if he'd been allowed to be his natural self? His first two years at Hogwarts, he'd been so caught up with Ron and Hermione, refusing to let anyone else get close. He hadn't even truly befriended Neville until this year. Was that part of Dumbledore's plan? Keep him isolated from the rest of his peers, so he never found out what he was missing?

"Can we wrap this up? I've got an Arithmancy OWL in twelve hours and I am not nearly as prepared as I'd like to be," Warrington said, a furrow forming on his forehead. That seemed to be the cue for everyone to break apart, claiming other places to be, and Harry figured he should probably get back to the common room as well. Ron and Hermione would be wondering where he was. If Hermione hadn't passed out from exhaustion yet.

Neville walked with him to the library to get the Charms book he'd originally left for, and the two of them made their way back up to Gryffindor Tower. "Thanks, Neville," he murmured softly, before they reached the portrait. "It's nice to know I have allies."

"The Ancient and Most Noble House of Longbottom will always be your ally, Harry," Neville assured him. The words were heavy with magic, like an oath, and Harry's eyes widened. Neville spoke the password before Harry could vow anything in return.

"There you are!" Ron called, looking up with desperate eyes. "I was starting to think you'd never come back. Help me, Harry, she's gone mental!"

Harry looked at Hermione, who seemed to have abandoned her own work in favour of taking a vicious correcting quill to one of Ron's Transfiguration essays. He laughed, shaking his head. "You're on your own with that one, mate."

.-.-.-.

Harry kept his head down as he ticked off his exams one by one, determined to do better than last year — not his best, or Dumbledore would get suspicious, but better. It was a relief to get to his Defence Against the Dark Arts exam; the one subject he was truly allowed to try his hardest in.

"Excellent, Harry!" Lupin enthused when Harry climbed out of the trunk after vanquishing his boggart. "Full marks!" He leaned in close, grinning conspiratorially. "Well done, cub!"

His good mood continued all the way to the steps of the castle, where the sight of a familiar bowler hat had him deflating like a balloon. He tried not to outwardly scowl as the Minister acted like he felt bad about Buckbeak in any way, like he hadn't already decided to kill an innocent creature. It was all he could do to help Hermione drag Ron away before he could do something foolish.

He was desperate for the day to be over by the time he walked into his Divination exam, the incense in Trelawney's classroom already making him sleepy. He almost thought he'd dozed off and imagined it when she went rigid in her chair, speaking to him in a raspy voice.

Had he just witnessed a real prophecy?

He climbed down the ladder, unsure whether to tell Ron and Hermione — Hermione would laugh for sure, and Ron probably wouldn't believe him either. He wasn't even sure if he believed it. But all thoughts of prophecies, real or not, flew from his head when Ron showed him the note from Hagrid.

"We have to go," Harry said immediately. "We can't let Hagrid face that by himself."

"But Harry, the teachers will never let us out at sunset! Especially not you," Hermione pointed out.

"I've got the cloak. We'll go after dinner." He'd taken to keeping the cloak in his Twilfitt bag at all times, just in case he might need it. He wanted to always be prepared.

"Okay," Hermione agreed, not even putting up a token protest about Sirius Black and school rules. Hagrid was far too important for that.

Trelawney's words rolled around Harry's mind as they joined the crowd of students heading down for dinner, worry gnawing at his stomach. What sort of chaos was he about to get into now?

. . .

He could hardly remember the last time he'd spent actual social time with both Ron and Hermione — not that this really felt like socialising, hurrying down to Hagrid's hut under the invisibility cloak. The half-giant didn't let them stay long, worried they might get caught, but it was enough for Hagrid to get some small comfort from their support.

And, unfortunately, enough for Ron and Hermione to start bickering again.

"I'm just saying, I can sympathise," Ron hissed as they walked away from the hut, careful to avoid the sight of the Minister and Dumbledore heading down to Hagrid's. Why on Earth was the Minister himself involved in a matter as simple as a dangerous creature execution? It baffled Harry, but he shook the matter from his head; what Fudge got up to was none of his business, not right now.

"After all, I know what it's like to have your pet *killed*," Ron finished, and Hermione let out an offended noise. Harry sighed to himself, wondering if he could cover himself with the cloak and just slip away, if they would even notice once they truly got arguing.

"What happened to Scabbers was an *accident*, Ronald!" Hermione retorted indignantly. "How dare you suggest I can't feel bad for Hagrid just because my cat did *what cats do!*!"

Harry was about to turn away and leave them to it — and then, in the fading light of the sunset, he saw a blur of orange running towards them.

Crookshanks. Of course. But what was he after?

He heard twin gasps as his two companions noticed the incoming, and then Hermione's hand flew to her mouth as she spotted the same thing Harry did. "Scabbers!"

Sure enough, Crookshanks was chasing a small brown blur across the grass — a blur that, when it stopped to turn sharply, had the distinct patchy fur of Ron's pet rat.

"He's alive!" Hermione exclaimed, lurching forward to try and grab the rat. Scabbers kept on straight past her, the bandy-legged cat hot on his tail.

"Not for much longer by the looks of it," Ron growled, already sprinting off in hot pursuit. Hermione hared after them, and Harry sighed, hurrying to catch up. He couldn't leave them out there, not if they were going to make such a racket while Dumbledore and the Minister were still lurking about.

They drew closer to the tree-line of the Forbidden Forest, Hermione faster than Ron as they followed the frantically zig-zagging rat. Harry sucked in a sharp breath as the bushy-haired girl dove, letting out a cry of triumph as her hands closed around Scabbers' wriggling form. "Got him!" she declared, then let out a quiet yelp.

Harry and Ron skidded to a halt, unable to do anything but watch as an enormous black dog leapt from the shadows, clamped its jaw around Hermione's wrist, and began to drag her away.

Right towards the Whomping Willow.

.-.-.

Everything had unraveled so quickly.

The boys had chased after Hermione and the dog, but the Whomping Willow stopped them from getting too close — at least until Crookshanks somehow did something at the base of the tree, freezing it in place. By that point, Hermione had already disappeared through a hole at its roots. Harry and Ron had no choice but to follow.

From there, things had only gone downhill.

Now, Harry found himself inside what seemed to be the Shrieking Shack, staring at Hermione on a broken old four-poster bed with Scabbers still wriggling in one hand while her other arm was cradled gingerly in her lap. And stood in front of her, brandishing Hermione's wand, was none other than Sirius Black.

"Harry, Ron, run!" Hermione urged, but they both shook their heads — there was no way they were leaving her with the man who had betrayed Harry's parents.

Black disarmed them both, awe in his eyes as he stared at Harry, whispering his name reverently. Harry stepped back, wishing he had something else to defend himself with. Wishing he was capable of some kind of useful wandless magic.

Valiantly, Ron stood between Black and Harry, declaring the Azkaban escapee would need to go through him to get to his godson. But far from striking him down in an instant like one might expect, Black shook his head wildly, insisting that only one life need end that night.

“Why d’you suddenly care about casualties?” Harry retorted quietly. “Didn’t bother you when you blew up Pettigrew and all those muggles, did it? He was your friend! My father was your friend!”

“You don’t understand, Harry,” Black insisted. “If you only knew the full story... it’s my fault, I won’t deny that... but you’ve got to listen to me... you don’t understand.”

“I understand more than you know,” Harry spat. “They trusted you, and you betrayed them. You were their friend! You were their secret keeper!”

Black howled in anguish, reeling back. “No, no, you’ve got it all wrong,” he moaned. “The truth, you need to hear the truth!” Black squeezed his eyes shut as if pained, and Harry took his chance, diving for his wand. Crookshanks dove as well, his claws digging into Harry’s forearm. Hermione screamed. The cat seemed determined to keep Harry from his wand, and Harry growled, shoving the ball of ginger fur aside and *reaching* — his wand rolled towards him, just enough for him to grasp it. Crookshanks’ claws sliced him through from wrist to elbow as he rolled to his feet, but Harry barely registered the pain, pointing his wand squarely at Black’s chest.

“Going to kill me?” Black asked with hollow eyes. Crookshanks hopped up onto the man’s chest, planting himself firmly and staring Harry dead in the eye.

What the hell was wrong with Hermione’s cat??

Suddenly, they could hear muffled footsteps from somewhere else in the shack. Harry’s heart leapt into his throat, and Ron called out. Black jumped up, but it was too late; the footsteps were thundering towards them, and the door burst open to reveal Professor Lupin, wide-eyed and wand raised.

“Expelliarmus!” The wand Black held flew out of his grasp — but so did the wand in Harry’s hand. Lupin caught both of them, staring across the room at Black. “Where is he?”

Harry narrowed his eyes in confusion. Who? Black pointed across the room at Hermione, who stared back incredulously, still on the bed. “Me? What?”

“But then, why... unless—“ Lupin’s eyes were darting from Hermione to Black like he was watching a tennis match. “Unless you switched without telling me? To him?”

“I’m sorry, Moony,” Black wailed. “We should’ve trusted you. We should’ve told you! Peter convinced us you were the traitor!”

“Professor Lupin,” Harry asked hesitantly. “Remus. What’s going on?”

“Harry,” Lupin’s voice was calm. “Cub. I think we’ve made a very big mistake.”

And then he lowered his wand and crossed the room, and embraced Black like a long-lost brother.

Harry felt his pulse echo in his ears. Professor Lupin, the man he'd trusted more than *anything*, was holding the man who wanted to murder him like he never wanted to let go. "Padfoot, old friend," he breathed, choking on a sob.

Hermione let out a wordless screech at the sight, her face ashen with pain and shock. "WE TRUSTED YOU!" she spat, glaring at the tawny-haired professor. "I wanted to give you the benefit of the doubt — I thought, if *Dumbledore* knows, you must be on our side — but you were working with *him* all along!"

"Not all this time, let me explain—"

"He's a werewolf!" Hermione declared, turning to look Harry in the eye. "That's why he's always sick. Don't trust him, Harry!"

Harry thought back over the school year; the regular absences, the silvery orb his boggart became, the strange potion Snape made for him regularly. Even the nickname, Moony. Calling Harry 'Cub'. "Oh," he said faintly. "That makes sense."

Lupin snorted. "I haven't been helping him, Harry, but I won't deny I'm a werewolf." He looked Harry in the eye, his expression earnest. "Please, cub. Will you trust me? Just for a few minutes?"

Harry folded his arms over his chest. Professor Lupin had been good to him this year. He hadn't seemed like he was plotting to kill Harry — he'd certainly had plenty of opportunities to try. "Talk," he said eventually.

"Harry, what are you doing? He's a werewolf!" Ron exclaimed, grabbing Harry by the shoulder. Harry ignored him, shaking off the hand and stepping closer to Lupin and Black. He needed answers.

"I was watching the map tonight," Lupin started, "I thought you three might go down to support Hagrid, and I wanted to keep an eye out. I watched you head across the grounds to Hagrid's hut. And twenty minutes later, I saw you leave. And get joined by a fourth name, moving very quickly."

"Yeah, his," Harry said with a dark look at Black. "He was following us."

"Not Sirius," Lupin corrected. "Peter Pettigrew."

"What?" Harry gaped. Pettigrew? Their other friend, the one who Sirius had killed?

Lupin turned back to Harry with imploring eyes. "Think, Harry. Wormtail."

Harry sucked in a sharp breath, looking at the rat currently playing dead in Hermione's lap. At Black, who had taken the shape of a dog. *Padfoot*. "Animagi," he realised. "You're all animagi. Which means... Scabbers."

Black barked out a laugh. “That’s the name he’s been going by, is it? How *cute*.” He lunged towards Hermione on the bed, but Lupin held him back.

“Sirius, no! They won’t understand, you need to explain.”

“We’re running out of time, Moony!” Black argued. “I can explain after he’s dead, now give me that rat!”

“Harry deserves an explanation,” Lupin insisted firmly. “After everything, he deserves that.”

“What the bloody hell are you saying about my rat?” Ron cut in loudly, glaring at the pair. Through lack of a wand, his fists were raised defensively. He edged closer to Hermione, and Black snarled.

“Don’t touch him!” His eyes were wild, Lupin’s hand on his shoulder holding him back.
“You can’t take him, not now I finally have him in reach!

“Pettigrew’s dead,” Harry said, confused. “You killed him. Everyone knows that.”

“Everyone *thinks* they know,” Black breathed, grinning madly. He lunged forward again, and Ron yelped — then the redhead grabbed Scabbers and held him close to his chest, turning to the door.

“This is ridiculous,” he declared. “You’re all nutters. I’m getting Dumbledore, or the aurors, or—“

“No!” The cry came unbidden from Harry’s lips, but he wasn’t the only one — Black and Lupin both shouted too, Lupin raising his wand to send ropes at Ron’s ankles to stop him from leaving. But at the same time, Harry flung an arm out, a burst of magic slipping instinctively from his fingers. He wasn’t even sure what he’d been trying to do, but whatever it was interfered poorly with Lupin’s spell — Ron stumbled as the magic hit him, then there was a truly disturbing popping noise, and all of a sudden the redhead blanched, falling unconscious, his right leg splaying out at a horrifying angle. Harry’s stomach lurched.

“Oh, shit,” he murmured, eyes wide.

“The rat!” Black cried, as Scabbers tried to make a run for it. With a wave of Lupin’s wand, a metal cage appeared around the creature, which squeaked and thrashed violently in the new confines. “Just kill him, Remus!” Black wailed, but Lupin shook his head.

“Harry needs proof, Sirius,” he replied calmly. He turned to Harry, his amber eyes imploring. “Everyone thought Sirius killed him. Even I believed it until tonight. But the map doesn’t lie. I would know.”

“He’s just a rat!” Hermione sobbed. “He’s been in Ron’s family for ages!”

“Yes, quite a few years, I’d imagine,” Black agreed grimly. “Far longer than a regular rat could be expected to live.” Harry sucked in a sharp breath.

“I—I don’t know if Ron ever said how long. He was Percy’s before Ron got him.”

"Harry, you can't be serious!" Hermione protested. "Don't tell me you believe this?"

It sounded mad, Harry knew. But the desperation in Lupin's eyes... that couldn't be faked.

There was a loud creak as the door swung open on its hinges, knocking against Ron's shoulder, and for a second nobody moved. But nothing happened.

"No one ever knew there were three unregistered animagi running around Hogwarts in our school days," Lupin said, gaze flicking between Harry and Hermione. "They always said they'd register after the war, but— well."

"Hurry *up* Remus," Black muttered impatiently. "I've waited twelve years for this, I don't want to wait any longer!"

"They need the truth, Sirius. We need to do this properly." Lupin squeezed his friend's shoulder. He turned back to Harry. "They learned to keep me company, you see. The potion Severus makes for me is a fairly recent invention. When I was in school, it didn't exist, and my transformations were... awful. Having them around in their animal forms, I didn't want to hurt them like I did humans. They could stop me from hurting myself." He shook his head, hair falling into his eyes. "All year, I've been debating whether to tell someone about Sirius' form. When he got into the castle, I knew he had to be transforming to stay hidden. But I couldn't do it. I couldn't betray James' memory like that. So I stayed quiet, because he was pack, and even after twelve years I couldn't believe he would truly hurt Harry."

"*You swore to me.*" The new voice startled all of them, when Snape whipped off Harry's invisibility cloak and revealed himself in the corner of the room, wand held aloft at Lupin's face. "*You swore* on Lily's memory that you weren't helping *him*." He glared at Black, who looked from Snape to Lupin and then let out a loud groan.

"Really, Moony? Snivellus? *Again?*"

"Shut *up*, Sirius!" Lupin bit out. "Severus, please, allow us to explain."

"I think I've heard enough," Snape said icily. "You left the map open on your desk, Lupin. I came to bring you your potion, and to my surprise, whose name did I see running across the lawn? I should've known you were helping him all along. After all you said..."

"*Severus,*" Lupin took a step towards the man, ignoring the wand in his face, voice raw with pain. "You don't understand. I never helped him, but we got it all wrong. *Please*, just listen, for me."

"Please, Professor Snape," Harry added. He'd never been so polite to Snape in his life, but if it made him hold off for just *five more minutes*. "Trust him. There's something going on here."

"Oh, there's something going on alright," Snape muttered, his eyes lingering on Lupin's hand curled around Black's shoulder. He stared at Lupin for a long time, then... he lowered his wand. "If you betray me again, I *will* kill you, wolf," he said to Lupin, who sobbed in relief.

“You say the sweetest things,” he murmured in reply. Black snorted.

Hermione stared at Professor Snape in astonishment, still cradling her clearly broken arm. “Professor,” she breathed in horror. “No, please — you have to get the headmaster! Ron is—” She broke off with a whimper as Snape glared at her, nudging the unconscious Weasley with his foot.

“He is alive,” he dismissed, and turned back to Lupin. “Talk.”

“I thought Peter was dead,” the werewolf said hoarsely. “I thought — I didn’t know what Sirius wanted with Harry, but I thought Peter was long gone. Until I saw him on the map tonight, and then saw Sirius’ name.” He turned to Black, brow furrowing. “How? How did you find him, Sirius?”

“He was in the paper,” Black said, reaching into his robe and pulling out a battered piece of paper. It was the Daily Prophet, from the issue talking about the lottery Mr Weasley won. The picture of all the Weasleys in Egypt, Scabbers perched on Ron’s shoulder. “I saw it, when the Minister came to inspect. On the front page. I knew him at once... how many times have I seen him transform? I knew I had to leave as soon as I read the boy was a Hogwarts student. I couldn’t let him— Harry,” Black broke off in another moan, wrapping one arm around his stomach as his shoulders shuddered. Lupin squeezed him reassuringly.

“He’s alright, Padfoot. Harry’s fine.” He looked from the photo, to Scabbers, and back again. “Good Merlin,” he said slowly. “His front paw.”

“What about it?” Harry asked quickly, craning his neck to look at the picture.

“All that was left of Pettigrew was a finger,” Snape murmured, comprehension dawning in his dark eyes.

Harry whipped around to look at Scabbers, who had frozen in fear in his cage. His front paw was, as it had always been, missing a toe.

“I didn’t think he had the brains for it,” Snape said, meeting Black’s gaze for the first time. “What did he do, cut it off and run?”

Black nodded. “Screamed all about how I betrayed Lily and James, then blew the street up with his wand behind his back, lopped off his finger and transformed.”

“So simple,” Lupin whispered. “Yet brilliant.”

“A first for old Pete,” Black agreed with a dark chuckle.

“So what, he faked his death and hid from you because he knew you betrayed my parents?” Harry retorted angrily, wondering where the whole story was going.

“I’d never betray Lily and James,” Black declared fiercely, snarling like his animal counterpart. “But it was my fault. I convinced them I was the obvious choice, I told them to make Pete the Secret Keeper instead. We didn’t trust Moony ‘cause of his boyfriend — sorry,

Moons, but you can't blame us — and when I went to check on Peter's hiding place, it was empty, no sign of a struggle. It didn't feel right, so I went to the house, and... it was too late."

"Enough," Lupin growled. "There's one way to prove it all." With a jerk of his wand, the cage vanished, and Scabbers was suspended in mid air, squealing and struggling. "Severus, you know the spell?"

Snape nodded curtly, and in an instant there was a blinding flash of light — then suddenly the rat began to grow and stretch, squeaks turning into human howls of fear.

In seconds, there was a full grown man stood in the middle of the room. Harry recognised his face, though it had changed quite dramatically from the round-faced boy in the yearbook picture.

Peter Pettigrew, alive and well.

Chapter 10

There was a long, tense silence as everyone stared at the man who had been a rat only moments ago.

“Sirius, R-Remus,” Pettigrew stuttered. “My old friends.”

Harry watched in disgust as Pettigrew tried to beg Lupin for help, insisting Black was trying to kill him. Which, well, he wasn’t wrong — there was a reason Lupin had yet to give Black a wand.

When that didn’t work, he turned to Harry, throwing himself at the boy’s feet and begging for mercy.

“Enough of this,” Snape snapped, raising his wand. “Your blithering was bad enough when we were schoolboys.” He waved his wand, and Harry winced, fearing the worst. But instead ropes shot out, binding themselves around Pettigrew tightly.

“Let me kill him, Snivellus,” Black whinged, like a toddler unwilling to share his toys. “Or Remus, he can do it! The rat needs to die!”

“Remus has always taken pride in never killing a defenceless human,” Snape said calmly. “It’d be a shame to tarnish that now.”

“If you kill him, you’ll never be free,” Harry spoke up, his thoughts moving quickly. “If we take him to the Minister, he’ll confess, and you’ll get a proper trial. You could clear your name.” He could be Harry’s godfather again.

“Harry’s right,” Lupin agreed. “Azkaban can have him.”

“Fine,” Black pouted. “But if you transform, Peter, we *will* kill you. I might even let Snivelly here do it. I’ve heard he can be quite creative.”

“Must you, Sirius?” Lupin groaned, head in his hands for the briefest moment. “I thought you’d agreed to stop using that name when Lily hexed you for it.”

“Whoops,” Black replied, entirely unrepentant. “Must’ve forgotten. Azkaban, y’know. Really frazzles the brain.”

“We should go,” Harry said. If they were lucky, maybe the Minister would still be at the school. “What about Ron?”

A wave of Snape’s wand, and Ron’s grotesquely angled knee was bound and splinted. “*Mobilicorpus*,” he murmured, levitating the redhead’s unconscious body.

“I’ll keep an eye on this one,” Lupin said with a grimace, keeping his wand pointed firmly at Pettigrew, while he passed Harry and Hermione back their own. Hermione took hers in

trembling fingers — it seemed she didn't quite know what to make of the whole situation.

And so together, they started the journey back to Hogwarts.

It was the most bizarre procession of people Harry had ever been part of, and he stared at Sirius' back as he walked through the tunnel. His godfather. The man he'd heard so much about — even when Lupin tried not to talk about him, he couldn't help it. All the stories of James Potter seemed to include Sirius Black.

Black kept glancing over his shoulder at Harry, wary and uncertain. Neither of them spoke — not until they were clear of the tunnel, and the vicious tree it lived under.

"I— Moony probably told you, Harry," Black started hesitantly, "but I'm— I'm your godfather."

"Yeah. I know." Harry bit his lip, unsure what else to say.

"Well, I mean, if I get free — that makes me your guardian. If... if you would want that." Black clearly misread the look of shock on Harry's face, as he hunched in on himself. "It's fine if you don't, I'm sure whoever you've got is great, I just—"

"Now's not the time, Sirius," Lupin cut in, covering Harry's snort of derision. Those amber eyes were sympathetic as they looked between the pair. "You can talk this over later."

They kept walking, but Harry jogged forward a half step, bumping his shoulder against his godfather's. "I'd love to live with you," he murmured, grinning slightly. "Just say the word."

Sirius looked like all his Christmases had come at once. For the first time, Harry could see in him the man from his parents' wedding photo, the charming boy from the yearbook.

"Really?"

"Definitely."

Both of them turned abruptly when Lupin choked out a quiet cry, shoulders tensing, the grey in his hair highlighted by the silvery light of the moon.

The full moon.

Snape and Sirius froze in horror, staring at each other. Ron's body hit the ground with a thud as Snape's spell ended abruptly.

"Oh no," Hermione whimpered, gaze fixed firmly on Lupin as his back began to arch.

"Your potion," Snape hissed. "Remus!"

But it was too late — the man was glassy-eyed, his mind clearly elsewhere already.

"Run," Sirius urged. "Snape, take the kids and run, *now*."

There was no time; Lupin gasped harshly, hunching until he was almost on all fours. His head lengthened, his clothes ripped, his skin began to sprout fur. Harry backed away several steps in horror, and within seconds there was an enormous wolf stood in front of them. A huge black dog tackled it, Sirius throwing himself at the mercy of the wolf, but it batted him aside with a growl.

Harry stared, transfixed. Snape moved to stand in front of him, wand raised. In all the chaos, no one noticed Pettigrew lunge for freedom until all of a sudden he was shrinking, leaving a tangle of ropes in his wake as he scurried off into the night. Snape cursed, shooting off a spell, but whether he was aiming for Pettigrew or for the werewolf, he missed. The werewolf growled again, striking out with one huge paw. Snape went flying, hitting the grass with a dull thud.

He didn't get up.

Hermione let out a quiet moan of horror. Sirius whined, then let out a loud howl that made the werewolf turn away from Harry and the others. It howled in return, setting off at a sprint towards the forest, after Sirius. After a minute, they heard a dog yelp in pain. Harry glanced down at the unconscious — *hopefully just unconscious* — Snape, at Ron equally limp beside him. Then he turned on his heel and ran after the dog and the wolf.

Sirius needed help. There was no way he could tackle a werewolf alone.

Hermione called after him, no doubt staying with Ron, but Harry didn't falter — he had to get to Sirius.

He could hear yelping coming from by the lake — until it stopped abruptly. Harry picked up his pace, fear pounding through his veins, wand clutched in his hand.

When the lake was in sight, Harry knew why the yelping had stopped. The werewolf was gone, but Sirius was on the bank of the lake, a man once more, moaning with his hands over his ears. And swooping ever closer were a whole hoard of dementors.

Harry felt the cold hands reaching into his chest, sucking out all his happy memories. He tried to hold onto them, raising his wand like Lupin had taught him. “Expecto Patronum!” *Sirius wants me to live with him. I'm going to be free.* “Expecto Patronum!” *I have my godfather back. No more Dursleys.* “Expecto Patronum!”

There.

Suddenly, a huge blinding light emerged from his wand, sending the dementors reeling back screaming. Harry's hand shook around his wand, the screaming still in his ears, his vision going fuzzy. He could make out some sort of four-legged animal — something with antlers? — galloping across the lake, driving the shadowy creatures away, but his knees gave way all the same, the magic burning through his exhausted body.

And then, everything went black.

.

Consciousness returned to Harry in two stages; the first stage of groggily blinking open his eyes, and the second stage of almost falling out of bed in his haste to get on his feet. “Mr Potter!” Madam Pomfrey exclaimed, rushing to his bedside as he struggled to stand. “Kindly desist, you’re going to hurt yourself!”

“Sirius!” Harry cried out. The nurse’s eyes went soft.

“No need to worry, my dear. Black is locked away upstairs, the dementors will be with him any minute. He can’t hurt you now.”

“What!” Her words had the opposite affect she intended as Harry tried to sit up once more. “No, they can’t, he’s innocent!” Surely Snape had explained?

He reached for his glasses, looking around the hospital wing as everything came into focus. Ron was passed out in the bed opposite, his bandaged knee propped up on a pillow. Hermione occupied the bed beside his, awake and looking just as horrified, her arm in a splint. And several beds down lay Professor Snape, still completely unconscious. Shit! He was their one hope of getting the headmaster and the Minister to see reason!

Harry’s shout must have been heard from the corridor, as the next minute, Minister Fudge himself was on the ward, accompanied by Professor Dumbledore.

“Minister, you’ve got the wrong man, Black’s innocent!” he insisted, and Fudge’s eyebrows rose in alarm.

“I say, dear boy; he must have hit you with quite the Confundus charm!”

“Harry’s right!” Hermione agreed, jumping out of bed herself. “Wake up Professor Snape, he’ll tell you!”

“Children, please, calm yourselves!” Madam Pomfrey cut in. “You’ve had quite the ordeal, it’s natural to be confused. Just lie down, and—“

“Professor Snape can confirm it,” Harry echoed Hermione. “Just wake him up.”

“Professor Snape has a very severe concussion; to wake him from that prematurely could cause serious brain injury,” Pomfrey scolded. It was on the tip of Harry’s tongue to tell her to just do it anyway, but he resisted. Brain damaged Snape wouldn’t help anything.

“Black must have filled their heads with his ridiculous tale,” Fudge said with a shake of his head. “Something about a rat, and Peter Pettigrew.”

“It’s the truth! Pettigrew’s an animagus, he was Ron’s rat, it was his fault my parents died!” Harry argued.

“Minister, if I might have a word with my students. Alone, if you don’t mind, Poppy?” Dumbledore requested. Neither the Minister nor Pomfrey looked impressed at being thrown out of the ward, but they did as the headmaster bid, Fudge declaring he was going to go wait for the dementors.

As soon as they were gone, Harry and Hermione about tripped over themselves trying to tell the whole story all at once.

“It is your turn to listen,” Dumbledore spoke over them, raising a hand. “There’s no time to interrupt. There is not a shred of proof that Sirius Black is an innocent man, as you say he is. The only two adults involved are currently unavailable, and by the time they can tell their story it will be too late. Cornelius will not wait around on the word of two thirteen year-olds. It’s too late, do you hear me?”

Harry glared at the old man— how could he just let Sirius die? Was he that desperate to keep control of Harry?

“But you believe us?” Hermione pressed.

“What I believe is neither here nor there,” Dumbledore told her. “I was not present, therefore I have no power. I cannot overrule the Minister for Magic.” It took all of Harry’s effort to hold back a derisive snort; as if Dumbledore didn’t overrule the Minister all the time. “What we need is *more time*.” He placed a strange emphasis on the words, and Hermione gasped. “Now listen closely. Sirius Black is being held in Professor Flitwick’s office. Seventh floor, thirteenth window from the right of the West Tower. If all goes well, you should be able to save two innocent lives tonight.”

Harry had officially lost the plot of the conversation, but Hermione was nodding as if the headmaster made total sense. “I am going to lock you in,” Dumbledore announced, straightening up. It is—“ he checked his watch “— five minutes to midnight. Three turns should do it. Good luck.”

“Good luck?” Harry mumbled, utterly perplexed as the door closed. “What the... Hermione, what was he talking about?” She seemed to know exactly what Dumbledore was getting at.

“Harry, come here,” Hermione urged, reaching into her robes and pulling out some sort of pendant on a very long, fine gold chain. Harry crossed the gap between their beds. The pendant was a tiny, sparkling hourglass. “Closer.” Hermione threw the chain around his neck, too, her movements a little awkward thanks to her tightly-splinted wrist.

“What is that, Hermione?” Harry asked with trepidation. The bushy-haired girl smiled breathlessly.

“Just trust me. Ready?”

Harry nodded. Hermione turned the hourglass over three times, and suddenly the ward around them dissolved. The world was nothing but a blur of colour and shapes around him, his blood rushing in his ears — and then it stopped, and he was on solid ground again. In the middle of the deserted Entrance Hall... in daylight?

Before he could speak, Hermione had him by the arm and was dragging him into a nearby broom cupboard. She removed the chain from his neck, stuffing the hourglass back in her robes. “What the hell just happened?” Harry asked in a furious whisper.

Hermione's explanation of the Time-Turner left him gobsmacked. "They trusted a *fourteen year-old*. With a *time machine*?? No offence," he added, realising how that sounded. Hermione snorted.

"It is a bit ridiculous, isn't it? All so I could take some extra classes. But Professor Dumbledore insisted I shouldn't have to 'curb my thirst for knowledge,'" she quoted. Harry's brow furrowed. What was Dumbledore planning? For that matter, *why* was he letting them save Sirius?

Unless he needed Harry's godfather for part of his grand plan? On the run, unable to spend much real time with Harry, but always just out of reach as a taunt of what might've been. Harry's stomach churned uncomfortably. He had the awful feeling they were playing right into Dumbledore's hand, but there was nothing he could do about it. Not if he wanted to save Sirius.

"So what's the plan?" he asked. "You said we're just outside, walking down to Hagrid's. How do we save Sirius? Go into the woods and look for him?"

"No, we can't disrupt the original flow of time. If we warn Sirius now, tonight will never happen," Hermione whispered.

"So... if we save him, it has to happen after he's already captured?" Harry thought carefully about Dumbledore's words, his specific instructions about Flitwick's office window. *Two innocent lives.* "Buckbeak."

"What?" Hermione was puzzled.

"Buckbeak. The other innocent life we save. We go and grab Buckbeak, wait until Sirius gets captured, then fly up to the window and go get him. He can escape on Buckbeak—they'll both be free."

"Harry, Buckbeak was killed," Hermione pointed out cautiously. Harry gave her a shrewd look.

"Was he?" he returned. "We heard the axe swing, we didn't see it. There's a chance."

It was a small chance, but it was all they had left.

Carefully, the two of them stuck to the edges of the lawn, sneaking behind the greenhouses and into the edge of the forest until they could see Hagrid's house. It was utterly bizarre, Harry thought, hearing his own voice as Hagrid let them in under the invisibility cloak.

"You've been doing this all year?" he murmured to Hermione. "Does it get any less weird?"

"Not in the slightest," she replied quietly, and the two shared a slightly manic smile. "We have to wait for the Committee to see Buckbeak, or Fudge will think Hagrid's hiding him."

The wait was excruciating. But finally, Hagrid opened the back door, and Harry could see himself, Ron and Hermione walk out of it. They threw the cloak over themselves, entirely unaware of their audience.

Harry was lucky that Buckbeak was familiar with him; once it was safe to move, the hippogriff was reluctant to leave Hagrid's pumpkin patch, and as Harry's furiously beating heart reminded him that it would just take one glance out the window for the people in Hagrid's hut to see him and ruin everything, he quietly begged the huge beast to move.

At last, Buckbeak was at the treeline, trotting at Harry's side. He forged on into the woods, skidding to a halt when Hagrid's back door slammed open. Harry couldn't stifle his smirk when Macnair and the Committee member exclaimed over Buckbeak's disappearance, even if Dumbledore did sound far too amused for his liking. Had this been the man's plan all along? Had he known about Pettigrew the whole time?

"And now we wait?" Hermione asked him, hugging herself around the waist with her good arm. Harry glance up through the trees; the sun was barely setting. It would be hours yet before Sirius would be captured.

"And now we wait," he agreed. "We should move, we won't be able to see the Whomping Willow from here." They stuck to the edge of the forest, hiding in the growing shadows as they moved closer to the Willow. They watched as Hermione appeared, sprinting after Scabbers. It was strange, watching things that had already happened from an entirely different perspective. Watching *himself* do things he'd already done.

At last they were all down in the tunnel, and it was silent once more. "How the hell have you been keeping track of yourself all year?" Harry breathed, shaking his head in astonishment. "I'd go mad." No wonder Hermione had spent the whole school year looking like she was on the verge of a breakdown. She was living about five extra hours to every day. Having to remember where she'd been at what time and who had seen her, so she didn't accidentally cross her own timeline. All for the sake of a few extra classes?

"It's been tough," Hermione agreed. "A few times I'd turn it back a couple of hours just to take a nap in an empty classroom. I don't think I'll do it again. It's too much."

"Dumbledore and McGonagall never should've let you do it in the first place," Harry muttered. "They should've just told you to self-study. You're smart enough not to need the lessons."

Hermione blushed, ducking her head bashfully. "It doesn't matter now. I've already dropped Divination, and I think I'll drop Muggle Studies as well."

That still left her with Arithmancy, Ancient Runes and Care of Magical Creatures, but Harry didn't say a word as they both caught sight of Professor Lupin sprinting across the grass towards the Willow. He levitated a branch to press the knot, sliding into the passageway like he'd done it a million times before. He probably had.

Shortly after, Snape appeared. He used the same branch as Lupin, grabbing Harry's invisibility cloak on the way down. A possessive urge reared in Harry, telling him to grab the cloak out of Snape's hands, but he ignored it. To his astonishment, Snape had been on their side. He'd been willing to listen.

He couldn't remember how long they'd been in the Shack for, once Snape had shown up. Surely it wasn't this long? It felt like they'd waited an age already. Buckbeak scratched impatiently at the ground.

At last, they heard footsteps. The strange group began to emerge from beneath the Willow; Snape levitating Ron, Lupin dragging Pettigrew, Harry and Sirius beaming at each other with Hermione bringing up the rear. Harry's chest tightened as the moon became clear, and everything all went horribly, horribly wrong.

"What if we went after him?" he whispered, watching Pettigrew transform.

"And try and look for a rat in the dark, with a werewolf running about?" Hermione retorted. Harry conceded the point. Then, he froze.

"Hermione, we need to move," he urged. She huffed.

"Harry, we can't interfere!"

"No, we need to *move*, before Lupin runs into the forest," he reminded pointedly, already up on his feet and yanking on Buckbeak's rope. Horror filled Hermione's eyes, and she whipped around. "Hagrid's cabin," Harry said, already running, Buckbeak at his side. "It'll be empty by now."

Fang barked at them when they threw themselves through the door, but Hermione soothed the huge dog. Buckbeak seemed delighted to be home, making himself comfortable in the bed Hagrid still had made up for him. "Don't go to sleep," Harry lightly scolded the animal, rolling his eyes.

They listened to Lupin howl and Sirius yelp, unable to see anything through Hagrid's window. "Why didn't you follow me?" Harry asked, knowing that outside at that moment a version of him was running towards the lake.

"I couldn't leave Ron," Hermione retorted. "I thought about getting help, but—I couldn't leave him. And then Dumbledore showed up anyway."

Harry scowled to himself—Dumbledore, as always, swooping in at the last minute. How convenient.

When they couldn't stand waiting any longer, the two students and the hippogriff snuck out of the cabin. Sure enough, there was Dumbledore, striding down towards the lake. Harry watched with his jaw clenched as the headmaster conjured stretchers for his and Sirius' unconscious forms, hurrying back to do the same for Snape and Ron while Hermione jogged at his side the whole way back to the castle.

From there, the clock was ticking — as soon as Macnair appeared to summon the dementors, Harry tugged on Buckbeak's rope to wake up the dozing hippogriff, then hoisted himself up onto the beast's back. Getting Hermione up there wasn't quite so smooth, with one of her arms out of commission, but with a bit of fumbling she was seated behind him, her face buried in Harry's shoulder, whimpering quietly.

Her arms were a vice grip around Harry's waist, but he ignored it, focusing on guiding Buckbeak up to the correct window. "He's there!" Harry reached over, knocking on the glass firmly. Sirius, slumped inside the office, sat up in shock. He scrambled to his feet, hurrying over to the window. Hermione raised her wand, unlocking it with a spell, and Sirius wrenched it open.

"Harry!" he gasped, stunned. "*How?*"

"Get on, there's not much time," Harry urged, shifting Buckbeak forward slightly so Sirius could climb on behind Hermione. "The dementors are coming."

Still gaping, Sirius hauled himself through the window and onto Buckbeak's back. Hermione locked the window once more, leaving it as if it had never been touched.

With everyone secure, Harry dug his heels in and guided Buckbeak all the way to the top of the West Tower. They landed with a clatter on the battlements, and Harry and Hermione slid off. "Sirius, you'd better leave, now. They'll notice you're gone any minute now."

"What about the others? Is everyone alright?" Sirius asked urgently. Harry shook his head; he needed to move!

"Everyone's fine, now *go!*"

"I'll write you," Sirius promised. "I'll figure something out. This isn't goodbye, Harry." He leaned down from the hippogriff, pressing his forehead to Harry's for the briefest moment. "Thank you."

For a moment, Harry thought about jumping back on Buckbeak and flying off with Sirius to who-knew-where. Away from Hogwarts, away from Dumbledore. Freedom.

But he couldn't. His friends needed him.

Instead, he stepped back to watch Sirius nudge the huge beast forward, Buckbeak's wings stretching wide as he launched himself off the battlements and into the sky. Hermione tugged on his arm. "We have to get moving, quickly!"

Harry wrenched his gaze away, allowing Hermione to drag him down the steps and back into the castle. Sirius would be fine, he told himself. He had to be.

Luckily, the West Tower wasn't too far from the hospital wing, and after a near-miss with Fudge in the hallway, they made it back to the doors just as Dumbledore was excusing himself from the ward. He smiled benevolently at them. Harry refused to meet his gaze. "All done, then?" Harry and Hermione both nodded. Dumbledore's smile widened. "Excellent. And I think—" He cocked his head, listening through the door, "—yes, I think you've gone too. Quickly, now." He ushered them back into the hospital wing, and the lock clicked behind them.

They'd done it.

Harry let out a breathless laugh, meeting Hermione's equally incredulous gaze. They crept back to their beds, just in time for Madam Pomfrey to emerge from her office. "Did I hear the headmaster leave? Am I allowed to look after my own patients, now?" She had a sour expression on her face as she shoved enormous blocks of chocolate at both Harry and Hermione. Harry settled down in his bed, taking a bite out of the sweet confection. He could relax now. Sirius was safe.

.

Severus ran gentle fingers over the lump on the back of his head, hissing as the flesh stung. It was too much to hope that the evening's events had been some bizarre, concussion-induced dream.

He'd woken up to the Minister raging in the middle of the hospital wing — Black had somehow escaped, right under his nose. Weasley was still unconscious, but when Severus dared look at Potter and Granger, they seemed entirely too innocent for their own good. Feigning sleep still, Severus managed to piece together what had happened after he'd been knocked out.

He never thought he'd see the day where he was actually *pleased* Sirius Black got off scot-free. He snorted to himself quietly; how things had changed. To learn that Pettigrew was the traitor after all... a few things certainly made sense, in hindsight. He wondered how Lupin was taking the whole affair, then glanced towards the window. The sun was only just rising over the tops of the trees. Lupin would have no clue about anything that had happened after his transformation.

Pulling himself into a standing position made Severus wince, but he was no stranger to pain. He bent down to buckle his boots, then straightened up, looking around the hospital wing. The three Gryffindors were fast asleep, and Poppy was nowhere to be found.

His wand was on the side table, and he grabbed it, tucking it back into his pocket as he walked somewhat gingerly from the ward. After a brief detour to get clothes for the man, he was striding across the lawn in the early dawn light, and stopped at the edge of the Forbidden Forest. "Point me Remus Lupin." His clear, curt tones had his wand spinning in his hand, and he walked on once it settled on a direction.

As he searched the dark woods, he couldn't stop his thoughts returning to what had happened the night before. The werewolf in front of him, rearing up with a howl, definitely bigger than it had been when he was sixteen. He could hardly believe he'd been so foolish as to *stand in front of it*, even if it had been to protect students. To protect Lily's boy. He'd stared a werewolf in the face, for the second time in his life, and lived to tell the tale. Hopefully, it would be the last time. But with some of his recent life choices, he found he couldn't promise himself that.

"Daft wolf," he muttered when he finally came across the man, wishing he didn't sound so fond. The greying man was sprawled awkwardly across the forest floor, entirely naked and covered in scratches. He groaned softly when Severus knelt down and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Come on, up you get. You need to get inside."

“Mmm, Severus?” he mumbled, blinking open hazy eyes. Severus watched as the events of the night rushed into clarity in the man’s eyes. “Harry!” he exclaimed, voice hoarse. “Oh, Merlin, is he alright? Did I hurt him? Where’s Sirius?— and— Peter!”

“Remus, breathe,” Severus cut through the man’s panicked ramblings, squeezing his shoulder. “Potter is fine. You didn’t hurt anyone. Pettigrew escaped, but so did Black.” He set the bundle he was carrying down on the ground, revealing a pair of soft black trousers and a thick brown cardigan. “Let’s get you back to the castle. I’ll explain everything on the way.”

It was slow going, getting Remus dressed and moving, and by the time they reached the castle doors Severus had given up letting the prideful idiot walk and just hauled him up into his arms. Remus looked up at him, grinning faintly. “I think I’m swooning,” he declared playfully, laughing when Severus scowled.

“Quiet, or I’ll leave you to crawl back to your quarters.” They both knew the threat was an empty one. Nonetheless, Remus settled down, a soft sigh escaping his lips as he rested his head against Severus’ shoulder. The Slytherin’s heart stuttered.

Finally, they were in Remus’ bedroom, and Severus deposited the man as gently as he could on the mattress. Remus closed his eyes for a long moment, then swore quietly. “Twelve years,” he murmured. “I thought my best friend was a murderer for *twelve years*. Peter, this whole time... how could I have been so wrong, Severus?”

“The evidence against Black was damning,” Severus pointed out. He perched on the edge of the mattress, his own muscles aching. His night hadn’t exactly been sunshine and roses either.

“I should’ve trusted him.”

“Why? He didn’t trust you.” Severus could still remember how it’d been back then, Remus full of anguish when he realised his friends were suspicious of him after all they’d been through, that they thought for even a *second* that he’d turn away from the Light. Severus had tried to convince him that their association wasn’t helping, but Remus refused to give him up. Foolish, idiot Gryffindor.

“If I’d pushed for a trial, this never would’ve happened. Harry never would have been raised by *her*.”

“The Ministry never would have listened to a werewolf,” Severus pointed out. “It’s all moot. What matters now is that we know the truth. Potter knows the truth.”

“But Sirius is still a criminal in the eyes of the world, and Peter’s free to take his slimy little traitorous arse back to his precious master, wherever he is,” Remus said with a scowl, wincing as it tugged on a cut on his face. Honey eyes met Severus’ dark ones, far too old to be sitting in such a young face. “Everything’s about to change, isn’t it, Severus?”

Severus glanced down to his fabric-covered left forearm, where the barely-there Dark Mark ached like it had been for the last year. Not enough to cause a problem, but enough to be

noticeable. "I'm afraid you're right." They were on borrowed time. "This is only the beginning."

Remus' face twisted in resignation. He reached up to cup Severus' jaw, hand sliding around to the back of his head. Severus couldn't help but flinch as fingers pressed against the lump on his skull. "You're hurt," Remus realised. "What— was it me?"

Severus stayed silent, which was confirmation enough, and horror flooded Remus' face. "Oh, Severus, *no*. Tell me I didn't bite you. You said everyone was fine!"

"Hush, Remus," Severus soothed. "You didn't bite anyone. You merely knocked me aside when I stood between you and the children. I'll heal."

"You... you stood between me and the kids? After I'd transformed?" Severus nodded. In the blink of an eye, Remus was yanking him down, and suddenly there were lips pressed to his. Severus tensed, but muscle memory took over, his lips moving against Remus' and his hand tightening on the man's shoulder, pulling him closer. Twelve years, yet it felt like no time at all. His heart ached as Remus' tongue snuck between his lips, a low groan dragging from deep in the man's throat.

When Severus finally had the sense to pull away, he found himself with one leg flung over Remus' thigh, practically straddling the man. Remus stroked his cheek gently, his eyes alive in a way Severus hadn't seen all year. "I am so sick," the Gryffindor breathed, "of trying to pretend I'm not absolutely mad about you, Severus Snape." His kiss-swollen lips curved in a faint smile, his head tilting up to bare his neck slightly, the cardigan hanging off his narrow shoulders. With his mussed hair and trusting gaze, he looked like every dream Severus had never let himself have. "Stay. Please."

All year, Severus had been reminding himself of all the reasons he couldn't have Remus Lupin. Telling himself time and time again that his teenage desires were going to get one of them killed, and they were adults now, and childish love wasn't enough.

All those reasons seemed to have fled his brain as he stared down at the man who had seen him through everything, the man he kept coming back to no matter how many times they pushed each other away.

He righted himself, sitting on the edge of the mattress once more. A whimper escaped Remus' lips, the light in his eyes dimming.

Severus leaned down and unbuckled his boots.

He was done denying himself things. If the Dark Lord was to return, he deserved every scrap of *good* he could hold onto before it was too late.

He shrugged his teaching robe off his shoulders, letting it pool on the floor. He heard a sharp intake of breath. "*Severus.*" The only person to ever say his name so reverently. He ached, all the way down to his bones, and not just from being flung across the grass by a full-grown werewolf. He was so *tired*. Tired of being alone. Tired of so many things.

Lying down on the mattress beside Remus felt like coming home for the first time in *years*. Their bodies were different, older — Severus wasn't as bony, and Remus was bonier than ever — but they curled into each other like two halves of a magnet, Remus tucking his face into Severus' neck, sprawled heavy over the Slytherin like he was scared Severus might leave as soon as he fell asleep. The weight was comforting, and Severus' hand settled low on Remus' back, beneath the cardigan, cool fingers pressing against warm skin. "Sleep," he urged in the barest whisper, burying his nose in the man's greying hair. He smelled like the forest, like wilderness. Severus' tame wild thing. Always Severus'. Even when neither of them wanted it that way.

"I missed you." Remus' words were muffled by Severus' collarbone, but he felt them all the same, shaking him down to his core. This felt like the first thing he'd done right since he'd turned spy against the Dark Lord.

They would have a lot to talk about in the morning. They would have plans to make, and headmasters to avoid, and lies to weave. It would be difficult, and dangerous. But they would do it. Together.

For now, Severus closed his eyes, breathing in the scent of his wolf, the comforting weight across his chest.

For now, they could sleep, like the world didn't exist. In that room, with the two of them finally reunited *properly*, after twelve years apart, it was enough. It had to be.

For now.

Chapter 11

Pomfrey released all three of them from the hospital wing after lunch the next day, and Harry had nearly forgotten that the world kept going on without them. The castle was almost entirely deserted, everyone taking advantage of the glorious weather and the lack of exams and the last Hogsmeade visit before the end of the school year. No one had any idea what had happened in the night, how close an innocent man had come to losing his life.

That was the thing about Hogwarts. It never failed to remind you that the universe didn't revolve around you.

Everyone knew, of course, that Sirius Black had been caught and escaped again. The Hogwarts rumour mill was a creature unto itself. But no one knew the truth.

None of the trio felt like going to Hogsmeade after everything that had happened. Ron's leg, despite being fixed up by Madam Pomfrey, was still sore and stiff, and privately Harry thought the redhead was shell-shocked from learning his pet rat had been a grown man the entire time. Hermione, on the other hand, seemed to finally be feeling the effects of her overloaded schedule; she'd gone up to bed, telling the boys not to wake her even if she slept through dinner.

That left Harry alone, wandering through the grounds in the bright sunlight, finding himself at the edge of the lake. He could hardly wrap his head around it all — he'd performed a proper Patronus charm, right there, and saved Sirius' life and his own. Hermione had been time-travelling for the entire bloody school year. It was *madness*.

“Alright, Harry?” It was Neville, his shirtsleeves rolled up to his elbows and dirt smudged across his forehead. “You and Ron weren’t in the dorms last night. I… what happened? Are you okay?”

“Yeah, it’s… a long story,” Harry dismissed with a shake of his head. “What are you up to?”

“I’ve been helping Professor Sprout get the greenhouses ready for the summer,” Neville explained. “With all the students gone, she’ll be looking after them all by herself, and some of the plants need to be moved first. I just came to get a bit of fresh air.” Neville sat down on the sand beside Harry, briefly bumping the smaller boy’s shoulder with his own. “You ready to leave?”

“I never am,” Harry replied wryly. Neville knew he didn’t like his muggle relatives, and he gave Harry a sympathetic grimace.

“Maybe you could come visit me and gran for a bit,” he suggested. “Dumbledore can’t keep you locked up with the muggles forever, right?”

Harry wanted to point out that the headmaster could and definitely would if he thought it would help his plans, but he stayed quiet. “Yeah, maybe.” That would be nice, going to

Neville's house. His gran could help Harry learn about the Wizengamot, and what to do about Dumbledore.

"I wonder what our Defence teacher will be like next year," Neville mused, digging his fingers into the sand. "It's a shame about Professor Lupin. I mean, if he made it this far without eating anyone, clearly he can't be that bad."

"What?" Harry stared at him in alarm. Neville cocked his head.

"You haven't heard? Professor Lupin is a werewolf, Harry. Apparently Snape told all the Slytherins this morning. Everyone in the school knows by now. He's resigned, I heard. Packing up his stuff today."

Harry froze. No, Snape wouldn't... he couldn't. Lupin was *leaving*?

He scrambled to his feet. "I have to go." Neville called out after him, but Harry was already sprinting back towards the castle. He couldn't let Lupin leave, not yet.

Lupin's office door was open when Harry ran towards it, and he flung himself into the room, gasping. Most of the man's things were already gone, and a steady stream of books were floating off the shelf and packing themselves neatly in a trunk, guided by Lupin's wand. The man looked up when Harry entered, his eyes sad. "Hello, cub," he greeted. "Heard the news?"

"You can't leave," Harry blurted.

"I'm afraid I have to, Harry. This time tomorrow, the owls will start pouring in. Attitudes are better, but there are plenty of parents who won't want a dangerous, bloodthirsty beast living in the castle with their children." His tone was wry, resigned. Harry glared at him.

"You're not dangerous," he insisted. "You're the best Defence teacher we've ever had."

That made Lupin smile. "Thank you, Harry. But I'm afraid not everyone is as open-minded as you."

"I can't believe Snape," Harry growled. "I was just starting to think he might be alright. How dare he tell everyone!"

"Severus didn't say a word," Lupin told him firmly. "I can assure you of that. No, my secret was spilled by... another source. Severus was part of the conversation, but he didn't realise one of his Slytherins was eavesdropping until after Dumbledore left."

Harry looked at his professor, comprehension dawning, and his face grew dark when Lupin nodded. *Dumbledore*. Of course. "He did it on purpose." He had no proof, but he didn't need it. Remus nodded in agreement.

"Most likely. I got too close to you, Harry. He doesn't like that." Lupin reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a familiar piece of old parchment. "However, now I'm no longer your teacher, I feel no remorse about giving you this back. This, too; Severus retrieved it from the

Shack this morning.” He brought Harry’s invisibility cloak out from behind his chair, neatly folded. “From one Marauder to another. The legacy you should’ve had since the very start.”

Harry’s breath caught in his throat as he took both items from Lupin. It was ridiculous, he’d had both of them in his possession before, but being given them now felt... bigger. His father’s legacy. “Keep them safe, Harry.”

“I don’t want you to go,” Harry said quietly, sounding far younger than his thirteen years. Lupin smiled, reaching out to squeeze his shoulder.

“It’s for the best, cub. I’m about to have some other priorities, once I catch up with an old friend,” he said with a pointed glance. “And you could do with more allies outside the castle.”

“But I just got you back.” Harry hated how desperate it came out. Lupin softened, pulling him into a brief, tight hug.

“You still have me, cub, I promise,” he vowed, lips pressed to Harry’s hair. He let go, smiling. “I’m not about to let you slip out of my life a second time, regardless of what happens. You’re family.”

“Family,” Harry echoed, a slow smile creeping across his face. He’d never had one of those he actually *liked* before.

“I’m proud of you, you know,” Lupin said, turning back to his packing. Harry stowed his map and cloak away in his bag, raising an eyebrow. “Rumour has it, you performed quite the Patronus charm last night.”

“It was a stag,” Harry boasted, and Lupin beamed. “That was Prongs, right?”

“Indeed it was. Your father’s animagus form was really quite something. James would be over the moon to see your Patronus take after him.”

Harry beamed at the thought, his heart clenching. At least this way it was like he had his dad with him still, after a fashion. “Are you alright?” he asked, brows furrowing in concern. Lupin seemed to be moving a little stiffly. “After last night and everything.”

“Oh, don’t worry about me, cub. I’m more than used to the whole process by now,” Lupin assured with a shake of his head. “I’m just glad none of you got hurt. I’ve not been that irresponsible about a moon since... well. Never mind. I suppose, under the circumstances, priorities were a little off last night. But Severus got me back to the castle safely this morning, and I’ll be right as rain in a day or two.”

Harry bit his lip; it was awful to think that his friendly, quiet professor had to go through such a painful-looking ordeal every month, that he was so accustomed to it he didn’t even flinch at the memory. Lupin was far stronger than he looked; stronger than Harry had given him credit for.

The latter half of the man's words made Harry pause, his thoughts returning to the night before. "Look. Um. About Sn— Professor Snape." The professor paused in his packing, face turning apprehensive. "I know you said that you know him differently — I mean, clearly; you went to school together and all. And he was decent last night. But all the rest of the time... he hates me. He's constantly singling me out and giving me detention even though my Potions' work is no worse than Ron's, and it's way better than Neville's! He's awful to me all the time and I know he hated my dad but I'm not him, and surely— can you talk to him, or something?"

He winced at the slight crack in his voice; the last thing he wanted was to sound like a whiny little child. He just didn't *understand*. Snape seemed to have two totally different personalities these days, and Harry brought out the worst in him.

Lupin sighed, leaning against his desk. "Professor Snape doesn't hate you, Harry, I can promise you that," he declared. Harry raised a skeptical eyebrow. "I'm serious. Yes, the history between him and James — and him and Sirius — is... complicated, to say the least. And I don't doubt that Severus uses James' name against you far more often than he should. But you have to understand, cub; when we were younger, it was even harder to be a Slytherin than it is now. Severus' contemporaries were the likes of Avery and Lestrange and Malfoy. Being a Slytherin of particular talents, he was — and still is — expected to run in certain circles."

It started to dawn on Harry with a sickening sort of clarity. "Circles that wouldn't like hearing he'd been nice to Harry Potter in class," he finished dully. Lupin grimaced, but nodded.

"He walks a dangerous line. With Dumbledore on one side, and... others waiting in the shadows. He must act as he is expected to act, regardless of his personal feelings on the matter. But I promise you can trust him, Harry. Now more so than ever, if I won't be in the castle. He's a good ally to have." His lips quirked wryly. "I trust him with my life, and he has earned that trust a dozen times over. Regardless of any... issues we may have had as schoolboys." Lupin clapped Harry on the shoulder, squeezing gently. "Does that help to hear?"

"It does, actually. Thank you." Harry had been learning all year about the roles people had to play in public — including the roles he himself was destined to hide behind. Clearly it was all far more complicated than Lupin made it seem; but Harry hadn't expected him to air Snape's personal business to a student, even his cub. Something settled in his chest at the confirmation, though — Snape was just keeping up appearances, the same as the rest of them.

Harry could work with that.

He was about to ask another question when they were interrupted by a knock on the open door — Professor Dumbledore, looking apologetic. "I'm afraid it's time. Your carriage is at the gates, Remus. I thought I might escort you down." He didn't look entirely thrilled to see Harry in there talking to Lupin, and Harry tried not to glare at the old man.

"I'll come with you," Harry said, daring the headmaster to tell him otherwise.

Lupin sent the last of his things into his trunk with a wave of his wand, then levitated it out of the room, following behind Dumbledore with Harry at his side.

“Why so glum, Harry?” Dumbledore asked, turning back to him as they walked. “You should be very proud of what you accomplished last night. You saved an innocent man from a terrible fate.”

A memory flashed behind Harry’s eyes. Trelawney rigid in her chair. *Greater and more terrible than ever before.* How could he have forgotten? “Professor,” he asked, looking up at the headmaster. “Has Professor Trelawney ever made a genuine prediction?”

Dumbledore froze, his eyes going wide and panicked for the briefest of seconds. Harry almost missed it. A blink later, and he was back to his genial self. “Professor Trelawney? Why, I believe she must have made some correct ones, in her time. Why do you ask?”

“I think she made one after my Divination exam yesterday. She said Voldemort’s servant would set out to return to him before midnight, and he’d help him rise to power.” Harry didn’t want to tell Dumbledore the exact wording of the prophecy, just in case he knew more than Harry did. All the same, the man looked a little *too* happy to get news like that. Again, he hid it quickly, but Harry was watching closely enough to see the satisfied smirk whip across the headmaster’s face. Beside Harry, Lupin looked grim.

“One thing you’ll learn about prophecies, Harry, is that they are inevitable. Nothing you could have done last night would have changed the outcome — if that is what is to come to pass, then that is what will be. You cannot blame yourself for the whims of fate.”

“But we have to be ready, if Voldemort is really coming back!” Harry wanted to know if Dumbledore was truly going to keep him docile, tugging him along like a lamb to slaughter. Would he let Harry prepare himself?

“I think that’s best left to the adults, don’t you, Harry?” Dumbledore replied lightly. “You merely need to worry yourself about enjoying your summer freedom.”

When the headmaster wasn’t looking, Harry shared a look with Remus. Just what was the old man planning, and why did it involve keeping Harry in the dark with his powers bound in the face of something so dangerous?

At Dumbledore’s prompting, Harry said goodbye to Lupin at the Entrance Hall, making no move to suggest their relationship was anything more than student and favoured professor. He watched the pair walk down the drive, the cogs turning in his brain. There were so many secrets, so many things he didn’t know. Harry didn’t like it.

He wanted to know what Dumbledore was up to, before the man’s plans got him killed.

.-. .

A few days before the end of term, Harry got a letter from Sirius, carried by an owl that looked like a fluffy grey tennis ball.

Dear Harry,

I hope this reaches you before you leave Hogwarts. I have a few doubts about the owl's reliability, but he's the best I could find.

I'm safe. We both are. I won't tell you anything more, just in case, but I'm safe. The dementors are still searching, but they haven't a hope of finding me here. I'm going to let some muggles get a glimpse of me soon, far from Hogwarts. Hopefully they'll lift the security on the castle for next year.

Also, I have a confession to make. I sent you the Firebolt, with a little help from Crookshanks. Think of it as twelve birthdays' worth of presents from your godfather.

I won't say much more, in case this letter gets into the wrong hands. But know I'm thinking of you, and there's a little Maraudering afoot. You'll know more when the time comes. For now, keep your head down, and your ears sharp.

I am enclosing something else for you, which I think will make your next year at Hogwarts more enjoyable.

If you ever need me, send word. I love you, pup. I'll write again soon.

Sirius.

PS - I thought your friend Ron might like to keep this owl, as it's my fault he no longer has a rat.

Harry hesitated to show the letter to Ron and Hermione, but they were both with him when the letter was delivered, so he couldn't really say no. To his surprise, Ron held the owl up to Crookshanks for inspection before claiming the little creature, wanting to check it wasn't hiding anything.

Harry was overjoyed by the small piece of parchment included in the envelope; signed permission from Sirius for Harry to visit Hogsmeade. That would be good enough for Dumbledore, he hoped.

"What does he mean, there's Maraudering afoot?" Hermione asked, reading the letter carefully. Harry, who hadn't shared the entire history of his father's legacy with his friends, merely shrugged.

"Who knows," he said evasively. He hoped it meant that Lupin had found Sirius, wherever he was.

"Brilliant," Ron declared, staring at his new owl. "Way better than some stupid rat."

Harry laughed, shaking his head. Ron still hadn't completely forgiven Harry and Hermione for going back in time without him. Hopefully the owl would go some way towards soothing his ruffled feathers.

.-. .

Harry's last night in the castle found him wandering the halls past curfew, safe under his invisibility cloak, enjoying it much more now he didn't have to worry about a mass-murderer coming after him. He glanced down at the crumpled paper in his hand, checking he was in the right place, then snuck into the classroom to his left.

For once, Draco was already in there. He jumped when the door opened, and Harry shrugged the cloak off, revealing himself. The blond's eyes went wide. "You have an invisibility cloak," he realised. "Suddenly a lot of things are making sense."

"It definitely comes in handy," Harry replied, grinning.

Draco shook his head, gesturing for Harry to pull up a chair. "No wonder you're always getting into trouble. I bet you had something to do with Black's little adventure, too — I heard you were in the hospital wing that night."

Biting his lip, Harry met suspicious grey eyes. "Maybe," he admitted eventually. "Sirius Black is innocent, Draco. It's a long story, but he never worked for Voldemort. Peter Pettigrew did. He framed Sirius and faked his own death."

Draco stared at him incredulously. Eventually, he scoffed. "One day, you'll tell me that long story."

"You believe me?" Harry hadn't expected it to be that easy.

"You have no reason to lie to me about something like that," Draco pointed out. "I'll expect an explanation in future. But for now, your word is enough."

It amazed Harry how far they'd come from the year before, where they could barely stand to look at each other without wanting to hex each other. He much preferred this.

"So what are your plans for the summer?" he asked curiously, bringing the conversation round to lighter topics. Draco shrugged.

"I might go with Blaise and his mother to Italy for a while. And Mother wants to spend some time at the family home in France. Father never comes with us, there. He's got too much work to do to take a holiday." Harry imagined spending a week or two without Lucius Malfoy was the highlight of Draco's summer. "Do you... do you think we'll be able to write? Or will Dumbledore find out?"

Brow furrowed, Harry hummed thoughtfully. "I don't know. If I'm back at the Dursleys, I might not be able to write to anyone, let alone you." He'd be lucky if they let him have Hedwig out. Hell, after the way he left, he'd be lucky if they didn't lock him back in his cupboard all summer. "I wonder if I can get away with another bout of 'accidental' magic. Give me an excuse to run to Diagon for the summer again. That was nice." He doubted he'd be allowed to get away with it twice, but it was a nice thought.

"Whatever you do, just be careful," Draco replied. "I know it's hard for you, Potter, but do try and stay out of any life-or-death situations for at least two months." His tone was mocking, but the concern was real, and it warmed Harry's heart.

How far they'd come indeed, for Draco Malfoy to genuinely be worried about the safety and wellbeing of Harry Potter.

.-. .

The train ride home was a quiet one, especially when he compared it to the one that had brought them to school at the beginning of the year. Harry was surprised at how many people managed to catch him while he was walking to the bathroom at the end of the train, imploring him to keep in touch over the summer. Susan Bones; Parvati Patil; even Daphne Greengrass told him to send her an owl sometime. It felt like he'd stepped into some bizarre alternate universe.

He returned to his carriage with Ron and Hermione, where they were also joined by Neville, Ginny, and a girl with pale blonde hair that Harry didn't recognise. "This is Luna," Ginny said by way of introduction. "She's in my year, in Ravenclaw."

The blonde girl stared at him with a somewhat dazed smile. "Hello, Harry Potter. I'm glad to see you don't have wrackspurts on you this year. They looked awfully uncomfortable last year."

Harry blinked. "Uh. What?" Ginny giggled.

"Luna's a bit... interesting, but she means well," she assured. Harry, who still had absolutely no idea what was going on, merely shook his head and sat down between Ron and Neville. Whatever; if Ginny's weird friend wanted to sit with them, that was fine by him.

"Cheer up, Harry," Hermione said as she watched him stare forlornly at the castle disappearing behind the mountains. "I'm sure we'll be able to see you this summer."

"Yeah, I've been thinking about that," Ron said. "You've got to come stay with us, Harry. It's the Quidditch World Cup this summer, Dad says he can get tickets from work. You can't miss it!"

Harry, who had never been to a live quidditch match but had listened to lots of them on the Wizarding Wireless he'd bought last summer, brightened up considerably at that. "That'd be brilliant. I bet the Dursleys would love to get rid of me." It all boiled down to whether Dumbledore would let him go. Surely he couldn't find an excuse not to? He didn't seem to mind Harry spending time with the Weasleys.

Conversation livened up as Ron and Ginny started debating over which team would win the World Cup, and Harry leaned back in his seat, a small, sad smile on his face.

There had been a whole half hour, a *glorious* half hour, where he'd thought he would be going to live with Sirius when he left Hogwarts this year.

If only that were the case.

.-. .

As it turned out, having an escaped convict for a godfather was surprisingly good for Harry's continued existence at the Dursleys. By which he meant Uncle Vernon had only smacked him around a little bit for what he'd done to Aunt Marge, rather than beating Harry within an inch of his life like he'd expected.

Of course, he didn't expect things to last, once Vernon clocked on to the fact that, being an escaped convict, Sirius would have a difficult time coming to Harry's rescue should anything terrible happen. But until that fact dawned, Harry was happy to live with his relatives in a state of uneasy truce. With any luck, he could get permission to go to the Weasleys' before things got truly awful.

Two days into Harry's summer break, at approximately five-fifteen in the evening, the doorbell rang.

Harry — who was up in his room, staring at the ceiling and debating maybe getting a headstart on his Transfiguration homework — didn't think much of the interruption, though he heard Uncle Vernon muttering about how rude it was to call at such an hour, shouting for his wife to get the door. Harry rolled over on his bed, wincing when it jarred one of the bruises on his back.

Then Aunt Petunia screamed.

On his feet like a shot, Harry hurried down the stairs, wand flicking out of the invisible holster on his wrist. Had Voldemort found him already?

To his utter astonishment, the person in the doorway was not Voldemort. It was Professor Snape, dressed like a muggle in black trousers and a black button-up shirt, his dark eyes fixed on Harry's aunt and a smirk tugging at his lips. "Hello, Petunia," he drawled.

"*You*," Aunt Petunia gasped, one hand clutching at her chest in shock. "How— you're— that *awful* Snape boy." The vitriol was clear in her tone. Harry gaped.

"You two know each other?"

Snape's eyes flicked away from Petunia to look at Harry, his smirk widening a fraction. "Your aunt and I are old friends, Potter."

Petunia let out a strange sort of squawking sound. "*Friends!* As if I ever would have been friends with a freak like you. Telling Lily all about that horrible school until she couldn't wait to go with you, coming home every summer and flaunting your *abnormality* all over the place."

Harry had known Snape and his mother were friends in school — Lupin had told him that ages ago — but he hadn't realised they'd known each other *before* Hogwarts.

"May I come in?" Snape requested, already stepping inside and shutting the door behind him, nudging past a still-horrified Petunia. By now, both Vernon and Dudley were in the living room doorway, Dudley's beady little eyes screwed up in confusion.

"Petunia? Who is this man?" Vernon boomed, stepping up towards the stranger in his home as if he had any hope of intimidating Severus Snape. Snape's eyes trailed over him in disgust.

"He's one of *them*, Vernon. He went to school with the boy's parents!" Petunia took a step towards her husband, whose face began to turn red, and he puffed himself up even further.

"Now look here, you," Vernon started, pointing one fat finger at Snape's face. "You have no right to come into my home and—and frighten my wife! We took the boy back like the old man told us, the rest of it is our business!"

"Are you quite finished?" Snape asked, boredom in his tone. Vernon spluttered, face growing even redder, a vein throbbing above his temple. Harry wondered in vague amusement if this would finally be the moment the man had a stroke. "Potter, pack your things."

"I can't, sir," Harry replied evenly. "They're locked under the stairs." He'd picked the lock and smuggled some of his books and such up his first night back, like he had done last year, but the rest was still locked in his cupboard.

Snape waved a hand, and the padlock on the cupboard fell off, broken. All three Dursleys flinched. Harry laughed when he saw Dudley with his back to the wall, trying to make himself look as small as possible — an incredible feat, at his size — with his hands over his fat bottom. His pig tail had obviously left some fond memories.

With the cupboard open, Harry dragged his trunk and Hedwig's empty cage out. His cheeks turned pink in shame when he felt Snape peering over his shoulder, taking in the small space; the ragged cot that had never left, the broken toys piled lovingly on one side, the clear signs that someone had once lived in there. Harry shut the door quickly. "Do I need all of my things, sir?"

"*I refuse,*" Vernon cut in, "to let this *man* undermine me in my own home! You're not going anywhere, *boy*."

Harry flinched at the snarled word despite himself. To his utter shock, Snape placed a hand on his shoulder, staring Vernon down in a way that had made even seventh years wet themselves in fear. Vernon let out a tiny 'meep', his moustache trembling.

"You're even more of an idiot than I thought you were if you believe you can order me around, *muggle*," Snape said sharply. "Potter is coming with me. For the rest of the summer. We may need to... drop in, from time to time. It wouldn't do for certain people to realise he's no longer living here. But you will allow him to come and go as he pleases. Or I might just have to share a few childhood stories with some of your lovely neighbours, Petunia. There are some rather... interesting tales, don't you recall?"

Petunia looked like she was about to faint in horror. "Fine, take the boy," she said, waving a hand. "Just get out! I don't want you anywhere near my family!"

"Believe me, Petunia, I have no desire to be near your... family." Snape's eyes turned to Dudley, making it abundantly clear what he thought of the boy. Dudley whimpered. "Get a move on, Potter. Your godfather is waiting."

Harry's face split into a grin. Snape was taking him to Sirius! He went to drag his trunk up the stairs, but with a wave of Snape's wand it began to levitate up behind him. "Sir," he said quietly, once they were up the stairs and out of earshot of his relatives. "Won't the Ministry be able to track that?" Between breaking the padlock and levitating Harry's trunk, wouldn't he get Harry in trouble?

"I have ways of keeping my magic undetected," Snape assured him. He waited in the doorway to Harry's room, his gaze studying it. Harry's stomach turned when he realised Snape would piece it all together. No normal boy had eight locks on the *outside* of his bedroom door, or a cat-flap, or the need to hide his homework beneath a loose floorboard. No normal boy had zero signs whatsoever that the room he lived in even belonged to him. He grit his teeth, keeping his head held high. He refused to let Snape mock him for this.

"Hedwig is out hunting," he said, shoving the rest of his possessions into his trunk. He didn't have much — he hadn't dared take out any of his new clothes, in case the Dursleys asked where he got them, and the only magical items he had out were his wand and his homework supplies. "Will she be okay?"

"She'll find you," Snape assured. "Is that everything?"

Harry gave his room one last scan, then nodded. "Yes, sir."

Snape shrunk Harry's trunk down to the size of a matchbox, then led the way back down the stairs, grabbing Hedwig's cage and shrinking that down too. "Ready?"

"Yes, sir." Harry looked to his relatives, quietly amazed that none of them had fainted in fear. If only he'd known sooner that his grouchy Potions' professor could inspire such reactions in his aunt!

"As I said, Petunia. Potter will come and go as he pleases, and if I find out you've told *anyone* where he is or who he's with, I promise you will regret it," Snape said coldly, staring Petunia right in the eye. She glared at him, arms folded over her chest.

"Your father should've tried harder to beat it out of you," she spat. "You have my word, Snape. We won't say anything."

Harry gaped at his professor, Petunia's words making a sickening realisation come together in his mind. *Beat it out of you.*

Maybe he and Snape were more alike than he thought.

To his credit, Snape didn't so much as flinch, offering one last sneer before turning to Harry. "Hold my arm, Potter. Tightly, now."

Harry did as bid, gripping tight to Snape's forearm, and all of a sudden the world span on its axis.

It was just for a split second, but Harry felt like he was being shoved through a small tube. His knees buckled slightly when he landed, but Snape kept him upright, walking him forward

several steps. “Side-Along Apparition. Not entirely pleasant the first few times,” the professor explained. Harry let go of his arm, staring in shock.

They had arrived in the middle of a long gravel driveway, with wide stretches of lawn either side that faded into woodland. At the end of the driveway was an *enormous* manor house. All dark wood and grey stone, it was an imposing silhouette against the forest behind it, four stories tall and bigger than anything Harry had seen before.

“Where are we?” he breathed in amazement, looking for any sort of clue as to where Snape had taken him. Were they even still in England?

Then, the front door of the manor slammed open, and bounding down the steps came an enormous black shaggy dog.

Chapter 12

As soon as he saw Padfoot, Harry's heart skipped a beat. He laughed, dropping to his knees with his arms wide open, but by the time the dog took his last huge leap towards Harry he was transformed back into a man, wrapping the boy in a crushing hug. "Hello, pup," he greeted huskily.

"*Sirius.*" Harry clung to the man like he might disappear, burying his face in the man's robe.

"I may vomit," Snape drawled, and Harry heard a familiar chuckle.

"Behave, Severus."

Harry's head snapped up, his grin getting, if possible, even wider. "Professor Lupin!"

The werewolf smiled back at him, standing shoulder to shoulder with Snape. "I'm not your professor anymore, remember?" he pointed out lightly. "I think it's about time you called me Remus."

Harry tore himself away from his godfather, getting to his feet in order to hug his ex-professor too. "Remus," he echoed. Remus' cheek pressed against his hair for a brief moment.

"It's good to see you, cub."

Sirius stood up, slinging one arm each around Harry and Remus. He'd showered and shaved since Harry had last seen him, and already he looked like a much younger man. He looked happy.

"What is this place?" Harry asked again, looking back to the manor in front of him.

"This is Seren Du House," Sirius announced, a strange accent on the words; Welsh, maybe, or Gaelic. "It's been in the Black family for centuries."

"But this one wasn't in the portfolio the goblins sent me," Harry said with a frown. Sirius' grin widened.

"This is one of two Black properties the goblins don't know about. Our family does love its secrets, after all." Harry's heart fluttered at the easy way he said 'our family', including Harry without batting an eyelash. "It's completely Unplottable; that means no one can find it on a map, or with any tracking spells. You have to know where to look. And, as that's in the middle of nowhere in North Wales, and there's only about six people alive who have ever been here before, I'd say you're pretty safe."

"Wow." Harry wished he could think of something more eloquent to say, but words had failed him.

“Are you quite done gaping?” Snape cut in, though his words weren’t quite as harsh as they might have been a year ago. Sirius rolled his eyes.

“Let him stare, Snape. He’s had a shock.” He glanced down to Harry, his expression growing softer, more tentative. “You said, before I had to run again, that you’d like to live with me. If you could. Well... here you are. A new home, if you’d like it.”

“It’s brilliant,” Harry assured, beaming.

Sirius rocked up on his toes, releasing him and Remus and bounding back towards the house. “Come on, I’ll show you inside!”

“It’s like having another child,” Snape muttered. Harry’s eyes widened when Remus elbowed the man gently in the side.

“Leave him be, he’s just excited. He hasn’t had much to be happy about in the last twelve years,” he chided.

Harry followed his godfather up to the manor doors, and into a grand entrance hall. There was a huge dark wood staircase in front of him, the walls painted dark blue and the floors a gleaming white marble. The only portraits hanging were landscapes; no people whatsoever. “We’ll give you the grand tour tomorrow,” Sirius promised. “But Ceri almost has dinner ready.”

With Sirius’ guiding hand on his shoulder, Harry was led into a large kitchen and dining area, with a long wooden table set for four places. At the stove, perched on a stool, was a house elf. The elf wore a little black pinafore dress with a crest on the front that Harry recognised as the Black family crest. She — presumably a girl, going by the dress — turned when they entered, and her face lit up. “Master Harry, sir!” she greeted, bowing so low her nose touched the stool. “Master Sirius be saying he was bringing his godson soon! I is Ceri, young master; the elf of Seren Du. It is being an honour to have you here!”

“It’s, uh, nice to meet you too, Ceri,” Harry replied. His only previous experience of house elves was Dobby, and that had been... a little volatile.

“Such manners, young master!” Ceri muttered approvingly. “Please be sittings for dinner, sirs.”

The four of them sat at the table, and Ceri soon had enormous plates of roast dinner in front of them; beef with all the trimmings, even Yorkshire puddings. Harry, who had barely eaten more than a few slices of bread and some cheese since he’d left Hogwarts, felt his mouth start to water. “This looks amazing, Ceri.”

“Thank you, young master! If yous be needing anything else, just call for Ceri.” With that she disappeared, leaving the four of them to their meal.

“Pass the gravy, would you, Snape?” Sirius asked politely, reaching out for the porcelain gravy boat. Snape did as asked, and Harry goggled. Last he’d known, Sirius and Snape hated

each other. Snape had reluctantly agreed to hear him out the night of Pettigrew's escape, but there was definitely no love lost between the pair. What had changed?

Harry's eyes turned to Remus, who was sat beside Snape, happily stealing the man's parsnips in exchange for his own carrots. He'd bet his Firebolt the werewolf had something to do with it.

"So you've been here since you escaped, have you?" Harry asked, once he'd sated his immediate hunger. He had to eat slowly, or he'd make himself sick. "Where's Buckbeak?"

"In the stables, out back. Loves it out here, he does; free run of the woods, as long as he's home by nightfall," Sirius said, looking pleased. Harry was glad; Buckbeak deserved some freedom, after being cooped up in Hagrid's hut for so long. "I stopped off long enough to find that owl and get a letter to you, then took a quick jaunt down to Norfolk to let some muggles see me, before heading this way. I hadn't been here since I was about thirteen, but I found it in the end."

"This place is incredible," Harry muttered, looking around. It was old-fashioned, but very clean, and surprisingly well decorated for a house that apparently hadn't seen people in two decades.

"Ceri kept it in good nick, waiting for the day the family would come use it again," Sirius agreed. "Just wait 'til you see the rest of it. I loved it as a kid — it's for family only, not visitors, so it's not nearly as stuffy and pretentious as the rest of the Black properties. Closest thing to home I had, except Hogwarts." He smiled, as if thinking of fond memories.

"Anyway, as soon as Remus left the school he wrote me to see where I was, and I went and picked him up outside of Aberystwyth. He brought Snape with him a week or so later when the term ended."

"Wait, you live here too?" Harry blurted, turning to Snape. The dark-haired man nodded.

"Not permanently. I have a role to play back at Hogwarts, and the headmaster expects certain things of me. But I plan to spend much of my summer here." For some reason, that made Remus grin into his roast potatoes, and Sirius roll his eyes.

"Lucky me," he muttered under his breath, then cursed. Harry got the feeling Remus had just kicked him under the table. "*Anyway*," he continued, turning back to Harry, "when Remus told me you'd been living with Lily's harpy of a sister, we knew we couldn't let that slide. So I had Ceri clear a room for you, and Snape was kind enough to play chaperone. Was it everything you dreamed of?" That was directed at the Potions Master, who smirked, eyes flashing.

"Seeing Petunia again was quite satisfying, thank you."

"She looked like she'd seen a ghost," Harry said, laughing. "How do you know her, Professor?" If Sirius was making an effort to be nice to Snape, then he supposed he could as well. The man had just rescued him, after all.

"I grew up in the same town as your mother's family; Cokeworth, not far from Wolverhampton. Lily and I met when we were seven, and Petunia was... not pleased with our association. Especially not once Lily got her Hogwarts letter and I was allowed to tell her the truth about magic," Snape explained.

"You knew my mum when she was little? What was she like?"

"That is a story for another time, Potter," Snape said, his tone surprisingly gentle. "One that I would be willing to share with you. Not tonight, however."

"You're safe from Dumbledore here, cub. He'll never even know you're gone," Remus promised.

"And you wanna know the best part?" Sirius was practically bouncing in his seat as he spoke. "The place is Unplottable, and the woods are full of old, wild magic — you can do as much magic as you like here and the Ministry won't know a thing."

Harry's eyes were round and gleaming at the prospect of being able to do as much magic as he wanted all summer. "Brilliant."

When their plates started growing empty, there was a small pop, and the centre of the table suddenly held a delicious-looking tower of profiteroles. "Your house elf is going to give me diabetes, Black," Snape muttered, though he served himself a decent-sized bowl of the dessert. Sirius barked out a laugh.

"She'll calm down eventually, she's just happy to have people to cook for again. Besides, according to her we could all do with a bit more meat on our bones. I can't say she's wrong, to be honest."

Harry looked around the table; all four of them were indeed painfully skinny, Sirius and Harry more than the other two. "It's like being at Hogwarts, but better," Harry remarked, swallowing a mouthful of profiterole.

There wasn't much talking while the four ate their dessert, and when the table was clear Remus cleared his throat. "I thought we might head to the living room and talk for a while. There's still so much Sirius and I don't know about your life, Harry, and I thought it might be good for Sirius and Severus to learn about what happened to you last summer." The two men in question gave him a concerned look, and Harry grimaced. Yes, he had a lot of explaining to do.

The living room turned out to be upstairs, and Ceri already had a fire going to ward off the evening chill. It held two comfortable-looking sofas and a pair of squashy armchairs, and Harry chose one of the sofas, surprised when Sirius sat next to him. Remus and Snape took the other sofa.

Ceri popped into the room. "Can Ceri be getting sirs anything to drink?"

"Just tea if you wouldn't mind, Ceri," Remus requested. The house elf nodded, her large ears flopping, and she returned moments later with a tea tray set for four, a small pile of biscuits in

the centre.

“How does Master Harry like his tea?” She was already making up three other cups, and Harry blinked.

“Uh, bit of milk, one sugar, thanks.” Ceri floated a teacup in his direction, then bowed and disappeared.

“What happened last summer, pup?” Sirius asked, dark brows knitted together in worry. Harry took a deep breath.

“Well, I suppose I should give you a bit of backstory, first. You know I live — lived — with the Dursleys. Well, Uncle Vernon has this sister...” Harry gave them a brief run-down of the joys of Aunt Marge, and a summary of what she’d said about his parents; something that had Sirius growling like his canine counterpart, and even Remus baring his teeth.

“So I ended up living in Diagon Alley for the last couple weeks of summer. And at one point, I went to Gringotts to get money from my vault, only I didn’t have my key, so the goblins scanned my magic. And...” Here he swallowed thickly. Sirius’ hand rested on his knee, squeezing in support. Slowly, Harry revealed what the goblins had discovered — all of it. He told them all four houses he was inheriting, and their suspicions about who cast the magic, and the consequences Gorra had heavily implied would come of him turning seventeen with the block still active.

By the end of his tale, Sirius was pacing the length of the living room in white-knuckled fury. “That manipulative, lying, no-good, scheming,” he muttered under his breath. Some of the knickknacks on the shelves began to rattle.

“Sirius, control yourself,” Remus called in a firm voice. “I’m as angry as you are, but blowing up the crockery won’t help anything.” Sirius seemed to realise his magic was getting away from him, and his shoulders slumped, a long breath escaping him.

“I knew Dumbledore was ruthless in the face of the Greater Good, but I didn’t realise he would go to such lengths on a child,” Snape murmured. “Mr Potter, might you permit me to do a scan of my own? I have no doubt the goblins were entirely thorough, but there are certain spells their particular brand of magic will not catch.”

Harry went wide-eyed in horror at the thought of having more of Dumbledore’s magic on him. “Please,” he agreed, nodding frantically. Snape stood, waving his wand and murmuring something under his breath. Harry’s chest glowed blue for a second, then red, then black. “What does that mean?”

“A Tracking spell. A passive one — he can only find you if he checks the spell, rather than knowing exactly where you are at all times. Also a minor Suggestibility charm, and a Truth-Telling charm. The combination would encourage you to spill secrets to the headmaster you might have preferred to keep to yourself. Not in a way you’d notice, but rather to make you feel like you can trust him. Though they’re weak enough that I’d imagine you’ve been able to ignore them since you learned the truth.” Snape looked disgusted all the same, and Harry mirrored his expression.

“Can you remove them?” He especially didn’t like the idea of Dumbledore being able to check his location at any time.

“Of course.” Snape did some complicated-looking wandwork, and when he scanned Harry again, his chest glowed white. “You’re clear. I do wonder, though...” He turned his wand on Remus, raising an eyebrow. After a nod of consent, he performed the same spell he had on Harry. Remus glowed black, then purple. Snape swore loudly. “The same Tracking spell, and an incredibly rare spell designed to target dual-natured creatures. I haven’t seen it in years; The Dark Lord used to use it on the werewolves who had displeased them, to cut them off from their wolf halves; it would drive them insane, eventually.”

“Moony,” Remus breathed, looking heartbroken. “Severus, do— do you know how long that spell has been present?”

“By the looks of it, since you were a child. Perhaps since Hogwarts, maybe even before then.”

Remus’ expression was devastated. “I always wondered why it felt like my wolf and my human mind were always fighting each other,” he said softly. “I thought that was just how it was to be a werewolf. That it was normal to be scratching myself to pieces every moon.”

“That one will take work to remove,” Snape said. “But I can do it, if you give me time.” He met Remus’ gaze, and Harry looked away suddenly, his cheeks heating. It felt like he was watching something he shouldn’t.

Eventually, Remus cleared his throat. “Well,” he said, a little flustered. “That was... unexpected.”

“Dumbledore must be stopped,” Sirius growled, dropping back onto the sofa next to Harry. A quick wave of Snape’s wand showed the dog animagus glowing black; also a victim of the passive Tracking spell.

“We’re all in agreement there,” Snape said, scowling at the results. “But until we know exactly what his plan is, we must stay quiet and play his game.”

“I won’t let his *game* stop me from raising my godson as my heir,” Sirius retorted. “Harry needs to know his place in the world.”

“Neville’s been helping me,” Harry piped up tentatively. “And— others.” He wasn’t quite ready to tell the truth about Draco Malfoy just yet. “Most of the heirs at school don’t like Dumbledore either. Neville got me learning Occlumency, so I can keep my secrets better.”

“Longbottom, really?” Snape was skeptical. “I’ll test your shields tomorrow, see how far you’ve come. It is vital that you’re able to keep all this hidden once you return to school, amongst anyone who might be in Dumbledore’s pocket — yes, that includes your precious Weasleys, and the Granger girl. Trust no one until proven otherwise. Until we know what we’re dealing with, you must be Dumbledore’s Golden Boy.”

His stomach squirmed uncomfortably. He didn't know how many of the Weasleys would take his side, or how many were loyal to Dumbledore. He already had a strong feeling that if he pushed Ron much further, it would make him snap.

"This summer should be enough to get you prepared," Remus told him. "Between the three of us, we should be able to give you a fairly good crash course in everything you'll need to know. Secrecy, defence, wizarding society; I know studying during the summer isn't the most fun, but Harry—"

"I want to learn," Harry cut him off with a wave of his hand. "Please, I want to learn everything I can." He'd be bored stiff if he couldn't do anything, and learning magic was great when it wasn't accompanied by three-foot-long essays.

"We'll discuss that more in the morning," Sirius suggested. "Figure out what you need to know, where you're at with everything. It's getting late."

The clock on the mantle said it was past eleven, and Harry suddenly realised how tired he was. It had been a hell of a day. He couldn't stifle the jaw-cracking yawn that escaped him. "Definitely bedtime," Sirius said with a grin, ruffling Harry's hair. "Come on, I'll show you your room. Where's your things?"

Snape held out Harry's shrunken trunk and owl cage, and Sirius resized them with a wave of his wand. They bobbed along behind the four as Sirius showed him up to the third floor of the house. "This is your room," he said, tapping on a door to his left. "I'm in that one at the end of the hall, and Moony's three doors down and to your right. Grab either of us, or Ceri, if you need anything."

"Where does Professor Snape sleep?" Harry asked curiously.

Sirius about doubled over laughing, and Remus' face turned a shocking shade of pink. Snape's pale cheeks went faintly red, and he coughed.

"Severus, ah— Severus is in with me, Harry," Remus volunteered, looking like he'd quite happily sink through the floor.

For a minute, Harry furrowed his brow — in a house that big, surely there were plenty of bedrooms? Then it dawned on him. A dim memory flickered through his brain, from back in the Shrieking Shack; *We didn't trust Moony 'cause of his boyfriend. Sorry, Moons.*

"Oh. Oh!" Harry felt his own cheeks heat up. "That— that's okay, in the wizarding world, then?" He'd heard more than a few rants from Uncle Vernon about *those people*, and heard all sorts of things about it on the telly. Then again, Vernon thought he was a freak too, yet he was perfectly normal in the wizarding world.

"People don't care about gender, much," Remus confirmed. Harry noticed now how close he was standing to Snape, their shoulders brushing ever so slightly. "Blood purity is more their issue. Society will care more that I'm a werewolf than that we're both men." He paused, glancing at the floor. "Is it... okay with you?"

"Well," Harry said, after a beat of silence. "I figured anything that Uncle Vernon says is bad has to be alright, yeah? As long as you're happy." He was more stuck on the fact of it being *Snape* than the two of them being men, but he didn't think that would go down well.

Remus perked up like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders, and Sirius let out an impatient whine. "Yes, we're here, we're queer, hallelujah — can I show Harry his room now, please?"

A laugh bubbled from Remus' lips. "Alright, Padfoot. I think we're going to go back to the living room. Goodnight, Harry."

"Goodnight, Remus. Professor," he added, and Snape nodded at him in reply. When the pair left, they didn't hold hands or anything, but their strides matched and their elbows touched. It seemed obvious, now Harry knew.

"Now, if you don't like it, we can change just about anything," Sirius told him, sounding nervous as he pushed the door open. Harry's breath caught in his throat.

His room was three times the size of his old one back at the Dursleys', with honey-coloured wood flooring and a fluffy looking grey rug in the centre. The walls were painted a soft grey-blue, with one wall taken up entirely by bookshelves waiting to be filled. He had his own fireplace, and a desk with a black leather chair. The wardrobe and dresser matched the enormous four-poster bed, all beautiful dark wood, detailed with some kind of intricate bird carving. Directly opposite the door was a huge window, overlooking the back garden and the woods beyond. "It's perfect."

"You like it?" Sirius brightened. "Really?"

"Sirius, I love it." Harry walked over to the bed, running a hand over the soft grey duvet cover. He'd been half expecting some Gryffindor explosion of red and gold; this was much more his style.

"Good." Sirius stood in the doorway, clearly unsure what to do with himself now. "I'll, uh, leave you to it, then. Nearest bathroom is directly opposite, by the way. You'll be the only one using it." He crossed the distance between them in three long strides, wrapping wiry arms around Harry. "It's really good to have you here, pup."

"It's good to be here," Sirius," Harry returned with a smile. He was so happy he could cast an army of Patroni, he was sure.

It was going to be the best summer ever.

.-.-.-.

Remus looked up when Sirius slipped back into the living room, sinking down onto the sofa. "Harry likes his room?"

"Yeah," Sirius replied, grinning. "Thanks for helping me with it, Moons."

"My pleasure."

The three of them went silent, until Sirius let out a sigh. “How could I have spent so long sitting in Azkaban while Harry was out here left to Dumbledore’s manipulative little claws? I should’ve been there to protect him.”

“You can’t beat yourself up over it, Sirius, you had no idea. Believe me, I’ve been doing plenty of that since I found out.”

“At least the truth has been discovered before it’s too late,” Severus added. “Potter has plenty of time for his magical core to balance out before he inherits the rest of his family magics.”

“True. We’ll get him ready for the future, whatever it holds.” Sirius’ grey eyes gleamed with determination.

Remus thought back to what Harry had said before he’d left the castle, about Trelawney’s prophecy. He’d shared that with his two companions, of course, but he could hardly believe it; Peter was going to be the one to help Voldemort back to power. It would happen, no doubt sooner than any of them would like. “Will we have enough time?” he asked plaintively, knowing the two men were thinking along the same lines.

Beside him, Severus tensed. “Now that we have the boy safely, and I have been... enlightened about Dumbledore’s true regard for him, I fear there’s something I need to tell you both.” He looked up, meeting Remus’ gaze. “Remus, do you remember when I told you I had turned to the side of the Light?”

Remus could remember it all too well. They’d had a hugely explosive fight about six months after graduation, when Severus had taken the Dark Mark. Remus had begged him to reconsider, to go to Dumbledore for help, but Severus had stood firm in his decision. It was the first time Remus thought he’d truly lost the man for good. They didn’t speak again for almost a year, until one day Remus came home to find Severus on his doorstep, looking heartbroken and promising that he’d changed, that he’d agreed to turn spy for Dumbledore and rejoin the light. It had taken time for them to trust each other again — indeed, they’d been just starting to properly figure it out when Lily and James had been killed, and Remus had practically dropped off the face of the earth in mourning.

“I never told you why,” Severus continued, his long fingers curling around Remus’ own. “What event caused me to realise the truth of the decision I had made.” He glanced over at Sirius, who was listening intently. “This is going to be... difficult for you to hear. I only ask that you allow me to say my piece before you hex me into oblivion.” His lips quirked in a wry smile. Remus’ heart clenched.

“One evening, I was spying on Dumbledore at the Dark Lord’s orders; he was interviewing a new teaching candidate. For the Divination post. She seemed as batty as every other seer I’d met, so I didn’t think much of it— until she began to make a genuine prophecy.”

Remus listened in dawning horror as Severus recited the words. “I was discovered before I could hear the end, but I took what I knew to the Dark Lord. It took several weeks for him to parse the meaning, but eventually he decided he knew enough.”

Born as the seventh month dies.

“Harry.” Sirius’ voice was a low growl, his hands clenched into fists on his lap. His wand was beside him, untouched.

“Potter,” Severus confirmed. “Or the Longbottom boy. The Dark Lord decided there was a good chance it could be either, so he set his followers to find both families.” The firelight flickered off of Severus’ sharp cheekbones, making him look haggard, his eyes full of grief. “As soon as I realised the Dark Lord planned to kill a child — *Lily’s* child — I went to Dumbledore and begged him for mercy, pleaded with him to protect Lily and her son. I offered my services as a spy for the light, to repent for what I had done. I hoped it would be enough. I was wrong.” He gave a twisted sort of grimace, drawing his hands away from Remus’ lap. “I am the reason Lily and James are dead. And that knowledge will haunt me for the rest of my days.”

The silence that followed was painfully thick. Remus didn’t know what to say, Severus’ words echoing in his mind, the pieces falling together. Harry was prophesised to defeat Voldemort. Voldemort knew that, which was why he went after Lily and James. Severus was the one who had given him that information.

“I was the one who convinced Lily and James to use Peter as the Secret Keeper,” Sirius said eventually. “I thought I’d be too obvious a choice. No one would suspect Peter. Not even us. Because of me, Voldemort got to them. He could’ve known about the prophecy for years and never been any the wiser if it had been me.” He looked up at Severus with hollow eyes, eyes that spoke of twelve years of Azkaban. “You’re as much to blame as I am, Snape.”

“Both of you carry around far more guilt than one man should bear,” Remus declared, staring into his teacup. “The past is the past, and we have all suffered from our mistakes. Some more than others. But what matters now is keeping Harry safe — from Voldemort and Dumbledore.” If Harry was the one destined to destroy Voldemort, and Dumbledore knew the full prophecy, Harry would be in grave danger on both sides when Voldemort returned to power.

“We have to train him. Not just with his family magic, or Occlumency,” Sirius realised. “He needs to know how to survive a war.”

“We can’t tell him why,” Remus insisted. “He’s not even fourteen yet. That’s far too large a burden to place on his shoulders, on top of everything else.”

“I think Potter has a good idea that he’s going to have to face something,” Severus pointed out. “We don’t need to tell him about the prophecy for him to know he needs to be prepared.”

From how eager Harry had been to learn from them throughout the summer, Remus had to agree.

“Fuck,” Sirius said abruptly, tugging at his hair. “Why did it have to be him? Hasn’t he been through enough?”

There was no response to that. All three of them sat silently, lost in their thoughts, their minds on the boy sleeping peacefully one floor above them. Remus reached out to grip Severus’ hand once more, needing the contact, the comfort.

It was a while before any of them went to bed that night.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Hey pals! So I have finally finished editing this absolute monstrosity all the way to the end, which naturally means that I am now impatient for y'all to get to the good bits. Because of this, I'm changing my update schedule; as of next week I'll be posting chapters every Monday, Wednesday and Friday. It's time for this fic to pick up some steam!

When Harry awoke the next morning, there was a large part of his brain that was certain the whole thing had been a dream. But he'd never been in a bed that comfortable; not at the Dursleys', and not at Hogwarts. He cracked one eye open, lips spreading in a grin. Even without his glasses he could see he wasn't at Privet Drive.

His new room really was incredible. He'd been too tired to take much of it in the night before, but he sat up and put his glasses on now, hardly daring to believe the room was all his.

The alarm clock on the bedside table said it was only six fifteen, and Harry doubted anyone else in the house would rise at that hour. He briefly contemplated going back to sleep, but it was no use. Now he was up, he was restless. He looked at his trunk, sitting at the foot of his new bed. His wand, still in its holster on the bedside table. He grinned to himself.

Sirius *had* said he could do as much magic as he wanted.

The Unpacking spell was one from *A Hundred Spells Every Wizard Should Know*, and Harry hadn't had much chance to practice it, but he'd been okay at it the last time he'd tried. He opened his trunk and his wardrobe, as well as the top drawers. Wand in hand, he murmured the spell. It was all about visualisation; he had to think clearly about how he wanted his things organised, otherwise they'd just shove themselves willy-nilly in his wardrobe.

His neatly folded clothes began to float out of the trunk, carefully arranging themselves the way they did in Harry's mind. They put themselves on hangers, or folded themselves into the drawers, and Harry laughed triumphantly when all his clothes were successfully where he wanted them to be. Next was books.

A flick of his wand, and his books were arranging themselves alphabetically on his empty shelves. There was still so much empty space, and Harry was eager to fill it.

The rest of his things, he placed by hand. Hedwig's cage went on top of the dresser, his Firebolt was propped up next to the window. The few photos he had to display went on his shelves, along with the Sneakoscope from Ron. His quills and parchment sat carefully on his

desk waiting for him to complete his homework. His little Wizarding Wireless went on his bedside table next to the alarm clock.

When he opened the drawer of his bedside table to put away his photo album, he froze. Lined up inside were several potion vials, all labelled in Snape's neat, spidery handwriting.

Bruise Balm - For topical application only

Skele-Gro - Only use if necessary

Nutritional Supplement - Six doses (marked), take before sleep

Standard Healing Potion, Grade 3 - Drink on empty stomach

Harry's pulse thudded in his throat, his palms growing clammy. Snape couldn't have snuck those in while Harry was sleeping, could he? He must have left them there before Harry had arrived — before he'd seen the way Harry lived at the Dursleys.

He swallowed thickly. How much did the adults think they knew? How many of Snape's suspicions had been confirmed by his little jaunt to retrieve Harry? The prospect squirmed in his stomach, anxiety clawing its way up his chest.

Your father should have tried harder to beat it out of you.

Maybe their similarities would be enough for Snape to keep silent. Surely if he wanted to confront Harry, he wouldn't have left the potions? He was a Slytherin, he respected subtlety. He may let Harry deal with his own demons.

But if Snape knew, what did Remus and Sirius know?

There was a knock on the door, and Harry slammed the drawer shut. He nudged the door open with a flick of his wand, revealing Remus in the doorway. He was wearing a dark brown dressing gown over blue striped pyjamas, and his hair stuck up haphazardly. "Morning, cub. Thought I heard you up and about." He looked around the room, then at the wand in Harry's hand, and smiled. "Making yourself at home? That's quite the book collection you're building there. I hadn't realised you were such a voracious reader."

"I had a lot of things to research last summer. And a lot of access to Flourish and Blotts," he added sheepishly, making Remus chuckle.

"I'm glad you're settling in. Are you hungry? Ceri should have breakfast done soon."

Harry's stomach rumbled loud enough for both of them to hear it. "I could eat," he said after a beat. Remus snorted. "Are the others up? Sirius, and, uh, Professor Snape?" Harry felt himself blush.

"Sirius is still in bed, but Severus is already downstairs." Remus paused, looking conflicted. "Harry, are you sure you're alright with our— our relationship? If it's too much for you—" "

“No, really!” Harry insisted, desperately not wanting Remus to think he had a problem with two men together. “It’s not that. It’s just, he’s my Potions professor, and he *hated* me for as long as I’ve known him, and to see him being *nice* is just... weird.”

Something in Remus’ posture seemed to ease, and he ran a hand through his messy hair. “Severus is a man of many masks, with many roles to play,” he conceded. “I told you before, he doesn’t hate you. By the end of the summer you two might even be friends.”

Harry gave him a look that said he was pushing his luck. Remus winked. “You never know, Harry. He keeps his emotions close to his chest, but he’s really not as awful as he likes to pretend. The two of you are actually more alike than you know, in some ways.”

His Aunt Petunia’s words drifted through his mind again. Harry swallowed. He wasn’t sure if that was something he wanted to have in common with Snape.

“I expect it to take time for you two to warm up to each other,” Remus continued, oblivious to Harry’s internal conflict. “But he cares for you, deep down.”

“Do you love him?” Harry bit his tongue as soon as the question escaped, cheeks flaming. Remus looked a little abashed, but a soft smile crossed his face.

“I have loved Severus since before I really knew what love even was,” he replied unashamedly. “And difficult as it might be for you to comprehend, he loves me as well. He’s just not the most... expressive man on the planet.” He shook his head, snapping himself out of his daze. “Anyway, enough of my lovesick rambling. Breakfast!”

Harry followed him down to the kitchen, where Professor Snape was already sat at the table, reading the *Daily Prophet* with a cup of tea at his elbow. Ceri was at the stove once again, frying eggs.

“Can Ceri be getting sirs anything to drink?” she asked brightly. “We be having tea, coffee, pumpkin juice, orange juice, milk—“

“Orange juice would be great, please,” Harry requested. With a snap of her fingers, a glass of orange juice began pouring itself from a jug on the counter, and floated its way over to Harry. At Remus’ request, she made more tea.

“Master Sirius be snoozing in late,” Ceri said in fond reprimand, and Remus chuckled.

“He isn’t used to being allowed a lie-in. He’ll be down as soon as he smells that bacon cooking.”

Harry watched as Remus leaned over Snape’s shoulder with one hand on the man’s back, reading the *Prophet* article with a frown on his face. Snape didn’t seem bothered by the contact, merely tilting his head so Remus could get a better look. Then Remus just sat down at the table, in the same spot he had last night.

It was strange. Harry hadn’t seen many couples interacting before. Just his aunt and uncle — never a role model for *anything*, let alone healthy relationships — and Mr and Mrs Weasley.

He didn't think all the madly snogging teenage couples at Hogwarts counted. He couldn't imagine Snape and Remus acting like the Weasleys, with their frequent pecks on the cheek and terms of endearment. He thought Snape might explode if Remus ever called him 'sweetheart', or 'darling'. Yet he didn't doubt Remus for a second when he said Snape loved him. He just didn't think he would ever hear the professor say the words.

As Remus predicted, Sirius shuffled down the stairs in his pyjamas once the smell of bacon started filling the house, still half-asleep by the looks of it. He ran a fond hand over Harry's hair as he passed. "Morning, pup." He slumped into his seat. "Ceri, everything smells amazing."

"Yous is being late, Master Sirius," Ceri said in reply, floating the breakfast plates over to the table. Sirius shot her a dazzling grin.

"But you waited for me anyway, because you're wonderful." The house elf blushed, turning back to the stove.

Ceri was very different to Dobby, in so many ways. Harry wondered which was a more accurate example of house elves.

"So," Sirius said once everyone had started eating. "Rules of the house." Harry eyed him in trepidation, and Sirius laughed. "Don't look so scared, pup. It's just a few things. Number one; no flying without telling one of us first, and certainly not after dark." That was reasonable; Harry could get hurt flying at night. "Number two; don't go into the woods unsupervised. There's all sorts of things that'll gobble you up in there." Again, reasonable. "Number three; there's a potions lab in the basement, it's now Snape's domain. Don't go down there unless he specifically asks you to. Some of the things he brews are sensitive." Harry had no desire to go in Snape's potions lab, so he nodded quickly. "Number four; expect retaliation for any pranks played."

At this, Remus buried his head in his hands with a long-suffering sigh. "No prank wars, Padfoot."

"But Moony!" Sirius whined, sounding younger than Harry. "We just want a little fun!"

Remus looked from Sirius, to Harry, to Snape, who raised an eyebrow. "If they prank me, you can be sure I will retaliate," he said unrepentantly. Remus sighed.

"You're just as bad as he is. Fine, rule five — no permanent or potentially harmful pranks," he warned sternly, using his Professor Voice.

"Ugh, fine. Spoilsport," Sirius muttered. "Carrying on. Rule six; no going outside on the full moon. Remus has his potion, but we're not taking any chances. And finally, rule seven; ask if you need help. With anything. Whether it's help with a spell, or your homework, or if you just need someone to talk to; all three of us are happy to help however we can. You don't need to handle everything by yourself anymore Got it?"

"I— I'll try." It would be a hard habit to break, and Harry could make no promises. Sirius nodded; that was enough for him.

“Great. Now all that boring stuff’s out of the way, any questions?”

“Am I allowed to write to my friends? Will their owls be able to find this place?” If the house was Unplottable, did that mean owls couldn’t get there?

“Owl magic is different; they’ll be able to find you anywhere. You’re perfectly welcome to write to your friends, as long as you don’t tell them where you are or who you’re with, of course.” Harry shot his godfather a ‘duh’ look. “There’s a little Owlery upstairs, I’ll show you it later.”

“There’s an owl up there that I use when I need something more… anonymous than my usual owl,” Snape piped up. “Her name is Artemis, she’s the tawny owl. You’re welcome to use her should you have need to write to anyone that would raise questions should Hedwig be seen visiting. Snowy owls are quite distinctive.”

Harry’s mind immediately flashed to Draco. And some of the other heirs, too. “Oh. Thank you, Professor. I appreciate that.” How long would it take him to get used to Snape being nice to him?

After breakfast, Snape was the first one to get to his feet. “I have potions to brew,” he declared. Remus glanced up from the paper.

“Don’t blow the house up,” he said with a fond smile. Snape made a faintly offended noise, and left the room. “What do you fancy doing today, Harry? After the grand tour, of course.”

“I don’t know.” Harry had never been allowed to do whatever he liked before. “I might go flying.”

“How about I show you around, and then you can decide,” Sirius said, looking eager to give Harry the tour. Harry looked down at himself.

“Give me ten minutes to take a shower and get dressed, and I’ll meet you in the entrance hall,” he agreed. Sirius beamed.

Harry’s bathroom was much nicer than anything he was used to; with both a shower and a huge claw-foot bathtub, everything decorated in black and white marble tiles with silver accents. There was also a full-length mirror, and Harry took the opportunity to see how bad the bruises on his back were. Not as awful as he expected. He’d certainly had worse. Nonetheless, he grabbed Snape’s Bruise Balm to apply after his shower. No need to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Sirius was dressed too when Harry met him, in loose jeans with a hole in the knee and a worn-looking muggle band t-shirt that might have actually come from the 1970s. “Perfect! Come on!” Sirius grabbed him by the hand, tugging him over to a room he hadn’t yet been in, and the tour began.

There was the parlour, the smoking room, the downstairs bedroom suite, the pantry — of course the kitchen, where Ceri waved while cracking several eggs into a bowl — the formal dining room, and the duelling room.

And that was just on the ground floor.

Harry was whizzed through another sitting room, a playroom, at least eight bedrooms, a nursery, four bathrooms, a library — where they found Remus absorbed in a book — the big study and the small study, the music room, another playroom, the Owlery, a bathroom with a bath the size of a small swimming pool, a dressing room, a drawing room, and then all the way down to the basement to see the wine cellar, the wardstone and ritual room, the safe room and the door to the potions lab.

“I won’t knock, Snape’ll bite our heads off,” Sirius said at that one, gently steering Harry past it. Harry was out of breath, and didn’t understand how Sirius was still talking a mile a minute as they returned to the entrance hall.

“This place is enormous!” Harry remarked, and Sirius laughed.

“One day I’ll take you to the Black family manor, down in Cornwall. It makes this place look like a dollhouse.” Harry stared at him incredulously. “Come on, I’ll show you around the grounds.”

It was a glorious sunny day outside, and Sirius tipped his head back with a grin, basking in the sun for a minute. “Still not used to that,” he murmured to himself. Harry’s heart twisted; there wasn’t any sun in Azkaban. Sirius shook it off though, cheerfully marching onwards. “The treeline is the property line, so don’t ever go past it unless one of us is with you.” The woods circled the whole house; even the driveway just led into the trees. “All the fun stuff is around the back, come on.”

Their first stop was the stables; five stalls, only one of which was occupied. “Buckbeak!” Harry greeted cheerfully, offering the hippogriff a bow. Buckbeak bowed in return, then butted his head into Harry’s chest, demanding to be petted. When they left, Buckbeak followed them, occasionally nudging Sirius’ shoulder fondly with his beak.

“There’s a greenhouse over there, it’s a bit wild at the minute. Ceri wasn’t sure what to do with it all these years. I think Snape plans to grow some potions ingredients in it, but I don’t know how much of a green thumb he has. If you want to get stuck in, take one of us with you; we’re not entirely sure what’s growing in there right now. Something might bite your head off.” Harry laughed, but a glance at Sirius’ face made him realise the man was completely serious. He thought of some of the plants in the restricted greenhouses at school, for seventh year study only, and grimaced.

“Is that a swimming pool?” Harry gaped, seeing the stone-edged pool sunk into the ground.

“Yup,” Sirius replied proudly. “Got it up and running on Saturday. Feel free to take a dip whenever. If you’re drowning, yell for Ceri.” That was a joke, and Sirius winked. “Also, look over there.”

Harry looked in the direction Sirius was pointing, only for the man to tilt his chin until Harry was looking up. He gasped. “A quidditch pitch!”

“Half-pitch,” Sirius corrected. “Not quite enough room for a full one. I know you’re not a chaser, so the goals aren’t as important to you, but they’re there if you ever fancy your hand with a quaffle. There’s a full set of equipment in the broom shed — the snitch hasn’t been used in a while, so it might be a bit wonky, but we can always have Remus or Snape pick up another one.”

“Sirius, this place is *incredible*.” Not only was he away from the Dursleys, but he was away from them at a house that had a swimming pool *and* a quidditch pitch. Unbelievable.

“It’s pretty great, isn’t it?” Sirius agreed wistfully. “It brings back old memories. I stopped going after my parents kicked me out; spent every summer at James’ instead. Mr and Mrs Potter were brilliant, don’t get me wrong, and The Pottery is a dream house, but... I’ve missed this place.”

“Your parents kicked you out?” Harry asked, surprised.

“Oh, yeah. First I sullied the family name by being sorted into Gryffindor, then I made friends with halfbloods and muggleborns and light wizards, and there was no going back. Blasted my name off the family tree, but never officially disinherited me. There’s a ritual, it’s a bit complicated, I s’pose Mum never got around to it. Or she hoped I’d see sense... either way, I’m the head of the family, now. At least, I would be if I weren’t a convict.”

“So who’s head at the moment?”

“No one, technically,” Sirius said with a shrug. “The family magic went a bit dormant in me while I was in Azkaban, but it’s still there; since I never had a trial, it was never officially stripped from me. I just can’t fully access it until I can step into the Wizengamot and claim my seat again, which obviously I can’t do until I’m a free man. Until then, Dumbledore’s my proxy.” His sour expression showed exactly what he thought of that. “Once you come of age, you can take it back, though.”

“Unless we can get your name cleared before then,” Harry pointed out. “Don’t give up hope, Sirius.”

Sirius shrugged again. “Doesn’t really bother me either way. I’ve got you, and Moony, and I’m out of that blasted prison cell. S’all I need for the minute.” Both of them looked up when they heard a bell ring out across the grounds. Sirius grinned. “Lunch is ready.”

Remus and Snape were already at the table when Sirius and Harry joined them, talking quietly to each other. “I still think it’s too early, Severus,” Remus was saying, before he looked up at their arrival. “Hello, boys. Been keeping out of trouble?”

“For the most part,” Sirius replied easily, sprawling lazily in his chair and reaching for a plate. Ceri had made a quiche that was packed with vegetables and ham. Harry’s stomach growled. “Eat up, pup. You’re a growing boy. With plenty more growing to do, by the looks of you; even Lily wasn’t that short at your age.”

Harry ducked his head. He’d resigned himself to his short stature; kids who grew up in cupboards and barely got fed didn’t end up six feet tall.

“Having fun, Harry?” Remus asked kindly. Harry beamed.

“Oh, yeah! Did you know this place has a quidditch pitch? I can’t wait to fly. And the library is huge! I bet there’s books that aren’t even in the Hogwarts library.”

“Definitely. Some of those books are older than Hogwarts itself. So no food or drink in the library, alright?” Remus warned, and Harry nodded. As he ate, he gathered his courage for a question.

“Were you serious last night, when you said you’d train me?” he asked tentatively. “If you don’t want to that’s fine, I’m sure you’re all busy, but—“

“Harry, we’d be happy to,” Remus assured. “All three of us. That’s actually what Severus and I were just talking about before you came in; if it’s alright with you, I put together a sort-of schedule for the summer. It’s got everything that the three of us thought you needed to learn, and we can always add in more things if you pick those up quickly. Or if there’s something you’d like to learn that we can squeeze in.”

He handed Harry a piece of parchment, and Harry unrolled it curiously.

Monday AM - Schoolwork

Monday PM - Misc. Spellwork

Tuesday AM - Duelling and defence

Tuesday PM - Free time

Wednesday AM - Potions

Wednesday PM - Occlumency

Thursday AM - Free time

Thursday PM - Wizarding culture

Friday AM - Warding

Friday PM - Schoolwork

“You can have the weekend free, and of course the evenings. And any time you feel it’s too much, just say so,” Remus said hurriedly. “I just thought... it’s a start.”

“It looks great!” His tone fell just short of sincere. Remus levelled him with a knowing look.

“What’s wrong? Is it too much?”

“No, no! It’s just... Potions?” He made a helpless face.

“I refuse to associate with anyone who cannot brew a simple Pepper-Up Potion,” Snape drawled. “I do not expect you to become a master, but by Salazar, you will be at least

somewhat proficient in brewing by the end of the summer. Potions are an important part of wizarding life, and you need to be capable of at least basic healing potions. There may come a time when there is no one you trust available to brew them for you.”

Harry sighed — he hated to admit it, but the man had a point. Maybe he would be better at Potions without Slytherins throwing things in his cauldron, or Snape taking points every five minutes. Unless... “You can’t take house points during the summer, right?” he checked suspiciously. Snape’s lips twitched.

“That is correct, Mr Potter.”

“Okay then. I’ll study Potions.” He didn’t miss the way Remus lifted his glass of pumpkin juice to hide a smile. “So we start tomorrow, then? With schoolwork?”

“If you’d like. I figured you could get your homework out of the way, and then after that we can use that slot to go over anything from previous years that has given you trouble, or get a head start on next year’s work,” Remus suggested.

“Works for me.” Harry leaned back in his chair, wondering what to do with his afternoon. He *really* wanted to try out that quidditch pitch. “I think I’m going to go flying, if that’s alright?” He raised an enquiring eyebrow at Remus — who seemed to be the most responsible one of the trio — who nodded. “But first, I’m going to write some letters. Am I alright to borrow your owl, Professor?”

“I have no need of her for now,” Snape acquiesced. Harry smiled in thanks, then excused himself from the table, hurrying up to his room.

The first letter he wrote was to Draco.

Draco,

First off, this is Artemis. She belongs to a friend. I thought Hedwig might give the game away a bit.

How are you? Are you in Italy yet, or France? I hope your summer is off to a good start. Mine got unexpectedly better than I ever thought. I can’t tell you why. Let’s just say I have some unanticipated company.

Are you going to the Quidditch World Cup this summer? Ron’s going to see if his dad can get tickets. I think it’d be brilliant to go, but even if I can’t, I think I’m in for a great summer.

Hope you’re well,

Harry

That was alright, wasn’t it? Not too much information, and not too overly forward? His friendship with Draco was still so new and unsteady, he never knew how to act around the blond. Next he wrote to Neville.

Hi Neville,

Hope you and your gran are doing well. Any fun summer plans so far? My summer is looking to be pretty good, for once.

I'm going to write to a few mutual friends this summer, if I can. If you know of anyone who would like to write to me, tell them I'm all clear to receive owls.

Talk to you soon,

Harry

After that, he wrote a couple of short letters to Hannah Abbott and Susan Bones, explaining that he was okay to have mail through the summer and he'd be happy to keep in touch if they wanted to. Once Artemis had taken those, he'd try a few more maybe.

There were others he wanted to write to — he wanted to write to the twins, and he should probably write to Ron and Hermione soon to stop them getting suspicious — but he didn't want to overload the owls with too many letters at once.

He'd already been to the Owlery once that day, and when he went back up he was glad to see Hedwig perched on one of the overhead beams, looking content. There were three other owls beside her; Remus' owl, a barn owl named Horatio; Snape's owl, a dark screech owl called Asphodel; and Artemis. She was a fairly unremarkable tawny owl, and she cooed softly at Harry when he called her down. "You too, Hedwig," he requested. He secured the letter to Neville on her first; no one would blink twice at Hedwig visiting the Longbottom household.

Once she had set off, Harry gently secured his three notes to Artemis' leg. "Take that one last, and wait for a response, okay?" he said, pointing at the letter for Draco. Artemis hooted, bobbed her head, and took off through the open window. Harry watched the two owls fly away for a minute, then grinned. It was time for him to do some flying of his own.

.-. .

Once Harry had thoroughly exhausted himself on his Firebolt, he took another quick shower and went to find some sort of company. He came across Sirius in the main living room, sprawled out on the thick rug in front of the fire. At first Harry thought he was asleep, until he picked his head up and blinked at Harry. "Hey, pup. Have a good fly?"

"It was great!" Harry enthused, taking a seat in the nearest armchair. He didn't often get time to just *be* on his broom, enjoy the wind rushing through his hair and the blood pumping in his veins as he dove and flipped through the air. "I never said thank you for the Firebolt, by the way, but I really love it. It's amazing."

Sirius rolled onto his back, a contented grin tugging at his lips. "Glad it makes you happy, pup. You'll have to let me take it for a spin sometime; I haven't been flying in years."

"Did you play quidditch?"

"I was a beater in my fifth and sixth years, but I wasn't as in love with it as the rest of the team, and by seventh I decided to let my place go to a talented little third year. I always liked

flying, though. James and I used to spend half our summers on brooms. We could never convince Moony to join us.”

“You should get your own broom,” Harry suggested. “Then we could go flying together.”

“I might have to. It’s been a while since I tossed a quaffle around, but I’m sure I’ll pick it back up eventually.” He turned his face towards the fire. It wasn’t exactly cold outside, but Sirius didn’t seem to care, basking in the heat from the flames. “We’re going to have a great summer, pup. To make up for all the rubbish ones. All the ones I missed.”

“It wasn’t your fault, Sirius,” Harry insisted. Sirius grimaced.

“We’ll agree to disagree there, Harry.” He sat up, running a hand through his chin-length hair. “Are you sure you want to spend your summer having lessons? I know there’s things you wanted to learn, but if Remus is coming on a bit strong with the schedule and all, you can say so.”

“No, I honestly want to,” Harry promised. “It’s way better than spending my summers weeding the garden and cooking for the Dursleys.” He saw Sirius frown, and ploughed on quickly. “Besides, school is great and all, but there’s so much magic they don’t teach you. Magic they don’t think is important because people in wizarding households grow up with it. I want to learn everything I missed out on by being raised by muggles.” There were so many basic household charms that they never bothered to teach in school, which would be fine if all the students had parents to teach them, but not everyone did.

“You really are Lily’s boy, aren’t you?” Sirius remarked. “Moony told me, but I didn’t quite believe it. After seeing you run after your friend into the Shack, I thought you had to be James through and through.” He chuckled to himself. “Probably for the best, to be honest. James always needed Lily’s logic to balance him out. He was a bit thick by himself, bless his soul.”

“Everyone always says I’m like my dad. I think because I look like him,” Harry said, looking down at the dark skin of his hands, which was already starting to go even more brown from being out in the sun all afternoon.

“I think people forget that Lily had a Gryffindor streak a mile wide, too,” Sirius said, swinging up to sit cross-legged facing Harry. “And Merlin, she could prank with the best of them. She didn’t do it often, but every now and then someone would *really* piss her off, and you could always tell a Lily Evans masterpiece. They were beautiful. Once in fifth year this Ravenclaw bloke cheated on one of Lily’s best friends, so she hexed him to make every piece of cutlery melt as soon as he touched it. Told him to eat face-first like the pig he was. It was brilliant. She was just so studious and sweet all the rest of the time that no one ever thought she could be trouble.”

“She sounds amazing,” Harry sighed.

“She was. Far too good for our Jamie. He knew he was doing well for himself with her. But she loved him to bits, once he deflated his head a bit. Stopped bullying Snape. I think half the reason it pissed Lily off so much was because James couldn’t see how mad Remus was for

the bloke. He didn't even realise they were shagging til after we graduated, and only then because he walked in on it," Sirius said with a roguish wink, making Harry blush.

"How long have they been together?" Surely he hadn't been oblivious to it all last year? *Someone* would've said if two of the professors were... *involved*, especially if one of them was Snape. The Hogwarts rumour mill wouldn't keep that one quiet.

"It's complicated with those two," Sirius told him. "It was inevitable since second year, but true love never does run smooth. As much as it pains me to admit that old Snivelly's really Moony's true love. Could be worse, I suppose."

"Remus seems to like him," Harry approached tentatively. There had to be *something* good about Snape if Remus loved him.

"Oh, he's not as bad as he used to be. He's actually been fairly decent to live with, so far," Sirius relented. "He'll probably be the one teaching you Occlumency, by the way. I thought about it, but Snape's a far better Legilimens than I am. He's been helping me sort out my own mind, y'know. Twelve years in Azkaban really did a number on my organisation skills up there," he said with a tap to his forehead. "Hasn't pried, hasn't asked questions, hasn't mocked me for anything he saw up there. Maybe he really has changed." Sirius sighed. "Or maybe I was always just too much of a pillock to see what Remus and Lily saw in him."

Harry didn't really know what to say to that. Luckily, he was saved having to find an answer by Remus calling them for dinner. Sirius jumped to his feet, his melancholy mood slipping away in the blink of an eye. "Come on, pup. Maybe after dinner we can get the two lovebirds to play cards with us or something. Have you ever played Warlock's Bluff?"

Chapter 14

Harry's standards were fairly low, but even so, he'd never been happier in his life.

Living at Seren Du was like everything he'd dreamed of all at once. Spending his weekdays learning new spells and wizarding politics and his family history; flying whenever he wanted; swimming whenever he wanted; spending evenings curled up in the living room with some combination of his three housemates, reading or talking or playing card games. On weekends Remus always tried to take him somewhere, saying it wasn't good for him to be cooped up with just the three of them for company. Sometimes they took Sirius with them — usually as Padfoot, sometimes under a glamour in muggle areas. Every now and then, Remus bullied Snape into coming too. They went to the beach, to the cinema, to the muggle shopping centre in Cardiff. On one memorable occasion, the four of them even went to a Holyhead Harpies quidditch match. No one batted an eyelash at the big shaggy dog Remus claimed was his familiar, and thanks to Snape's disguise charms no one recognised them either. Seeing live professional quidditch was breathtaking, and it made Harry even more desperate to go to the Quidditch World Cup.

Even his Potions lessons were enjoyable, once he and Snape both realised Harry wasn't terrible at brewing if he was in the right environment.

Harry wasn't even missing his friends that much. He wasn't sure if it made him an awful person, but he quite liked his private little bubble of happiness. Sure, it got a little lonely sometimes — the three adults were often busy, and couldn't always be expected to entertain Harry's whims — but he was used to being lonely in the summer. It was nice not having to share with anyone, or make allowances for anyone, or fight for attention. At the Burrow, everything was chaos all the time, and Hogwarts was much the same. Here it was just him and his three sort-of guardians, and he was mostly left to his own devices unless he sought out company.

His birthday was slowly approaching, and for once Harry was actually looking forward to celebrating it. Sirius was up to something, the dog animagus just giving Harry a mischievous grin every time he asked about birthday plans, and Harry was dying with curiosity.

Staring up at the brand new Holyhead Harpies poster stuck to his bedroom wall, Harry glanced over at his alarm clock. It was eight in the morning on a Saturday; Ceri wouldn't have breakfast ready for another hour. Sirius always liked to sleep in on weekends, unless they were going somewhere. If he could, he'd sleep in every day, but Remus kept insisting he couldn't laze about all morning.

Harry got up with a leisurely stretch, surprised to see Artemis perched outside his window. He grinned, bounding over to let her in. There was a letter tied to her leg, and once Harry had divested her of it she hooted softly and flew away, no doubt heading to the owlery. Harry opened the envelope with eager fingers.

Harry,

France is disgustingly hot. My poor fair skin is not made for these sorts of temperatures! Even with sun blocking charms, I'm having to spend most of my time indoors. Mother seems to think that's a perfect excuse to take me touring around old museums and such rot.

I refuse to believe you made a successful Wronski Feint. You'll have to show me when we get back to school, because I'm fairly sure you're lying to me. And if you're not lying, how dare you. Gryffindor can't win the cup two years in a row. That's just rude.

Have you been writing to Blaise Zabini? I was over at his house in Italy the other week and I could've sworn I saw this owl. If I'm not the only snake in your life, I'll be heartbroken, Potter. I thought we had something special.

Father visited yesterday. It was awful. There's something bothering him, and I don't know what it is, but it must spell trouble. I don't want to go back to England, not if it means putting up with his foul temper for the rest of the summer. Do you think I might burn to a crisp if I just stayed in France until September 1st?

I learnt a new card game from some French witches, too. They're daughters of my mother's friends. They go to Beauxbatons — that's another magic school out here on the continent, if you didn't know. The game is called Coup Le Chat, which is a ridiculous name that translates to 'blow the cat'. When I asked why, they just laughed. It's a fun game, I'll have to teach it to you. Though it's better with three players. Maybe we can invite Blaise to play with us, since you seem to have such fun talking to him.

Write to you soon, if I don't melt.

Draco

Harry was smiling by the end of the letter, even if there was an odd, twisting sensation in the pit of his stomach when Draco mentioned spending time with French witches. Dudley always said that European girls were prettier than any English girls. Was that the same for witches?

Not that it mattered, if Draco was hanging out with pretty girls. Harry didn't care.

He set the letter aside on his desk to reply to later, shrugging on his new green dressing gown and heading down to breakfast. "Good morning, Potter," Snape greeted cordially, in his usual spot at the table with tea and a potions journal. No one else was up yet; except for Ceri, of course. She had Harry's orange juice headed towards his place before he could even ask for it, and he gave her a grin in thanks.

"Good morning, Professor. Remus not up yet?" The full moon was two nights ago, and he was still suffering a little from it.

"Not yet, but I don't think it will be long. He's feeling much better than he was yesterday."

"That's good. Is there a plan for the day?" With the moon, Harry wasn't sure if they were going to go anywhere like they did last Saturday. Sirius couldn't take him by himself, and he didn't want Remus to push himself.

"Indeed, but not until this evening. Plenty of time for Remus to gather his strength." As Severus spoke, they heard muffled footsteps down the stairs, and soon a drowsy Remus Lupin shuffled into the kitchen, mid-yawn. He ran a hand over the back of Harry's neck as he passed, then, to Harry's surprise, draped himself over Snape's back and buried his nose in the man's neck, pressing a kiss to the skin there. Snape didn't seem bothered, tilting his neck to bare it to the werewolf, who hummed in satisfaction.

"Smell good," he murmured. Snape's lips curled in the corners in what might have been a fond smile.

"Do sit down, you're embarrassing Potter."

Remus huffed softly, dragging his nose up Snape's jaw and pressing a kiss to his cheekbone. "Don't care." But he did take his seat at the table, even if it involved him shuffling his chair closer to Snape's and resting his head on the man's shoulder, letting his eyes fall half-shut.

Ever since Snape had finally removed Dumbledore's curse from Remus, allowing him to reconnect with his wolf side, he'd had the occasional day like this. Especially around the days of the full moon. Days when he let his wolf instincts out a little more keenly, when he was more aware of the scent and feel of pack. Harry had never seen him be this affectionate to Snape, though. It was sort of sweet. And the way Snape wasn't even batting an eyelash, Harry wondered if the couple were more tactile in private. Remus had told him that Harry's parents and Sirius were the only ones to ever know the truth of their relationship, before; clearly keeping their distance in front of others was not a new thing for them.

As Remus slowly woke up, he started to come back to himself a little more, though he didn't seem particularly embarrassed by his behaviour. He pressed another kiss to Snape's jaw, then scooted his chair back to its usual spot.

Ceri set breakfast out, and none of them bothered waiting for Sirius to appear, tucking in with aplomb. He showed up about ten minutes later, dressed and ready for the day. "Morning, you lot. Moony, did you even sleep last night, or did Snape keep you up? Oops, sorry Harry," he added when the teen blushed brightly. "I'm just saying, you look like you could do with a few more hours."

"I'm awake," Remus promised. "It's just taking a bit for my human brain to kick in."

"Pfft, human brains," Sirius dismissed. "Who needs 'em?"

"Is it hard to become an animagus?" Harry asked suddenly, the thought crossing his mind. Sirius blinked.

"I mean, it's not *easy*. There's a reason most people don't do it. But most witches and wizards are capable."

"How old were you and Dad when you did it?"

"Sixteen or so," Sirius said, brow furrowed in thought. "Got the idea halfway through fifth year, managed the transformations by Christmas in sixth. So yeah, sixteen, seventeen-ish. So

wait until you're a little older," he added with a grin. Harry pouted.

"Can't I at least find out what animal I'd be?" he wheedled. Sirius barked out a laugh.

"That's a slippery slope, little pup. Once you know, it's hard to wait. Unless you're something awful, like a slug." He stuffed a huge piece of toast in his mouth. When he'd swallowed, he eyed Harry in consideration. "Tell you what, you keep up your grades through fourth year, maybe I'll start teaching you in your fifth. Could come in handy."

Harry brightened up considerably; that was *easy!* "It's a deal."

"That includes your Arithmancy and Runes grades, alright? There will be tests. Won't there, Remus?"

"Absolutely. Gruelling ones," Remus agreed, perking up now he'd had his second cup of tea. "Harder than your OWLs." Once Harry had finished all his homework, he'd requested his schoolwork sessions be turned into Arithmancy and Runes lessons. He had so many regrets about his choices of elective, but it was too late now.

"I'll pass them," Harry declared confidently. He finished off his orange juice, and Ceri took his empty plate off the table to be washed. "What are we doing today?"

"We don't need to leave until six, so until then, whatever you want," Sirius replied. Harry's interest was piqued.

"Where are we going at six?"

Sirius grinned wolfishly. "It's a surprise."

Harry huffed; Sirius *never* spoiled surprises. "Can we go swimming for a bit?" His prior experience of swimming pools was the obligatory lessons in muggle primary school to make sure kids knew how to not drown. Considering Dudley's favourite past-time in those lessons was actively trying *to* drown Harry, he hadn't really enjoyed them. Now, he found he quite liked being in the water.

"Sounds good to me. What are you two up to?" He turned the question to Remus and Snape, who shared a glance.

"I had no prior plans," Snape replied. "Though I won't be here tomorrow. The headmaster has need of me for something." All four of them shared a dark look at the mention of Dumbledore.

Harry ambled back upstairs to change into his swimming trunks, and he didn't wait for Sirius before heading to the pool, running the last couple of steps to jump in with a splash. He heard a loud bark behind him, and turned just in time to be hit with a wave of water as a huge dog cannon-balled into the pool. Laughing, Harry swam over to the edge, watching Sirius' doggy paddle turn into an effortless front crawl as he changed from dog to man. "Got you there, pup," he teased, ruffling Harry's wet hair. Harry ducked out of the way, diving under the

water once more, grateful for the charms Snape had added to his glasses so he could see underwater with them.

He sat in the shallow end for a bit, watching Sirius swim lazy lengths. Even after just a few weeks of freedom, he was looking years better from his time in Azkaban and on the run. You couldn't see all of his ribs anymore, and he actually had some muscle definition to his arms and shoulders, his olive-toned skin taking on a bit of colour from the sun. Nothing, he kept insisting, like he'd looked in 'the good old days', but he looked healthier.

Harry, too, was looking a lot better for his Dursley-free summer. Ceri's cooking combined with hours in the pool or on his broom — or duelling with Remus and Sirius, which was a workout in itself — was helping him pack on quite a bit of muscle. He hadn't grown much taller, only a couple of inches, but he was starting to look less like a starving runaway.

Joining his godfather in his swimming, trying halfheartedly to race the man, Harry didn't realise they had company until a body splashed into the pool. There was a beat, and then Remus' head popped up out of the water, his hair flat against his forehead and a grin on his face. Harry beamed at him. Remus hardly ever came swimming with them!

To his utter astonishment, Remus wasn't alone. Snape was walking towards the pool wearing a pair of black swimming shorts and a plain grey t-shirt, a book tucked under his arm, his Dark Mark a grey smudge on his left forearm. He cast a disparaging look at the trio frolicking in the pool, then stretched himself out on one of the deck chairs nearby. Harry couldn't look away from his pale, hairy calves. Snape, in *shorts*. Ron would never believe him.

Ron would never believe a lot about Harry's summer.

Harry swam towards Remus, who ducked underwater and tackled Harry around the waist, throwing him up and towards Sirius. He hit the water with a splash that almost reached Snape, who glared from behind his book. "Do you mind?"

"Not really," Sirius replied nonchalantly, splashing a little more water in his direction. Harry snickered before he could help himself.

"Where's that beach ball got to?" Remus asked, looking around for the brightly coloured inflatable they'd brought back from their trip to the seaside. Harry looked around, saw it wedged under a deck chair, and grinned to himself. He focused his magic, reaching a hand out towards the ball.

"Accio beach ball," he whispered. There was a brief tug, and the ball zoomed towards him.

"Look at you!" Sirius cheered, diving over to sprawl on Harry's shoulders, beaming delightedly. "A wandless Summoning charm, you little show-off!" Harry's cheeks glowed with pride. He'd been working on it for a while, using the book he'd bought to help him stay more aware of his magical core. After the extra spells Snape had found on him, he didn't ever want to be at the mercy of someone else's magic again.

The three of them tossed the beach ball between them, Sirius getting slowly more aggressive and daring as the game went on. At one point, he launched himself off Remus' shoulders to

reach up and spike the ball down towards the water, laughing when it made Harry squawk. Needing a minute to catch his breath, Harry swam over to the edge of the pool, leaning his elbows on the stone tiles.

“Good book, Professor?” he called cheerfully to Snape, who glanced up at him.

“Indeed.”

“You should come swim for a bit, y’know,” Harry offered. “Maybe you could try and drown Sirius.”

“Oi!” came the cry from across the pool. Snape’s eyes glittered in amusement.

“Tempting,” he mused. Then, to Harry’s utter astonishment, Snape put his book down and sat up. Seconds later, Harry was looking at his professor’s bare chest as he shed his t-shirt and walked towards the pool. There was a loud wolf-whistle, and when Harry whipped around, the exasperated look on Remus’ face confirmed that he had definitely not made that noise. Sirius on the other hand was smirking, beach ball in one hand.

Snape was pale as snow, thin and wiry, with several faint scars across his torso and biceps. Harry tried not to gawk at him. Snape hadn’t even taken his shirt off when they went to the beach!

The man stepped up to the edge of the pool, diving smoothly into the deep end and reappearing a few feet from Remus’ side. His dark hair stuck down flat, and he glanced askance at Remus. “Am I allowed to drown the mutt?” he asked. Remus sighed, struggling to hold in his amusement.

“I’d rather you didn’t,” he replied conversationally. “But whatever makes you happy.”

“Oi!” Sirius said again, mock-angry. “No drowning the Padfoot! This is a no-drowning pool.”

“What a pity,” Snape drawled, before launching off into the water again. He ignored the three of them entirely, swimming steady lengths along the edge of the pool, dodging the beach ball when necessary. After about twenty minutes, he hoisted himself out of the water, heading back towards his deck chair. As he walked away, Harry caught sight of a nasty, twisted scar running diagonally across his mid-back. It looked almost like he’d been whipped.

“Don’t ask,” Remus murmured softly, his honey eyes on his partner as the man cast a Drying charm on himself, then tugged his t-shirt back on. “He’s trusting you enormously to even let you see them.”

Harry nodded, turning back to the pool. Much to his surprise, he was actually starting to like Snape quite a lot. The man’s quick wit and dry humour were unexpectedly hilarious, and he was a great teacher now he didn’t hate Harry. Harry wasn’t looking forward to going back to school in September, when they’d have to pretend to be enemies again.

They stayed in the pool for a while longer, then eventually dried off and dragged themselves back to the house, Sirius playfully wrestling Harry on the way. Snape and Remus disappeared

into their room after lunch, Remus claiming to need a nap before their evening plans, so Harry pestered Sirius into helping him practice fourth year Transfiguration spells. Even if he couldn't show it in his classwork without making Dumbledore suspicious, he wanted to prepare himself as much as he could. Even Hermione would be impressed at how much of a bookworm he was becoming; the manor library was one of his favourite places, and the bookshelves in his room were rapidly filling up. He had an entire section for fiction novels now, both wizarding and muggle — Remus insisted there was more to books than just learning, and wanted to make sure Harry started out with the classics. Reading muggle versions of magic in books was wildly entertaining.

Ceri called them down for an early dinner, and Harry was practically vibrating with excitement through the meal, wondering what his godfather had in store for him. He wolfed down his food, looking up at the clock. They still had another twenty minutes. "Do I need to go change?" he asked, looking down at the plain jeans and t-shirt he was wearing, then looking at the adults. "Where are we going, magic or muggle?"

"Muggle. Grab your jacket, we'll be outside," was all Sirius would tell him. Harry nodded, racing up to his bedroom and throwing his wardrobe open, looking at his choices. Sirius had been in jeans and a t-shirt, but he made everything he wore look cool. Snape was wearing black jeans and a dark green button-up, while Remus had on grey trousers, a button-up and a cardigan. Not helpful.

Eventually, Harry decided on a nice pair of dark jeans, a blue long-sleeve shirt with a geometric design on it, and his Silverling's jacket and boots. He made an attempt at taming his wild hair, but gave up within a couple minutes, shrugging helplessly at his reflection.

Making sure his wand was in its invisible holster, Harry grabbed his muggle wallet off his desk and hurried back downstairs, where the three adults were waiting in the entrance hall. "You ready, pup?" Sirius asked, excitement lighting up his grey eyes. Harry grinned, nodding, and followed them out into the driveway.

You couldn't apparate or disapparate from inside the house, so they always had to walk about twenty feet away to get past the wards. Before they left, Snape turned to Sirius, casting a few spells to mask his true identity; his hair became short and mid-brown, his jaw narrower, his skin several shades darker. It wasn't entirely necessary — after several weeks of good meals, a shave and a haircut, Sirius was a far cry from the man on the wanted posters, and his face hadn't been on the muggle news in months. But, better safe than sorry.

Harry took Sirius' arm, waiting for the now-familiar feeling of being squeezed through a tube. They appeared in an empty alley somewhere, Remus and Snape right behind them. Harry fell into step beside his godfather, bouncing on his toes as they left the alley and emerged on a street right next to what looked like a huge park. It was full of people, blocked in by barriers, and rising over the crowd Harry could see some sort of stage structure. There was loud music coming from the crowd; a kind of gentle, folksy rock music.

Sirius put an arm around his shoulder, keeping him close as they joined a line of people at some sort of entrance gate. "Have you ever been to a concert before, cub?" Remus asked from behind him, his eyes bright. Harry shook his head. "Well, this is a good one for your first time. Just stay close to us, okay?"

Sirius handed over four tickets at the gate, and each of them was given a wristband, Harry's red to show he was underage. The crowd thinned out once they got through the barriers, and Harry saw a line of smaller stalls selling food and merchandise and such. "Open air concerts are always better than something in a venue," Sirius declared, his arm still across Harry's shoulders. "There's more space, it's not as smoky, and the music sounds better too."

The song ended, and a wave of applause rose up. The lead singer said something Harry couldn't quite make out, then the next song started up. Sirius steered him around a corner, and he could finally see the stage. The concert seemed to be pretty family-orientated; there was a huge cluster of people at the very front, but further back people were more spread out, many people with blankets and picnics spread about them. Sirius found a good spot that wasn't too close to the crush up front, and offered Harry a grin. "Can you see alright, pup?"

"Yeah," he assured, having to speak loudly over the music. "Sirius, this is amazing!" He'd never seen any kind of live music before. He could feel the bass guitar rumbling in his chest, the drum pounding in his ears like a heartbeat. Sirius beamed.

"You're gonna love it, kiddo!"

Harry glanced back at Remus and Snape, who were stood close to each other but not touching; it was the muggle world, after all, and you could never be too careful. They still curved into each other, just a little bit, like they couldn't help themselves. They probably didn't even notice they were doing it. Snape didn't always come with them on their weekend trips, but Harry liked it when he did. Remus was happier when he did. The werewolf was smiling faintly, his head bobbing along to the music.

Sirius spun Harry around, grabbing the boy's hands in his much larger ones and lifting them over his head, waving them in time with the music along with the rest of the crowd. Harry laughed, leaning back against his godfather's chest, hearing the man sing along with his slightly husky baritone.

Best summer ever.

.-.-.-

Sprawled out on the living room sofa in front of a crackling fire, Padfoot wedged between him and the back of the sofa and demanding head-scratches every few seconds, Remus could hardly believe how much his life had turned around in the last two months. He had his best friend, his pack cub, and the love of his life all under one roof, with nothing to disturb them until school began. *And* he was connecting with his inner wolf in ways he never had before. Transformations were easier than ever, and he felt ten years younger. If not for Harry's age and the lack of Lily and James, it would almost be like none of the last thirteen years had happened.

Padfoot let out a loud doggy snore, and Remus snickered, adjusting to make himself more comfortable. Sirius was getting much better, but he still often spent time in his animal form; after practically living as a dog for twelve years, it was hard for him to adjust to being human sometimes.

Harry and Severus were downstairs somewhere practicing Harry's Occlumency, so Remus officially had nothing to do until dinner. He could get used to being a man of leisure; after having to scrape whatever job he could find just to survive, he still couldn't quite get used to doing nothing. He missed teaching — more than he expected to, honestly — but tutoring Harry gave him so much joy, and it was nice to take a break as well.

He cocked his head when he heard familiar footsteps heading his way; was that the time already?

Severus appeared in the doorway, his fairly neutral expression turning into a scowl when he saw the way Padfoot was stretched out over Remus. Remus bit back a sigh. "I can see I'm interrupting," Severus said sharply. "I'll come back later."

"Severus," Remus called, but the man turned away. Remus sighed, dragging himself out from under the dog and off the sofa. "Go back to sleep, Padfoot," he muttered, rubbing the dog's head as he looked up in drowsy confusion.

He caught up to Severus halfway down the corridor, grabbing him gently by the elbow. "Severus, what did you need?"

"I was going to ask if you wanted company reading before dinner, but I see you already found it," the Slytherin retorted. He was unable to hide the hurt in his tone from Remus' practiced ear, and the werewolf frowned.

"I always want your company," he murmured, leaning in close to the man. "Sirius snores."

That was apparently the wrong thing to say, as Severus wrenched his arm from Remus' grip, stalking off towards the stairs. Remus hurried after him. "Severus, please," he urged. "Tell me what I'm doing wrong."

"If you can't figure it out yourself, that should be proof enough," Severus snapped.

Remus felt like they were sixteen again, navigating the minefield of Slytherin versus Gryffindor, werewolf versus future Death Eater, two teenage boys desperate for connection but so scared of getting hurt.

He'd hated being sixteen.

"*Severus*," he said again, sliding a hand to the back of the man's neck. Moony whined in the back of his head, asking why their mate was sad. Remus wished he had an answer. He looked deep into the near-black eyes he loved, trying to figure it out.

"Go back to your mutt, Lupin," Severus urged. "I have other places to be."

Slowly the matter dawned on Remus, and he almost groaned. *Again?* He thought he'd put this to rest over a decade ago. "*Severus*," he murmured, gently pushing the man up against the wall. Not hard enough that he couldn't fight it; never hard enough to hurt. Severus' back hit the dark blue wallpaper. "There is nothing between Sirius and I. There never has been and never will be anything but a very deep, utterly *platonic* love between Sirius and I. You know

that. You know we kissed once when we were drunk fifth years and it was the worst kiss of my entire life.”

“He might’ve gotten better since then,” Severus muttered. Remus snorted.

“If you want to go find out, by all means, go ahead,” he retorted dryly. “But I have *zero* interest in doing so.”

“Does he know that?”

“Of course he does! Severus, my God, a blind man could see the way I look at you like you hung the whole Merlin-damned Milky Way!” He sucked in a sharp breath, his heart breaking that even after all these years, Severus still just *didn’t get it*. “Sirius has been through *hell*. Over a decade surrounded by dementors, then hiding in the Forbidden Forest living off rats. He hadn’t had a comforting touch since before Lily and James died, til he came here. He still has nightmares about being back in that place! Sometimes he needs someone to be there just to remind him he’s not alone. If I can be that person for my best friend, my *brother*, then you bet your arse I will. And I... I lost *everything* that night. I lost my pack, I lost my place in the wizarding world, I lost *you*. I’ve got most of it back, and I’m *so grateful* for every day I get to keep it. I lost Sirius for thirteen years. I need him, Severus. Not the same way I need you, but I need him all the same. *Please* don’t begrudge me that. Know that I only ever want you. You’re my heart, Severus, you have been since we were bloody thirteen!”

He had tears in his eyes now, his grip on Severus’ shoulders turning desperate. He couldn’t bear it if Severus ever tried to make him choose between him and Sirius. “You need that affection,” Severus said knowingly. “The affection I can never give you.”

“I don’t care!” Remus burst out in frustration. “I’m not ashamed of loving you. I didn’t hide it from Harry, I won’t hide it from Sirius — I’d announce it in the bloody *Prophet* if it wouldn’t risk both our lives. You’re more reserved, I understand that completely, and I love that about you. But don’t tell me you can’t give me affection when you show it to me *all the time*. It’s not the typical public affection, but I’ve never expected that, Severus. I’ve never doubted your love for me, *please* don’t insult me by doubting mine for you. Cuddling with Sirius — especially when he’s a dog, Merlin! — It’s nothing more than platonic comfort. I won’t give that up. But I need you to trust me.”

Severus breathed deep into the silence that stretched between them, until his anguished eyes opened to meet Remus’ once more. “You’re not the only one who lost everything that night, Remus,” he said eventually, every word dripping with pain. “I had to live through the aftermath. I had to *carry on*. Forgive me if I find it hard to believe we’re done hurting each other.”

Remus gripped the front of the man’s robes, pulling him into a furious kiss, trying to shove every ounce of what he was feeling into the embrace. It was messy, with teeth clashing and a desperate little groan ripping from Severus’ throat, and they were both breathing hard when he pulled away. “Believe it, Severus Snape,” Remus declared firmly. He was never more sure of anything in his life. “We are *done*. Darkness is coming, but whatever may happen, we will face it side by side, *on the same team*, and if *anything* wants to get to you it’s going to have to go through me, because we are *done* hurting each other and you are *mine*.” The last word was

a growl, and he knew his eyes were glowing gold. “We’ve wasted so much time, Severus. So much time fighting the inevitable, pushing each other away to try and stop future pain. We’re too bloody old for that now.”

“*I can’t lose you again.*” Severus’ voice was a heartbroken whisper. Remus pressed closer to him, like he was trying to crawl inside the man’s chest and call it home.

“You won’t,” he promised, though it was a vow he could never keep. Anything could happen. But he knew only death would tear him away from the man he called his own. “You won’t lose me. I’m yours. I’ve always been yours. My heart beats the rhythm of your name, my soul has your magic threaded through it, there is no part of me that isn’t entirely devoted to you. *Severus, please.*”

Severus let out a low growl, and all of a sudden Remus was being pushed back, through a door that quickly slammed behind him. He looked up — they were in a bedroom. It wasn’t theirs, but it wasn’t Sirius’ or Harry’s either, so that was good enough for him. With a sound that was more wolf than man, he tossed his Slytherin lover onto the bed, crawling after him with hooded eyes. One of them threw a hand out, he wasn’t sure who, but he heard the lock click firmly, and then he stopped caring about anything that wasn’t Severus’ skin, Severus’ voice, Severus’ scent. Moony howled in the back of his head. Severus met him at every move, ripping at clothing and tugging hair. Remus was lost. But it was fine, it was *perfect*.

Severus would find him again. He always did.

Chapter 15

Two days before Harry's birthday, Snape came home from a meeting at the school, eyes filled with fury and magic making the windows rattle. "That foolish, idiotic, reckless, careless—"“

"Calm yourself," Remus called, walking over and resting soothing hands on the man's shoulders, tipping his forehead against Snape's for the briefest moment. "What has Albus done now?"

"Not just Albus," the Slytherin snarled. "The whole *sodding* Ministry." Harry shared a glance with Sirius, alarmed.

"What's going on at the Ministry?" he asked. Snape took a deep breath, straightening up.

"The Department of International Magical Cooperation has decided to revive the Triwizard Tournament."

Both Sirius and Remus swore loudly. Remus' empty teacup exploded. Harry stared at them in blank confusion.

"What's the Triwizard Tournament?"

Seeing that Remus was a little preoccupied as Snape continued ranting about dunderheaded buffoons, Sirius turned to his godson. "It's a competition between three magical schools — Hogwarts, Durmstrang and Beauxbatons — that pits a champion from each school against each other in three tasks designed to test their magic, their courage, and their quick thinking."

"That doesn't sound so bad," Harry mused; it actually sounded quite fun. Sirius' face was grave.

"The tournament was discontinued in 1792 due to the exceedingly high death toll of both champions and spectators," he said flatly. Harry's stomach sank.

"Oh."

"Not only are they reviving the tournament, but *of course* Hogwarts is hosting," Snape continued. "As if we didn't have enough to deal with! The school is going to be swarming with foreigners, including bloody *Karkaroff*—"

"Karkaroff?" Sirius barked, head whipping around. "What the hell is he doing there?"

"He's headmaster of Durmstrang now," Snape replied, looking like he'd swallowed a lemon. "They do so enjoy their Dark Arts."

Harry didn't dare ask who Karkaroff was. He didn't think he'd like the answer.

"The students aren't supposed to know, but I'll bet anyone with a parent in the ministry is aware by the time school starts back up," Snape said. "They're limiting entry to only those

who are of age, but from what little Albus told me about the plans for the tasks, it's going to be chaos regardless.”

“Have they hired a new Defence teacher yet?” Remus asked, still with his hands on Snape’s shoulders, like he’d forgotten they were there, thumbs absently working at tense muscles. Snape shook his head.

“If they have, I haven’t been informed. Let’s just hope it’s someone good, with all this happening at the school.”

“Well, if you can only enter if you’re seventeen, I’ll just stay out of it, then, won’t I?” Harry pointed out diplomatically. “Yeah there’ll be a load of new people around the castle, but most of them will be students. I’ll just watch this Triwizard thing, keep my head down, and stay out of Dumbledore’s way.”

“You’ll still have to be careful,” Remus warned. “With so many people coming and going, it’ll be easier for someone to slip in where they’re not supposed to be.”

“I mean, being entirely honest, it doesn’t sound much more dangerous than my previous school years. Teacher possessed by *literal* Voldemort, giant basilisk roaming the halls looking for blood, mass murderer out to kill me — no offence, Sirius,” he added. “All on top of a headmaster who has some secret plan to maybe use me as an actual magical bomb. Just a pretty standard year, to be fair.”

The three adults stared at him for a minute.

“Why the hell are we letting him go back to that school?” Sirius muttered.

“Why the hell do I *work* at that school?” Snape agreed, shaking his head. Harry snorted.

“It’ll be alright,” he said, nonplussed. School-sanctioned danger made a nice change from the regular danger.

“Remember, students aren’t supposed to know until it’s officially announced,” Snape reminded him, and Harry rolled his eyes.

“I’ll just add it to the list of all my other secrets, don’t worry,” he replied. Snape shot him a dark look.

“Cheeky little brat.”

“Sorry, Professor, but your glare stopped working on me about the time Sirius turned you into a hamster the other week,” Harry admitted apologetically. “All I can think of is those chubby little cheeks.”

Snape growled again, while Sirius sniggered. Harry smirked.

The windows had stopped rattling, at least.

.-.-.

The morning of Harry's fourteenth birthday dawned clear and sunny, and Harry was awoken by several owls tapping against his window. The most violent of which was the tiny ball of fluff Sirius had given Ron — who, according to the letter, was named Pig, which, *what??*

He'd stayed up until midnight, as he always did, wishing himself a happy birthday when the clock turned over. But for the first time ever, he fell asleep quickly after, eager to celebrate his birthday properly. For the first time ever, he had people to celebrate it with.

He had presents from all the usual people — The Weasleys, Ron, Hermione, Hagrid — but to his surprise he also had presents from the twins, Neville, Susan and Hannah, and cards from Daphne, Blaise, Ernie, Anthony, Sullivan, the Patil twins, and even Cassius Warrington. He'd never felt so popular in his life.

There was nothing in the pile from Draco, and Harry tried to ignore the stab of hurt that rose in his chest. Perhaps the owl was just delayed. Draco was still in France, after all.

His bedroom door burst open, and Padfoot bounced onto the bed, sending Harry's presents flying. "Padfoot!" he exclaimed laughingly, shoving gently at the huge dog. "You've made a mess."

"That's what magic's for!" Sirius replied, human once more and sitting on Harry's bed, beaming. "Happy birthday, Harry!" He opened his arms, and Harry wriggled over for a hug.

"Happy birthday, cub," Remus called from the door, watching the scene with fond eyes. "Sirius, let him up, will you? Breakfast is ready. Ceri made pancakes."

At that announcement, Harry abandoned his godfather and practically sprinted to the kitchen, skidding into the table and taking his seat. "Happy birthday, Master Harry!" Ceri chirped. "Ceri be making your favourite!" She placed a plate in front of him, stacked high with pancakes, loaded with homemade whipped cream and fresh berries.

"Thanks, Ceri!" he enthused, reaching for his knife and fork.

"Couldn't wait for the rest of us?" Sirius mock-complained, when he entered the kitchen to find Harry with his cheeks bulging full of food.

"It's *pancakes*, Pads," he implored once he'd swallowed.

For once, Snape was the last one to the table, and he nodded at Harry in greeting. "Happy birthday, Potter."

Harry grinned at him, making sure his mouth wasn't full of pancake. Snape still looked mildly disgusted.

"So what are we doing today?"

"Well, you've got your Potions lesson this morning, and—" Sirius broke off in a laugh at the offended look on Harry's face. "Kidding, kidding. You've got presents in the living room, and then a little surprise at about ten."

If it was the surprise Sirius had been hinting about for weeks, Harry couldn't wait.

Breakfast was a lively affair, and once all the pancakes were gone the four of them moved up to the living room, where there were several wrapped presents on the coffee table. "Go on," Remus urged, nudging Harry forward gently. Harry didn't know where to start. He'd never opened birthday presents in front of people before. At least at Christmas, everyone else had presents, too.

He reached for the first one on the pile, a heavy box wrapped in brown paper; from Remus.

Tearing open the paper carefully, he gasped when it revealed a boxset of four beautiful hardback books. *The Earthsea Quartet*, the box read in shiny foil letters. "She's a muggle author," Remus explained. "I think you'll really like them. I started them when I was your age — the last one only came out a few years ago."

"Thanks, Remus!" Harry murmured, setting the books aside carefully to reach for his next present. The paper on this one was also plain brown, but the handwriting on top betrayed it to be from Snape. He was surprised it wasn't book-shaped.

The paper parted to reveal a small leather roll-up bag, about the width of his calf all around. When he undid the buckle keeping it secure, it revealed a dozen potion vials kept in neat little pouches, each one labelled with the same spidery handwriting. *Pepper-Up Potion, Pain Relieving Potion, Dreamless Sleep*, the list went on. "Should you ever need to medicate yourself without the supervision of Madam Pomfrey," Snape drawled. "Though please do try never to need them. You're just starting to not be entirely useless, it'd be a waste if you got yourself killed."

Harry grinned widely, and with a burst of impulsiveness, took two steps across the room to wrap his arms around Snape's waist. "Thanks, Professor."

Snape froze, and eventually lowered a hand to pat Harry's shoulder. Harry didn't push his luck, letting go and retreating back to the table. There were three gifts left, all wrapped in the same sparkly silver paper.

"That one's from me, that one's from me *and* Moony, and that one doesn't really count because it should've been yours to begin with," Sirius explained, pointing to each in turn. Harry went first for the one from just Sirius, tearing into the paper with some hesitation, just in case it exploded glitter everywhere. He was safe, for now.

Ripping the paper all the way off, his eyes lit up at the sight of the Zonko's box; of course Sirius had got him prank materials. "Figured you could take them to school, keep the old man on his toes," the animagus reasoned, mischief dancing in his eyes. Harry smirked.

The present from both Remus and Sirius combined was large and squishy, and Harry unwrapped it to find a beautifully soft dark grey cloak, with a gold clasp in the shape of a pawprint. "It's got size adjusting charms, for when you grow," Sirius told him as Harry stroked a gentle hand over the wool. "Warming charms and the like. And, well, I thought when the time comes, we could have your family crests embroidered on. Every young wizard needs a good cloak."

Harry swung the cloak over his shoulders, feeling the warmth wrap around him like a hug. He grinned. The only wizarding clothes he had were his school robes. This cloak looked like something Draco might wear. He looked down at himself, imagining how it might look with the Potter and Black crests on the front — and Slytherin and Peverell too, he supposed. “It’s brilliant,” he declared. Sirius beamed.

The final present was a huge, brightly coloured tapestry — it was clearly old, and Indian in origin, depicting some sort of abstract scene of the creation of the world, according to Hindu mythology. Harry had to set it on the floor to unroll it fully, his eyes round as he studied the intricate weaving. “This was brought over with the first ever Potters to emigrate to Britain, made by their ancestors,” Sirius explained, his voice thick with emotion. “It’s hung in the home of every first-born Potter since. We can hang it up here somewhere; then, when you’re old enough to have your own place, you can take it with you. James used to know all about it, and I only remember bits and pieces, but I’m pretty sure there’s a book about it in the vault.”

Harry was embarrassed to find himself tearing up a little bit — he had never had *anything* like that. Growing up with the Dursleys, they were determined to act as if Harry’s skin was just particularly tan, and once he got to the wizarding world people all just told him about the great magic in his blood. No one ever acknowledged the history of the Potter family, or told him *anything* about his heritage. “When we can, I’ll take you down to the Potter vault, and we can go through everything, teach you about the family. I learnt a fair bit living with James for so long — I don’t know everything, but I reckon I know enough to get you started,” Sirius said hesitantly. “I’m not James. I’m not trying to replace him. But... he would’ve wanted you to learn about where you come from. He would’ve taught you all that, if he could. I figured I can do my best to—“

He was cut off by Harry barrelling into his chest in a rib-crushing hug, and Sirius quickly returned it, kissing Harry’s messy hair. “You’ve been denied so much, pup. You deserve better.”

Harry kept his face buried in Sirius’ chest until he could be sure he was no longer going to cry, and then he pulled away, still with a bit of a lump in his throat. “Right,” he murmured. “I’m just gonna... take this all upstairs.”

“Don’t forget your surprise at ten,” Remus reminded. “You’ll want to be dressed for that.”

Harry had almost forgotten about that. He carefully rolled up the tapestry and gathered his presents, heading to his room and letting out a deep breath, still shaking a little. In that moment he hated Voldemort, and Dumbledore, for tearing him away from everything he should’ve had growing up. Love. A family. A heritage. Voldemort might have set it in motion by killing his parents, but Dumbledore was the one who kept him isolated from that point onwards. Dumbledore was the one who tried to deny him his family magics.

He turned to his wardrobe, shaking the dark thoughts from his head. It was his birthday, there was no need to get morose.

As ten o'clock drew closer, Sirius turned into Padfoot to stop himself spoiling the surprise, and Harry retaliated by sending various mostly-harmless jinxes at the dog, who jumped all over the entrance hall to avoid them, barking happily. "Just tell me!" the teen pleaded. Padfoot growled playfully, shaking his head.

The clock struck ten.

Sirius was back on two feet in an instant, and grabbed Harry around the shoulders. "Come on!" He led him towards the front doors, practically skipping. Was his surprise a place? Were they going somewhere? Stepping out into the driveway, Harry gaped.

Walking towards the house were two figures, one taller than the other, both with the sun shining off their white-blonde hair. "*Draco!*" Harry's eyes were wide in astonishment, and he whipped around to look at his godfather. "But he's— how did you—I don't understand!"

"Remus mentioned the two of you had become close," Sirius said, still grinning smugly. "I thought it'd be nice for you to have company your own age for the day."

Draco and his mother made it up to the house, and Narcissa Malfoy leaned in to press a brief kiss to Sirius' cheek. "You're looking well, cousin," she greeted. "Freedom clearly agrees with you."

"It definitely does. You should try it sometime," Sirius replied wryly.

"Cousin?" Harry echoed. Sirius rested a hand on Harry's shoulder.

"Narcissa Black-Malfoy," Sirius introduced. "Daughter of my father's sister. Cissa, dear, I don't believe you've been formally introduced; Harry Potter, my heir."

Narcissa offered a hand, and Harry knew he was supposed to kiss the back of it. "Well met, Heir Black."

"Well met, Lady Malfoy," Harry replied. He glanced between the two adults. "Wait, if you two are cousins, and I'm your heir, does that make Draco my cousin too?" For some reason, that made him feel weird.

Sirius and Narcissa shared an amused glance. "Not to worry, pup," Sirius assured, chuckling. "You're my heir in name, not blood."

"Sirius, allow me to introduce my son, Draco," Narcissa said primly, nudging Draco forward. He bowed.

"Well met, Lord Black."

"Well met, Heir Malfoy," Sirius returned. "Salazar, Cissa, he's certainly got the Black cheekbones. Not much of Lucius in him, is there?"

"Less and less every day, I believe," she said, running an affectionate hand over her son's hair. Draco preened.

With the formal greetings out of the way, Harry was finally facing Draco, who smirked at him. “Unanticipated company, Potter?” he remarked, reminding Harry of the first letter he’d sent at the beginning of summer. “Bit of an understatement.” He didn’t seem fazed by the enormous manor and its grounds; he probably lived in something twice the size of it. “No wonder you’ve been able to practice your Wronski Feint. Which I still don’t believe you can pull off, by the way,” he added.

“I’ll prove it to you,” Harry challenged. He glanced up at Sirius, who smiled fondly.

“Yes, you two can go flying. Narcissa and I can catch up in the parlour. Maybe even lure Snape up from his lab for a spot of tea.”

“Uncle Severus is here?” Draco asked, surprised.

“I’m sure he’d be delighted to see you, sweetheart, but you go ahead and play with Harry — it’s his birthday, after all. We’ll call you in for lunch,” Narcissa said. She reached into her handbag, and Harry beamed when she pulled Draco’s broom out, the bag much bigger on the inside than it appeared. “Have fun, boys. Do be safe. And happy birthday, Mr Potter.”

“Thanks, Mrs Malfoy!” Harry grabbed Draco by the wrist, tugging him in the direction of the quidditch pitch at the back of the manor. When they were alone, he rounded on his friend. “You’re supposed to be in France!”

“You’re supposed to be in *Surrey*,” Draco returned in the same tone. “Explain, Potter.” He mounted his broom, kicking off in a lazy spiral, and Harry summoned his Firebolt from the broom shed to join him. The two drifted in easy laps around the half-pitch as Harry told Draco all about Snape rescuing him from the Dursleys at the beginning of summer, and everything that had happened since.

“Mother was surprised when she got the letter from Uncle Severus, asking if we could get away for the day on the 31st,” Draco said once it was his turn to explain things. “I suppose your godfather included a letter too, explaining his circumstances. She took it fairly well, all things considered.”

“I didn’t realise she knew we were even friends,” Harry commented. Draco shrugged, doing an effortless barrel roll.

“I tell my mother everything,” he said evenly. “She won’t tell Father.” He smirked, swooping over to Harry’s side. “Now, enough about our guardians — surely you’ve got a snitch around here somewhere?” His eyes flashed in challenge, and Harry returned the look.

“You’re on, Malfoy.”

. . .

Harry hadn’t realised how much he missed having company his own age until he had Draco around. Or maybe it was just Draco in particular. Being able to spend time with the blond boy without having to hide in abandoned classrooms in the middle of the night; flying against him

for the snitch in companionship rather than rivalry — Harry couldn't stop smiling, even when Draco asked him why he was grinning like a loon.

They flew until lunchtime, first trying to beat each other to the snitch and then getting the quaffle out, passing back and forth as they talked about their summers. Harry told Draco about the concert he'd gone to the week before, while Draco bragged about all the interesting places he'd been in Europe. "I brought my cards with me," the Slytherin said, tossing the quaffle in Harry's direction. The dark-haired boy had to stretch to catch it, letting the movement carry him into a sloth roll. "I can teach you that French game. It's ever so simple. Mirielle said it's quite popular at Beauxbatons."

"Mirielle? She's one of the girls you saw in France?" Harry asked, wondering why the name seemed to stick funny in his throat. Draco nodded.

"She and her cousin, Adalene. Their home isn't far from our summer house, we spent most of the week together."

"Oh." Harry's next throw was so hard it almost knocked Draco off his broom. The blond shot him a glare.

"So, been having fun with Granger and Weasley all summer?" he returned. "Since you're not with the muggles and all."

"They don't actually know I'm here," Harry admitted. "We didn't think it was safe. I've barely even heard from them — Hermione's written more than Ron, but... anyway, you're the first visitor I've had all summer."

"Oh."

Draco was saved having to think up another response by Sirius calling for them from the back patio. "Lunch is ready, boys!"

They landed swiftly, carrying their brooms with them and hurrying towards the house. Halfway there, Draco skidded to a halt, eyes wide. "Is that— the hippogriff! Buckbeak!"

Harry looked over towards the tree line, where Buckbeak was trotting out of the woods, tossing his head back and swallowing a dead rabbit. "Oh, yeah, did I not tell you that bit? Sirius escaped on his back. He lives here now."

Draco looked at him incredulously, then back to the hippogriff. "You're definitely telling me the full story after lunch," he declared, then grabbed Harry's arm and pulled him towards the house. Harry flushed; for a second there, he'd thought Draco was going to take him by the hand.

Ceri had made an excellent spread, and in the middle of the table was an enormous chocolate cake with the words 'Happy Birthday Harry' in swirling silver icing, delicately iced snitches all around the edges. A pang of fondness rose in Harry's chest as he remembered the cake Hagrid had brought him, three years ago. His first birthday cake.

“Uncle Severus!” Draco greeted, then glanced at the man beside him. “Professor Lupin.”

Remus smiled. “Hello, Mr Malfoy. I’m glad you could make it.”

“Draco.” Snape reached out to touch his godson’s shoulder briefly. “It’s good to see you well.”

As they sat down to eat, Harry looked around the table, getting a strong urge to laugh. If someone had told him a year ago he’d be spending his birthday with Draco Malfoy and Professor Snape, and actually be *happy* about that, he would’ve sent them to St Mungo’s.

But he was. Happy, that was. It was the best birthday ever, and it was barely even halfway over.

“My son tells me you’re getting better acquainted with the other heirs at Hogwarts, Mr Potter,” Narcissa said, reaching for a plate of sandwiches. “It’s good to hear the Black family name will be properly represented in the Wizengamot once more.”

“I’m still new to it all, but I’m learning,” Harry replied. “Draco’s helping a lot. He knows far more about it than I do.”

“If I can be of assistance, don’t hesitate to ask. We are family, of a sort, after all,” Narcissa pointed out. “There was a time when we thought that Draco might be the Black heir. I didn’t realise Sirius had taken precautions. Lucius was... quite disappointed.” Her face hardened for a moment, and Sirius growled quietly under his breath.

“You understand why I had to, Cissa,” he said. “I knew you’d raise the boy well, but I couldn’t be sure how much influence Malfoy would have over him. The Black family name has been through enough without adding that to it.”

“Oh, I completely agree.”

Draco nudged Harry under the table. “Do you know what’s happening at Hogwarts this year?” he asked conspiratorially. Harry raised an eyebrow.

“Do *you* know what’s happening?” he returned quietly. How could Draco know?

“Father told me everything,” Draco bragged.

“I’m sure he also told you to keep quiet about it,” Snape cut in with a pointed look. Draco’s pale cheeks flushed.

“Yeah, but *you* told me,” Harry pointed out. Snape’s glare turned on him, but he just grinned.

“For your own safety.”

“And we all appreciate the forewarning,” Remus said, resting his hand on Severus’ forearm for the briefest moment.

“It’s a shame underage wizards can’t enter,” Draco drawled. “I’m sure I’d win if I could.”

"Yes, I'm sure you know far more spells than the seventh years," Harry agreed sarcastically, earning a glare. "You'll have to sit back and let someone else have the glory, I know it'll be very difficult for you."

Draco gave a haughty sniff, turning to his pumpkin juice. "With any luck, the Hogwarts champion will be a Slytherin. Or a Ravenclaw." He sent a glance to Harry. "As long as it's not a *Gryffindor*."

"I bet a Gryffindor champion could win," Harry argued. He didn't know the Gryffindor seventh years very well, but they all seemed competent enough.

"I'm sure if Dumbledore has his way, it'll be a lion," Draco muttered with a grimace. "More glory to the house of red and gold." All three Slytherins in the room rolled their eyes in unison. Harry couldn't even debate the point; he didn't doubt Dumbledore *would* put a Gryffindor in the spotlight if he could.

"Well, we'll find out soon enough," Sirius declared. "Now, who's for cake? Go on, birthday boy."

Harry was glad there was no singing and candle-blowing; at Dudley's birthday parties it always looked excruciatingly awful. Instead Harry was handed an enormous knife, and carefully cut a slice for each person at the table. The cake was moist and fluffy, with a thick layer of cream and ganache in the middle. It was *heaven*.

"Oh, that reminds me," Draco said suddenly. He reached down into his mother's handbag, pulling out a gift wrapped in Slytherin green paper. "Happy birthday."

Harry blinked, surprised. He'd thought Draco's visit was the present. He said as much, and the blond gave him an exasperated look. "Of course I got you something, you daft lion. Go on, open it."

Harry tore into the paper, a beaming smile crossing his face at what lay inside. A brand new pair of quidditch goggles, brown leather with gold edging and buckles. According to the accompanying scroll of parchment, they were charmed unbreakable, anti-glare, waterproof and fog-proof, as well as prescription-adjusting; he wouldn't need to wear his glasses underneath them.

"You mentioned your current pair pinch your new glasses by your ears," Draco muttered, his pale cheeks turning rosy. "I don't want you to have any excuses when I kick your arse next year."

Harry laughed, Draco ducking his head when his mother scolded him for his language.

"You've got high hopes," the Gryffindor teased. His pulse was racing, his stomach squirming far more than it should over a birthday present. He couldn't even remember making that complaint; for Draco to not only have been listening, but remembered enough to think about it when picking out Harry's present... it made his face heat, though he wasn't sure why. "They're brilliant, Draco. Thank you so much!"

The two boys sat, grinning and blushing at each other — completely unaware of the looks the adults were exchanging over their heads.

“Have you shown Draco your room yet, Harry?” Remus asked, and Harry shook his head.

“Not yet. We’ve been too busy flying.” He glanced over at his blond friend. “I can show you after lunch, if you’d like?” He’d never had a bedroom he was proud to show a friend before. “Oh, I should show you the library, too. It’s huge!”

“You’re getting worse than Granger,” Draco muttered, barely any malice in his tone. Harry stuck his tongue out. “And here I thought you were starting to be civilised.”

“You can only get so far with Gryffindors, Draco,” Snape told him. Remus snorted.

“May we be excused?” Harry asked, once he and Draco had both finished their cake. Draco could only stay until five, and Harry wanted to make the most of his time. They probably wouldn’t see each other again until school started, and then they’d have to pretend to be enemies again.

“Go ahead, pup.” Sirius ruffled Harry’s hair, and the two boys left the kitchen, Harry leading the way, carrying his present from Draco securely.

“Come on, it’s up here.” He turned off the stairs towards his room, slowing down so Draco could look around curiously.

“There’s no portraits,” he remarked. Harry shrugged.

“Sirius said it’s better that way. No chance of being spied on. I guess the Black family liked their secrecy.”

“Malfoy Manor has dozens of portraits. I can’t get away with *anything*,” Draco groused. “There’s a couple that like me, but most of them just go straight to Father if I’m doing something I shouldn’t be.”

“Why doesn’t your mother just... leave? Get a divorce, or something?” Harry asked. Meeting Narcissa, hearing the way she spoke of her husband, it was clear she didn’t want to be married to him.

“It’s not that simple in the wizarding world. Divorce needs a good reason, and it needs to be approved by the head of the slighted party’s house. Unfortunately, the Black family doesn’t have one of those at the minute, legally. Besides, we’ve got nowhere to go. You don’t just say no to a man like Lucius Malfoy.” The twist of Draco’s lips was bitter, and Harry squeezed his arm sympathetically.

“We’ll find Pettigrew, and get Sirius’ name cleared. Then he can approve the divorce. I bet he’d even let you move in here, if you needed somewhere safe to live.” Harry couldn’t see Sirius letting Narcissa stay with such an awful husband if he could help it. He was always telling Harry how important family was to the Blacks.

Draco sighed. “It’s a nice thought, but we couldn’t hide forever. Father always gets his way.” He swept some blond hair out of his eyes. “I thought you were showing me your bedroom, anyway? Hurry up!”

Harry blushed, his brain flashing to some *other* context Draco might want to see his bedroom. He told his brain to sod off and stop being ridiculous. As if he and Draco would be — like that!

Still, as he nudged open the door, the thought stayed lodged in the corner of his mind. It wouldn’t be so bad, maybe. If they were.

—.-.—

Sirius looked across the living room at the two teenage boys sprawled in front of the fire, playing some sort of card game the Malfoy boy had apparently learned in France. His mind still boggled at the sight of a Potter and a Malfoy being so friendly. The blond wasn’t that bad, considering his upbringing. Narcissa had done alright with him there.

And Narcissa, well — Sirius hadn’t expected it to be so easy to see his cousin again. In the years before the fall of Voldemort, he’d thought her truly lost to her awful husband. She’d been haughty and cruel and gotten sucked in to all the talk of blood purity and war against muggles. He wasn’t sure what had changed, but he was glad. She was more and more like the little girl he’d grown up alongside, who would do anything for her family and just wanted those she loved to be safe and happy. She still clearly had a lot of firm opinions about blood status, but they were much more similar to Sirius’ opinions; muggleborns were quite welcome, as long as the wizarding traditions weren’t lost in amongst their muggle customs.

“They really don’t have any idea?” Narcissa asked quietly, her eyes cast over at her son and Sirius’ godson. Remus smirked.

“Not a clue. Not that Harry’s told me, at least. Astonishing, isn’t it?”

“It’s disgusting,” Snape drawled. Sirius laughed quietly.

“I think it’s sweet.” He watched as Harry stole a card from Draco’s hand, making some sort of remark that had Draco’s cheeks turning pink. “They’re so innocent.”

“Hopefully we can keep them that way for a while longer,” Remus sighed. “Merlin, they’re worse than Severus and I ever were. At least we *knew* we were flirting.”

Across the room, Harry laughed, rolling away as Draco tried to snatch one of his cards. Sirius sighed to himself; did Harry have to choose a *Malfoy*?

That was unfair, he supposed. Draco was a nice enough kid, for a Slytherin. He’d heard something from Harry over the weeks about the role the boy had to play in public, and it sounded like it would wear on anyone.

“I’m betting they’ll figure it out by Christmas,” Sirius declared under his breath. “Harry’s a bit thick sometimes, but he’s not that dense. He’ll have a quick little sexuality crisis, then

they'll be sorted."

"I'm surprised Draco's so oblivious," Narcissa commented. "He's always known he likes boys. Truthfully, I've been wondering if something like this might happen ever since I got a letter his first week of Hogwarts with three whole paragraphs about Harry Bloody Potter and how frustrating he was." She smiled fondly. "I certainly never expected it to go like this."

"Harry is full of surprises," Remus remarked.

That was an understatement if Sirius had ever heard one. "I think we've only hit the tip of the iceberg, there." He thought about everything that had come to light ever since he'd met Harry. It was just the beginning.

He caught Snape and Narcissa sharing a loaded glance, and Remus frowned and placed a hand on Snape's left arm. Sirius's brows furrowed. "What?" he asked, wondering what he was missing.

Snape looked to Narcissa. "Is it getting darker for you, too?"

The blonde woman nodded. Snape cursed softly.

"*What?*" Sirius hissed again. Then it dawned on him, his gaze dropping to Remus' hand curled around Snape's forearm. He hadn't seen Snape in short sleeves since that day in the pool. "*Oh. He's getting stronger, isn't he?*" Peter must have found his master, as Trelawney had predicted. Sirius' stomach rolled.

"It's just a matter of time," Narcissa confirmed. "Lucius has been meeting with several *old friends* this summer. I believe there are plans being hatched."

Squeezing his eyes shut for a minute, Sirius shook his head, looking back over at the two teenagers. So carefree, so *happy*. He wanted Harry to stay that way forever.

"I've been invited to several of those meetings," Snape revealed. "I managed to find excuses for all but one. He's definitely reconnecting with the old crowd. I'm keeping my ear to the ground, but it's all just murmurs so far. Everyone is hesitant to trust what they know to be true, just in case."

The Triwizard Tournament likely wasn't the only thing they'd have to worry about this school year. Sirius cursed Peter Pettigrew for the thousandth time — because of him, he wouldn't be able to protect Harry like he ought to. He just had to send him off into Dumbledore's clutches and hope against hope nothing happened that he couldn't fix.

He looked to his cousin, who had fear etched in her pretty features. "Cissa, if you ever need somewhere to go," he started cautiously, unsure how she might take his offer. "The House of Black will always welcome you with open arms." He couldn't do anything about Lucius legally, but he could offer her a safehouse until the war ended if it ever got bad.

"I had hoped to play my part well enough to keep Draco out of the worst of things," Narcissa said, pursing her lips as she cast her gaze over to her son. "I'm starting to think that might not

be possible anymore. I hadn't accounted for this."

Sirius snorted under his breath; none of them had accounted for the way those two boys looked at each other with stars in their eyes.

"It's too early to tell, yet," Narcissa continued. "But I'll make sure there are arrangements in place for any future... inevitabilities. And I'll keep your offer in mind. Thank you, cousin."

"Whatever comes to pass, I think it's clear we're all in it together, now," Sirius replied.

Between those two teenagers sat oblivious in front of the fire, all four of the adults in the room would give their lives in a heartbeat for one or the other. And, while Sirius knew it was too soon to tell — teenage crushes came and went like clothing trends — if Harry was anything like his parents, he had a sneaking suspicion he and Narcissa were going to end up even closer family than they were now. Eventually.

If Harry could ever get his head out of his arse and realise what was in front of him.

Ah, young love.

.-.-.-

When Pig arrived with a letter from Ron in the second week in August, reality came crashing back down on Harry uncomfortably quickly. He stared at it for a long moment, a tightness in his chest that it took him a minute to realise was anxiety.

Why did he feel so anxious about seeing his best friends again?

Since Draco had visited on his birthday, it had gone back to just being himself and the three adults. He'd mentioned briefly to Sirius that he had other friends who were somewhat in the know, like Neville, who could maybe visit, but Sirius had gently put his foot down.

"I told you when you got here this house has always been for family, not visitors," he had said with an apologetic half-smile. "I understand wanting to have your friends over, but the fewer people who know about this place, the better. Narcissa and Draco are family, as astonished as I am to be saying that and actually meaning it. They're Blacks, they deserve to be here. But no one else, pup. Not here."

Harry understood, and truthfully he liked it better that way. Seren Du was a little bubble of paradise — the rest of the world didn't exist unless they sought it out. All of them seemed to be benefiting from the break; even Snape, though he'd been acting a little weird lately, was like a completely different man. Harry didn't know if the professor was always like that in private, or if it was Remus' influence, but he was pretty sure the house had something to do with it.

All the same, he should've been excited to go to the Burrow. And to the Quidditch World Cup! And yet... if Ron hadn't made it clear in his letter that he wasn't taking no for an answer, Harry might have turned him down.

He kept the letter in hand as he shuffled down to breakfast, where all three adults were already up. "Morning, cub," Remus greeted, then frowned. "Why the long face?"

Harry held up the letter. "Ron's dad got tickets to the Quidditch Cup. They're going to come pick me up from the Dursleys on Sunday evening."

"That's brilliant! International quidditch, I'm so jealous!" Sirius' enthusiasm was damped by a confused expression. "Why do you look like you need a Cheering charm?"

"No, it's great!" Harry insisted. "I just... I like it here. I thought I'd have all summer with you." Ron had talked about the Cup, but Harry hadn't truly expected Mr Weasley to actually be able to get enough tickets for all of them.

"Pup, go to Ron's house. Have fun with your friends. Go see the Cup," Sirius urged softly. "I love having you, but you can't stay cooped up in here forever. You deserve to spend time with your friends, not us three old farts."

"Oi, speak for yourself there, Grandpa," Remus said in mock-annoyance.

"Only one of us is going grey, Moony dearest, and it sure as hell isn't me," Sirius replied sweetly. "Anyway, pup. What I'm saying is, this place is your home now, it will be as long as you want it. But you're young, you should be out having fun with kids your own age. Besides," he added, screwing his nose up. "How will it look to the rest of them if you suddenly decide you love being at your relatives' place so much you don't want to leave them to go see *quidditch*? They'll think you've been possessed."

Harry grimaced. That would certainly give the game away. "I suppose." He glanced down at the letter. If the Weasleys were coming on Sunday, that only gave him two more days at Seren Du.

"We'll figure out a way to keep in touch while you're in school. It'll be fine." Sirius reached over to squeeze Harry's shoulder. "Chin up, kiddo. We knew this was coming sooner or later."

"Yeah, but I thought it'd be later," Harry muttered, frowning into his porridge.

"It'll be good for you to see your friends again, Harry," Remus said, offering him a smile. "We'll have to take you back to the Dursleys' Sunday lunchtime, let you get picked up from there. It's a good thing we already got your school supplies." Instead of going to Diagon Alley, Harry and Remus had gone to Margin Alley in Cardiff, where it was quieter. Sirius wanted to come, but apparently there were anti-animagus wards in the area.

"I'm sure my relatives will be thrilled to see me again," he replied dryly. At least he wouldn't have to spend long with them.

Chapter 16

With the clock suddenly ticking down very rapidly to his departure, Harry was determined to make the most of Seren Du before he left. He had a bit of a panic at the start — so many things he wanted to do, and so little time left! — but he figured it out pretty quickly. He could fly at the Burrow, even if it wouldn't be on a proper half-pitch. The pool, the library, and the company were the things he would miss the most.

He also sent Artemis off with a round of letters for all the friends he couldn't send Hedwig to, explaining he was being moved to somewhere his mail would be monitored and he'd see them back at school. Luckily, that was only a couple of weeks away. He'd hate to be out of contact with Draco for much longer than that. Ever since the visit, Artemis had been run ragged flying back and forth between them.

The three adults had decided to wrap up Harry's lessons for the summer, since he'd be leaving soon anyway. Harry was actually a little sad about it. Currently, he was sat in Snape's potions lab, helping finish off a batch of Skele-Gro that would be going to the Hogwarts hospital wing ready for the new school term. "With that bloody tournament, we'll probably need plenty of it," Snape had muttered derisively.

Setting the potion aside to cool, Harry looked up at his professor cautiously. "That's all done, then?" Snape nodded.

"Once it's cooled, I'll bottle it and send it to the school." He checked some notes on a piece of parchment tacked to his desk; Pomfrey's order list, from what Harry could gather. "Now that I've seen you're a perfectly competent brewer, I'll expect your grades to improve in my class, Mr Potter."

Harry sent him a light glare. "I'm sure they would if my professor didn't hate me, and the Slytherins didn't sabotage me."

"From the looks of things, you've got half the Slytherins wrapped around your little finger," Snape retorted, making Harry blush. "And you are aware that I will have to keep up appearances. I shall endeavour not to harm your potions, and I will mark you as fairly as I can, but there are people on both sides watching me, Potter, and I must maintain a certain level of... spite in your direction."

"I expected as much," Harry said with a shrug. It really wouldn't be much different to previous years. He could handle it. "But, sir, before we reach that point... I just wanted to say thank you, for everything you've done for me over the summer. You didn't have to spend time teaching me. I'm well aware that you're here because Moony is, not for me or Sirius. I just— you didn't have to be nice to me, but you were. So, thanks," he finished awkwardly. Snape was silent for a minute.

"I daresay Remus would have been quite unimpressed with me had I treated you here as I treat you at school," he said eventually. "Nonetheless, I find that without certain... external influences, you are not a terrible student, Mr Potter. Still unfailingly Gryffindor, but that

appears to be the life I have chosen for myself.” This came with a long-suffering sigh that made Harry laugh.

“You know the Sorting Hat almost put me in Slytherin?” he said, watching Snape’s dark eyebrows rise.

“What a disaster that would have been. Dumbledore might have had a stroke on the spot.” Snape turned to Harry, looking him over appraisingly. “I have hope that between myself and Draco, we’ll be able to make enough of a Slytherin out of you for you to survive in this world. Rest assured, Mr Potter; while we may have started off on the wrong foot, we are on the same side now.” He strode towards the door, beckoning Harry to follow. “As we still have some time before dinner, I would like you to follow me to the parlour. I wish to check your Occlumency shields one last time before you face the headmaster.”

Harry nodded, and the pair of them went upstairs to the empty parlour. Harry took a seat, knowing he would need it if Snape was about to be as ruthless as he feared.

The Slytherin didn’t give Harry time to prepare; as soon as they made eye contact, he was working away at Harry’s shields. Harry kept his breathing steady and his mental defences tight, unsure how long he sat there for. Snape tried everything; brute force, sneaking through cracks, even trying to convince Harry that he’d disappeared, only to try and creep in when he let his guard down. Through it all, Harry refused to let him in. Eventually, the attack ceased, for real this time.

“Very good, Potter,” Snape said with an approving nod. “You should be able to withstand any discreet attempts at entering your mind. Should the headmaster wish to put in any more force than that, it’ll be obvious to you and also any bystanders, and I believe if it ever gets to that point you will have bigger things to worry about.” He looked at Harry with a serious expression. “Make sure you have your shields up at all times, especially if you’re in large crowds or around the headmaster. Eventually it will become second nature, but at first it may get exhausting.”

“I’ll do my best,” Harry promised. “Thank you for helping me with this, Professor.” He’d made more progress in the last month and a half than he had in the entire nine months he’d been working on it by himself.

“You’re welcome, Potter. You’re free to go.”

Nodding in thanks, Harry got to his feet, leaving the parlour with his hands in his pockets. Now, how to spend the rest of his day... perhaps he’d set a few parting pranks for his beloved godfather.

.-.-.-.

All too soon, it was Saturday night. Harry’s school trunk was packed and ready, after a long, drawn-out selection process of his bookshelves, which culminated in Remus promising to send him any books he left behind if he decided he wanted them. It was a refreshing concept for Harry, having a bedroom he could leave stuff in during the school year without worrying

about any of it being broken or stolen or thrown out. Having enough things that he couldn't fit them all in his school trunk.

Harry was about as ready as he could be, and was lying in bed listening to some quiet music on his Wireless when there was a knock on the door. He turned off the Wireless, calling for whoever it was to enter. Sirius slipped into the room, shutting the door behind him, and turned to Harry with a sad sort-of smile on his face. "Mind if I join you?"

Harry patted the mattress beside him, and Sirius clambered up onto the bed, leaning against the headboard with his shoulder bumping Harry's. "All set, then?" he asked, his gaze landing on Harry's trunk.

"I think so. Moony said he could send anything I'd forgotten over with Snape." He bit his lip. "Are you ready? For me to leave?" It was weighing on his mind, the prospect of school starting up; he would be gone, Snape would soon be gone, and Remus wouldn't want to spend all his time away from his partner.

It meant that there were times Sirius would be alone in the house. After being in Azkaban, Sirius didn't do well being alone. "Don't worry about me, Harry," he insisted. "I'll be fine. I've got Buckbeak, and Ceri. And Moony's promised me he won't be gone more than two evenings a week." He shrugged. "Gotta get used to being by myself eventually, right? Can't expect you lot to babysit me forever."

"We're not babysitting you, Sirius," Harry scolded lightly. "This has been the best summer ever."

"It has been pretty great, hasn't it?" Sirius agreed. "I'm glad I was able to give you that. I wish I could give you the world, Pup, but this is a good start." The man sighed, running a hand through his dark hair and turning to Harry. "I've been reliably informed that I can't keep you hidden away here forever, so for your old godfather's sake, *please* look after yourself in the big scary outside world?" His words were playful but his eyes were serious, and Harry chuckled.

"You're not old, Sirius, you're thirty-four."

"Thirty-five in November!" Sirius yelped. It was clear he thought that was akin to turning a hundred.

"Exactly, you're barely a quarter of the way into your life, for a wizard."

"You're missing my point," Sirius retorted, aware he'd lost that particular argument. "Be careful, okay? Voldemort isn't the only enemy you have anymore. Dumbledore wants you for his weapon — exactly how, we can only guess, but it's clear he doesn't care about you past how you factor into his grand plan. If he knows you're starting to mess with that plan, you're in deep trouble. There's going to be a lot going on at the school this year, and I need you to be safe."

"I won't go looking for trouble, Sirius," Harry said. His godfather's expression was doubtful. "I mean it! I can't promise trouble won't find me, but I'll try my best to stay away from it."

And Dumbledore.”

“I suppose that’s all I can ask.” Sirius reached into the pocket of his robe, pulling out a small round mirror in a black frame. “I want you to have this. It’s a two-way mirror; your dad and I used to use them all the time. I’ve got the other one — just say my name into the mirror, and mine will vibrate, and then we can talk to each other.”

“Or you can call me if you’re lonely and need someone to talk to when Remus is with Snape,” Harry realised. He took the mirror, running his fingers over the surface. It was only the size of his hand, but he’d easily be able to keep it with him in his school robes. “This is brilliant!”

“If you ever need to talk, about *anything* — the headmaster, your classes, romantic advice,” he wiggled his eyebrows and Harry made a face, “I’m always here for you. Okay?”

“I’ll call. At least once a week,” Harry promised. It would be much easier than sending an owl.

“And if you need someone in person, go to Snape. He’s still a greasy git, but I guess he’s family now.” Sirius grumbled, but Harry knew better; his godfather was delighted Remus was happy and in love. Even if it was Snape.

Sirius shifted around until he was sitting cross-legged facing Harry. “Remember where your allies are, Pup. From the sounds of things, you’ve got a fair few. Keep making friends with all the other heirs, and the kids in other houses. I know I’m hardly one to talk, but all these inter-house rivalries have been going on far too long; it’s fine when it’s friendly, but the divide has gotten far too deep. If anyone can help reconcile that, it’s your generation. Even if you have to do so in secret, keep them close. Especially Cissa’s boy — he’s a Black at heart, and once you’ve got a Black’s loyalty you’ve got it for life.”

“It feels like this is all so much bigger than us, Sirius,” Harry murmured. “We’re all just kids. None of us are even old enough to take our Wizengamot seats yet; how are we supposed to change the minds of half the wizarding world?” There were so many broken parts of wizarding society; things that had been allowed to fester since Voldemort’s first rise to power, if not longer. The more Harry learnt, the more he realised how screwed up things had become. But half of the people in charge didn’t seem to care; not when the system benefited them. They didn’t want to fix it, they’d just figured out how to exploit it.

“One thing at a time, kiddo,” Sirius said. “You’re a determined little bugger, and I have every faith you’ll succeed. We’ll be right behind you every step of the way.” He offered a grin, patting Harry’s knee. “Remember, you don’t have to change everything all at once. Just focus on getting through the school year in one piece for now, yeah? You’ll have plenty of time for politics when you’re older. Try and enjoy being a normal teenager for a bit longer.”

He knew what Sirius was implying. He wasn’t stupid; the adults had been shifty all summer, and the tattoo on Snape’s arm — his Dark Mark — was more visible now than it had been before. Voldemort was gaining strength, and war would soon be upon them once more. Still, it was an absurd concept to Harry, with his previous Hogwarts track record. “When have I ever been a normal teenager?” he pointed out wryly. Sirius barked an unexpected laugh.

"You've got me there, kid. Well, normal teenagers should be in bed by this time. Actually, that's a lie, normal teenagers stay up all night getting into mischief," he added with a half-grimace, "but you've got a big day tomorrow, so you should get some sleep." He shuffled off the mattress, but leaned in to kiss Harry's hair. "I'll see you in the morning. I love you, Harry."

Harry would never get tired of hearing that. "I love you too, Sirius."

His godfather slipped quietly from the room, and Harry looked down at the mirror in his hands, sighing. That was one of his problems solved.

If only he had a hope of figuring out how to address the others.

.-.-.-.-

Harry awoke with a gasp, hand flying up to his burning scar. *What the hell was that all about?*

It could have been a nightmare. But a nightmare had never made his scar burn like that. A nightmare had never felt so... real.

A shiver went down his spine. He couldn't even remember what really happened; he concentrated harder, trying to recall. It had been so vivid... there were two people he knew, and one he didn't... in a room he didn't recognise... a cold, high voice — Voldemort.

Flashes of the dream flew through his memory. Wormtail was there, they were talking about — about him. They had killed someone already, and they wanted him dead too.

Harry had no idea who the old man was, but his gut told him he was now dead. Except not, because it was a dream. Wasn't it?

He crawled out of bed, wondering if anyone else would be up that early. Snape was usually an early riser. To his surprise, Remus was the only one in the kitchen, his eyes still half-closed. "You're up early," he commented, then frowned when he got a better look at Harry. "Cub, are you alright?"

"I had a dream," Harry started shakily. "I... when I woke up, my scar was hurting. It's probably fine, right?"

The look on Remus' face suggested that it was not, in fact, fine.

"Tell me everything." Remus held out an arm, and Harry only hesitated for a moment before accepting the comfort offered, leaning into the man's embrace.

"I don't remember much, just that it was so vivid." He told Remus about the old muggle man, and Wormtail, and Voldemort. The more Harry spoke, the more Remus looked grave. "And then I woke up, and it was like someone had pressed a hot poker to my scar."

Remus put the back of his hand to Harry's forehead as if checking for fever, then ducked down to press a gentle kiss to the still aching scar. Harry tried not to flinch. No one else had

really touched it before, certainly not with such tenderness. “This has never happened before? Dreams like this? Your scar hurting?” Harry shook his head, and Remus’ frown deepened.

“What does it mean?”

“I’ll be honest, Harry; I have no idea.” Remus didn’t look happy about it. “I’ll do some research. You should write to Gorak, at Gringotts — you said he noticed some dark magic around your scar when he scanned you? Perhaps the goblins will know more. For now... make sure to clear your mind and check your shields before you go to sleep at night. And if it happens again, tell us immediately, alright?”

“If what happens again?” It was Snape, striding into the kitchen, his hair still damp from the shower. Remus kept an arm around Harry as he informed the Slytherin what had happened, and Snape’s lips pursed.

“I’ve never heard of this happening before. Then again, no one has survived the killing curse before. I’ll look into it, Potter, and let you know if I find anything.”

“Thank you,” Harry said, reluctantly pulling away from Remus and heading to his usual seat. “Can we just let it go for now? There’s nothing we can do about it, and I feel okay now. I just... I don’t want to dwell on it when I have to leave this afternoon.”

“Alright,” Remus agreed. “But I’m telling Sirius tonight.” Harry nodded; that was fine. He’d want Sirius to know anyway.

Snape would be taking him back to the Dursleys at half past three, ready for the Weasleys to arrive at five. Harry didn’t want anything negative hanging over his last few hours with his family.

.-.-.

Returning to the Dursleys after spending so long at Seren Du was like waking up from an excellent dream to find yourself in a nightmare. Aunt Petunia’s face went the colour of spoiled milk when she opened the door to them, and she glared. “I suppose this is about that letter?” she hissed, beckoning them into the house. Harry was confused for a minute, before he remembered what Ron had said in his letter; the Weasleys had sent something through the muggle post. He felt dread gathering in his gut, and couldn’t stop the laugh that burst out at the sight of the envelope covered in stamps. The letter inside was a fairly polite request for Harry’s company, but the way Petunia stared at it you’d have thought it was full of nothing but insults and curse words.

“They’ll be coming to pick me up at five o’clock,” Harry confirmed. “So I won’t be here long.”

“Perhaps you may want to persuade your husband to take you and your son out for dinner tonight, Petunia,” Snape drawled pointedly. Petunia puffed up instinctually at being told what to do by a wizard, then seemed to realise the sense in his suggestion.

"It'll be hard trying to find a table anywhere decent at such short notice," she sniffed, then turned to Harry. "You'll be gone when we get back?" He nodded.

"Should be, yeah." He couldn't see the Weasleys wanting to stick around long.

"Fine. Just... stay up in your room until then." She seemed to realise she'd given Harry an order, and glanced fearfully at Snape for a second, but held her ground. Harry merely rolled his eyes.

"Don't worry, I have no desire to join you in the living room," he assured dryly. "I'll just leave my stuff here so it's ready when I go, shall I?" Severus resized Harry's trunk and Hedwig's cage, and Harry leant them against the wall in the middle of the hallway. Petunia looked like she was about to have a fit.

Harry looked at Snape. To his utter bewilderment, he actually felt a pang of sadness at having to say goodbye to the abrasive man. He was going to *miss him*. "Thanks, Professor," he said somewhat awkwardly. "I'll see you at school."

"Do try and make it there in one piece," Snape replied dryly. Harry laughed.

"I'll try my best. Enjoy the rest of your summer." He wondered what it would be like at Seren Du without him. Quieter, probably. Snape would be glad for it.

Snape gave Petunia one last glare, then apparated away. Harry shared a long, tense look with his aunt. "I'll be upstairs. I'll, uh, see you later. Remember, they're coming at five."

As she went to go no doubt complain to her husband about that awful man bringing their equally awful nephew back, Harry trudged up the stairs and turned back to his room. He was a little surprised they hadn't turned it back into Dudley's second bedroom in his absence. He stood in the doorway, surveying the tiny space sadly. Now he knew what it was like to have a real bedroom, where he was allowed to actually decorate and own things and the furniture wasn't all broken hand-me-downs, he could hardly believe the Dursleys had put him in this and he'd been *happy* with it.

Anything was a step up from the cupboard, he supposed.

He'd brought a book with him to read while he waited, and he smiled slightly when, an hour later, Uncle Vernon yelled up the stairs. "Boy! We're leaving. You'd better not be here when we get home. Don't eat anything out of the fridge." And then they were gone.

Harry moved downstairs, laughing to himself at the absurdity of reading a book about healing charms on the sofa in the living room of his relatives' house. If anyone had been home to see it, he would've been beaten for sure.

As five o'clock drew closer, Harry realised he didn't know how the Weasleys were getting there. They didn't have the car anymore; he and Ron had seen to that in second year. Perhaps Mr Weasley would just apparate in and pick him up, like Snape had done?

Five came and went. Harry glanced up at the clock every few pages, biting his lip worriedly. The Dursleys would probably stay out most of the evening, just in case, but if they didn't... He had written back to Ron, but what if it hadn't made it in time? What if they weren't coming after all?

He thought of the two-way mirror sitting inside his trunk, at the very top. He could call Sirius if no one came. Snape would come get him. Things would be fine.

At half past, he was just starting to get truly anxious, when there was a loud whooshing noise and then several bangs in quick succession. The little electric fireplace rattled. Harry's eyes went wide in a sort of horrified amusement as he realised what must have happened.

"Ouch — Fred, no, go back, there's been a mistake. Tell George not to — ow, George, no, go tell Ron, I—"

"Mr Weasley?" Harry called hesitantly, trying not to laugh.

"Harry? Harry, is that you? What happened? We seem to be stuck!" Mr Weasley shouted back, remarkably cheerful considering his predicament. Harry could hear fists hammering on the boards of the wall.

"The fireplace has been blocked up, you won't be able to get through there!" Harry said, raising his voice to be heard over the racket.

"What on earth would they block up the fireplace for?" Mr Weasley sounded baffled.

"They've got an electric fire!" Harry explained, and heard the man make a noise of excitement.

"Oh, with a plug! How fascinating. Hold on a minute, Harry, I'm trying to... yes, I think I'll have to. Stand back, Harry!"

Harry crossed to stand behind the sofa, and all of a sudden the wall exploded outwards in a barrage of rubble and plaster dust, the electric fireplace slamming into the opposite wall. Harry winced; he *really* hoped that was fixable. Out of the dust cloud stumbled Mr Weasley, the twins, and Ron.

"Hiya, Harry!" the twins greeted in cheerful unison, then glanced around the room. "Where are the muggles at?"

"They went out for dinner," Harry explained. Mr Weasley made a quietly disappointed sound. The twins, too, looked disappointed, but Harry suspected for an entirely different reason.

"Shame, shame, I would've liked to meet them. Then again," Mr Weasley added, looking around at the destroyed living room, "perhaps it's, ah, for the best they weren't here."

Harry imagined what his uncle might have done in the face of such chaos and blatant magic, and was almost sad Snape had told them to leave.

"So this is a muggle house, is it? Goodness, look at all those ecklectric things! How marvellous!" Mr Weasley seemed to realise he wasn't alone, and smiled abashedly at Harry. "Ready to go, Harry? Where's your trunk?"

"It's in the hall," he said, turning to retrieve his things. When he returned, there was a fire in the grate.

"You boys go first, now. I'll stay back and, ah, clear up the mess," Mr Weasley said with a glance at the gaping hole in the wall. He pulled out a small pouch of floo powder. "Here you are, boys."

Harry let Ron and the twins go first, then stepped into the fire and spoke his destination, squeezing his eyes shut against the whirl of ash that followed. He stumbled out into the kitchen at the Burrow, stomach churning uncomfortably. Before he could properly catch his breath, he was wrapped up in a tight hug. "Harry, dear!" Mrs Weasley fussed. "Welcome back. You're looking a little peaky, have you eaten yet?"

Harry wasn't sure how she could say he was 'peaky' when his skin was the darkest it had been in years, but he didn't question it. "Good to see you too, Mrs Weasley. I've already had lunch, thanks."

"Let him put his things away before you start feeding him, Mum," came a deep, amused voice. Harry glanced over at the kitchen table, where Ron and George were sat with two older redheads Harry had only ever seen pictures of. The two eldest Weasley brothers, Bill and Charlie. "How's it going, Harry?" the one who had just spoken greeted, holding out a burn-scared hand for Harry to shake. Charlie, the dragon tamer, was shorter than Harry expected, with incredibly muscular arms covered in tattoos and a face that was more freckles than lightly tanned skin.

The eldest brother, Bill, rounded the table to shake Harry's hand properly. Harry's throat went a little dry. Bill Weasley was tall and broad-shouldered, with long hair tied back in a ponytail and a fang earring dangling from one ear. He looked so *cool*. Certainly not what Harry expected from someone who worked for Gringotts. He grinned, blue eyes sparkling. "Nice to finally meet you, Harry. We've heard so much about you, after all." He winked. Harry's stomach filled with butterflies.

"Yeah, uh, hi," he croaked, then coughed. "Nice to meet you, too. I didn't realise you'd both be home."

"It's the Quidditch Cup Final!" Charlie pointed out. "No way we were gonna miss it."

Mr Weasley apparated into the kitchen with a pop, brushing plaster dust off his robes. "All sorted," he assured Harry. "Not a spot out of place."

As if summoned by all the noise, Hermione and Ginny wandered into the kitchen, stopping when they saw the new arrival. "Harry!" Hermione hugged him tightly, looking him over. "Wow! You look great!" Then she blushed. "You know what I mean. You look like you've been eating."

Harry was well aware of how he usually looked in the summers, and chuckled. “Thanks, Hermione.”

“Ron, why don’t you help Harry take his things up to your room,” Mrs Weasley suggested. Fred reached out to grab Harry’s trunk.

“We’ll get it, Mum!” As he turned, something brightly wrapped fell out of his pocket; it looked like a sweet. He went wide-eyed and scrambled for it, but Mrs Weasley summoned it quickly.

“What’s this?” she asked with eyebrows raised pointedly, a knowing look on her face.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” Fred said quickly.

“Just a sweet,” George backed him up quickly, plucking it from his mother’s fingers. “Come on, Harry, let’s go.” He grabbed Harry and practically dragged him from the kitchen, Hedwig’s cage in hand. When they were halfway up the stairs, Harry gave them a curious look.

“What was that all about?”

The twins shook their heads, staying silent until they were in Ron’s room with the door shut. Only then did George hold up the sweet with a smirk. “Shame your muggle cousin wasn’t home, Harry. I’m sure he would’ve loved this,” he said conspiratorially.

“Ton-Tongue Toffee,” Fred explained. “We invented them. Makes your tongue keep growing; we tested one on Ron the other day, his got about four foot long before Mum came in and shrank it.”

Harry snorted, imagining Dudley with an enormous tongue flopping out of his mouth. Oh, he would’ve loved to see that. “That’s genius,” he enthused, and both twins beamed.

“We’ve been inventing loads of stuff over the summer,” George told him.

“We wanted to sell them at Hogwarts, but Mum found the order forms. She’s been fuming ever since.” Fred grimaced, then brightened. “Anyway, how’ve you been, young Harrikins? Everything alright with the muggles?” He looked Harry over in concern. Harry wished he could tell the boys the truth; maybe he’d ask Sirius about it. They could keep secrets with the best of them, and they’d already proven they could be trusted.

“I had a pretty good summer, actually. Been talking to some of my new friends,” he added with a pointed glance. The twins caught on quickly.

“Excellent! Always great having more friends,” Fred said with a wink. “Glad to hear you’re doing alright. Now, we’d better get downstairs and help Mum with dinner, before I go blind from all this orange.” He looked around the room disparagingly, and Harry laughed; Ron’s room was a bit bright, with all its Chudley Cannons regalia. Harry much preferred the Harpies’ colours of green and gold.

When they returned to the kitchen, Mrs Weasley was directing the kids around with the air of a military general. “Oh, good,” she said when she spotted the three of them. “Harry, would you mind helping Ron with the cutlery? Fred, George, the salad is ready to go—oh NOT AGAIN!” She had reached for her wand on the table, only it had turned into a giant rubber mouse with a loud squeak. “BOYS!”

Fred and George shared an alarmed look, grabbed the salad bowl, and sprinted out into the garden. Mrs Weasley huffed, grabbing her real wand and flicking it towards the potatoes, which peeled themselves so violently they bounced off the ceiling. “Honestly, don’t know where we went wrong with those two,” she muttered to herself. “They’ll be brought up in front of the Misuse of Magic Office before they’re twenty.”

Harry grabbed a handful of forks and slowly backed out of the kitchen, not wanting to get involved in that. Clearly the twins had been... busy this summer.

Outside, the two tables they were supposed to be setting were doing battle in mid air thanks to Bill and Charlie, crashing into each other violently overhead. Harry saw Crookshanks dart across the grass, in hot pursuit of a chubby little gnome. Ginny, Ron and the twins were cheering on the table battle, while Hermione looked torn between amusement and anxiety.

“Watch out, Harry!” Bill exclaimed as his table caught Charlie’s with a huge bang and sent one of the legs flying. Harry ducked, coming up laughing. It was almost like being back with Sirius.

There was a clatter overhead, and suddenly Percy’s head was sticking out of an upstairs window, looking quite cross. “Will you keep it down?” he called. “Some of us have *work* to be doing!”

“Sorry, Perce!” Charlie said, grinning. “Didn’t mean to disrupt the cauldron bottoms!”

Percy scowled at him, slamming the window shut again. The two eldest Weasleys chuckled, but obligingly brought the tables down to settle where they were supposed to, reattaching the leg with a quick spell. Bill waved his wand, conjuring clean white tablecloths. Harry started setting cutlery out, and soon enough the table was set for eleven, and Mrs Weasley was directing several steaming dishes out with her wand.

Harry ended up seated between Hermione and Charlie, who quickly got Harry involved in a lively conversation about quidditch. “You should’ve seen the letter Ollie sent me when you joined the team,” the redhead said, smirking. “I thought he was going to cry with joy. That year between me leaving and you starting was... not a good time for them.” He popped a potato in his mouth. “I think you’re the only reason he started speaking to me again at all, actually. When I graduated without leaving a good replacement behind, he swore I was dead to him.”

Harry could absolutely see Oliver Wood doing such a thing.

“Y’know he’s playing reserve for Puddlemere now?” Charlie continued, and Harry raised an eyebrow.

"He told me he was trying out, I didn't realise he got the spot. That's brilliant!" He made a mental note to send a letter to congratulate him. "Might have to start supporting Puddlemere, now."

Charlie snickered. "I dunno, at least let him make the main team first. Can't have it going to his head too quickly," he said with a wink.

They tuned into the conversation opposite them, where Mrs Weasley seemed to be fixated on Bill's earring. "And your hair's getting silly again," she continued, fussing over the ponytail with a frown. "If you'd just let me give it a trim."

"I like it," Harry blurted. Immediately, he went bright red. "I mean, I think it looks cool."

"Yeah, it's nice. You're so old-fashioned, Mum," Ginny piped up from Bill's other side. Bill looked across at Harry and winked. Harry almost dropped his fork in his lap.

Down at the other end of the table, Ron and the twins were discussing the upcoming quidditch match. Ron started to regale Harry with a blow-by-blow of the previous cup matches, but Harry assured him he'd been listening on his Wireless to keep up with the scores. Ron looked a little put-out, but carried on arguing Bulgaria's chances with George, even when Charlie chimed in to point out how talented Ireland's chasers were. Hermione leaned in towards Harry, ducking her head.

"Have you heard from, y'know?" she asked pointedly. It took him a minute to realise she was talking about Sirius. He stifled a smirk; if only she knew.

"Yeah. He's good, he's found somewhere safe to hide out." Somewhere amazing, somewhere Harry already missed desperately.

Not that it wasn't nice, being back at the Burrow, surrounded by his friends again and excited for the quidditch match. The chaos was *very* different to mealtimes at Seren Du, where it was mostly quiet conversation unless Sirius was in a particularly mischievous mood and then all of them were having to watch out for any number of bizarre spells on their food or cutlery.

Dinner faded into dessert, which faded into sitting in the garden having companionable conversation until the sun began to set, at which time Mrs Weasley stood up and began to stack dishes. "Oh, look at the time! You had all best go to bed, you've got an early start tomorrow! Harry, dear, I'm headed to Diagon Alley tomorrow to get everyone's school things, if you want to leave your list out tonight. There might not be time after the cup; the match went on for five days last time!"

Harry faltered, rushing to think of a quick excuse. "Oh, I already got my school things, Mrs Weasley," he said. "The Dursleys had a meeting in London a couple of weeks ago and they dropped me off. I didn't know you'd be coming to get me, and I didn't want to run out of time." That sounded reasonable enough. She didn't know the Dursleys well enough to know that they never, in a million years, would have willingly given Harry a ride to London to buy magic supplies. Ron and Hermione shot him odd looks, but luckily didn't say anything.

“Oh,” Mrs Weasley deflated for a second, then continued clearing the table. “Not to worry, then. That’s one less thing to worry about. I’ll have to send your vault key back to Professor Dumbledore.” That was muttered to herself as an afterthought, but Harry stiffened, his hands clenching under the table. Dumbledore still had his vault key? And was just sending it out however he pleased? Harry should have known.

He made a mental note to include a word about that in the letter he planned to write to Gorak and Farlig about his scar, wondering if there was any way to stop people accessing his vaults without permission. Merlin only knew what the headmaster was doing with free access to Harry’s family vaults.

Between the eleven of them they made short work of taking all the dishes back into the kitchen, and Harry was soon curled up on the cot bed in Ron’s room, closing his eyes and trying not to feel strange about no longer being in his own bedroom. It was funny how quickly he’d gotten used to it. For once, he had somewhere that felt more like home than Hogwarts.

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

What felt like barely fifteen minutes after he'd gone to bed, Harry was awoken by the chime of Ron's alarm clock, and a knock on the door. Mrs Weasley crept inside, smiling when she saw Harry was blinking himself awake. "Time to get up, dear," she whispered, moving to shake Ron, who was sleeping soundly through the alarm. At the foot of Harry's bed, two indistinct shapes were shuffling around. Harry reached for his glasses, seeing the twins sit up with identical groggy stretches, silhouetted in the dark. Even the sun wasn't up yet.

They dressed silently, too sleepy to attempt conversation, and shuffled down the stairs to the kitchen. "Where're the others?" Ron asked through a yawn. Mr Weasley looked up.

"The girls will be down in a minute. The other boys are old enough to apparate, so they get a bit of a lie in." He stood up, holding his arms out with a grin. "What do you think? Do I look like a muggle? We're supposed to go incognito."

He was wearing a golf jumper and a pair of baggy jeans that looked older than Harry was.
"Very good," Harry approved, grinning.

Hermione and Ginny stumbled in, slumping into chairs as Mrs Weasley began to ladle out porridge for everyone. Mr Weasley say back down and shuffled through some pieces of parchment, counting them; their tickets, Harry assumed.

"Eat up, we've got a bit of a walk," Mr Weasley told them, pocketing the tickets. Ginny looked up at him blearily.

"Walk?" she repeated, unimpressed.

"To the portkey," Mr Weasley explained. "With so many people going to the same place, they could only put out a certain number of portkeys. It's why we're up so early, I'm afraid," he added to Harry and Hermione. "Scheduled departure time and all."

"I've done worse for airport runs," Hermione assured him, rubbing at her eyes. His eyes lit up.

"I've always wondered what that was like, flying on an air-plane," he started.

"George!" Mrs Weasley said sharply, making them all jump. It was far too early for sudden loud noises. "What is that in your pockets?"

"Nothing!" The answer came too quickly. Mrs Weasley scowled, and with a quick summoning charm several brightly coloured objects were zooming into her outstretched hand. Harry braced himself for the tirade, seeing Ron do the same across the table. Several

more charms had the sweets flying from all sorts of unexpected places, including the turn-ups of Fred's jeans, Mrs Weasley yelling at them all the while.

If Harry had known they were trying to smuggle them out of the house, he would've offered his services!

After a somewhat frosty goodbye from the Weasley matriarch, they were setting off across the grass by the light of the moon. Harry sped up to walk beside Mr Weasley. "So where's this portkey leaving from, then?" He'd never used a portkey before, but Remus had taught him about them over the summer.

"Stoatshead Hill," Mr Weasley replied, pointing to the land mass rising up in front of them. "There's about two hundred portkeys all over Britain for this, and this is our nearest."

Climbing Stoatshead Hill at the best of times was probably quite the ordeal, but in the dark it was a minefield of rabbit holes and unexpected rocks. All of them were breathless and a little sweaty by the time they reached the top, and Harry saw two silhouettes across the hilltop. "Over here, Arthur!"

"Amos!" Mr Weasley greeted brightly, striding towards the pair and shaking the taller one's hand warmly. As they grew closer, Harry made out the other figure as Cedric Diggory, his brown hair windswept and his cheeks flushed. "Kids, this is Amos Diggory, and I believe you know his son."

"Hi Cedric!" Harry said cheerfully, once it became clear the twins were not going to do so. The rest of the Gryffindor quidditch team still held a grudge against the Hufflepuff seeker for the match last year, even though Harry had told them to let it go.

"Hiya, Harry. Hi, everyone," Cedric added with a quick wave. Hermione and Ginny both giggled quietly. It was a common reaction around Cedric Diggory, Harry had noticed. He didn't really blame them; the Hufflepuff was very handsome.

"Long walk, Arthur?" Amos asked companionably. "We had to get up at two! I'll be glad when he's got his apparition license, I swear. I can't side-along to save my life; I'd splinch us both."

"Only a month away, Dad," Cedric offered supportively. Amos chuckled.

"It's alright, lad. It's worth it for this! Blimey, Arthur," he added, looking around at the gathered crowd. "Don't tell me all these are yours?"

"Oh, no, only the redheads," Mr Weasley assured. "Harry and Hermione are Ron's friends. But I've got three more old enough to apparate themselves."

Amos' eyes moved to Harry, and Harry mentally counted down as soon as he saw the man's eyes flick to his forehead. "Merlin's beard! Harry Potter!" His eyes went wide. "Ced's told me all about you, of course! I said to him, I said, Ced, that'll be something to tell your grandchildren! You beat *Harry Potter* at quidditch!"

Cedric winced, giving Harry an apologetic glance. “I told you, Dad, there were dementors, it wasn’t a fair match.”

“Oh, you Hufflepuffs!” Amos dismissed, clapping his son on the shoulder. “It doesn’t take a genius to see who’s the better flier when one man falls off his broom and the other stays on! Eh, Harry?”

“I mean, if you’d like to try playing quidditch while listening to your mother’s screams as she’s murdered in front of you,” Harry retorted evenly, “by all means, be my guest.”

That took the wind out of Amos’ sails, and there were several long, awkward seconds of silence before Mr Weasley coughed. “Do you know if we’re waiting for any more, Amos? Must be nearly time.”

“No, no, it’s just us,” Amos replied, somewhat stilted.

“We’d best get ready, then. Gather round, everyone.”

The portkey turned out to be an old boot, and it took them a minute to get situated so that all nine of them were stood in a tight circle, each with a hand on the boot. They waited as the sun slowly began to rise, Mr Weasley offering a countdown until—

Harry felt like a hook was jerking him from the navel, and suddenly his feet left the ground, Ron and Hermione slamming into his shoulders on either side as they sped upwards in a swirl of colour and wind. It all ended abruptly, his feet slamming into the earth, and he almost kept his balance until Ron staggered into him, knocking him to the ground.

Cedric offered him a hand up, grinning sheepishly. “Easy there, Harry.” He brushed some dirt off Harry’s arm. “Look, I’m sorry about my dad,” he said under his breath. “I’ve tried talking to him, but he’s just—“

“It’s fine,” Harry insisted. “Really. He’s proud of you, it’s nice.” Cedric gave a half-grimace.

“We still on for that rematch?” he checked. Harry nodded keenly.

“Absolutely. See you later, yeah?” he added once he realised they were parting ways. “Enjoy the match.”

He waved Cedric off, and as soon as they turned away he found himself accosted on either side by a Weasley twin. “You’re getting awfully cosy with Diggory there, Harry,” Fred muttered. It took Harry a second to realise what he was implying, and he blushed bright red.

“We’re friends! He’s a nice guy. He feels really bad about the match still, you should let up on him.”

George eyed him doubtfully. “Hmm. Still. Bill’s better looking.”

Harry spluttered. They had noticed that! He covered his face with his hands, mortified. “Don’t worry about it, Harry!” Fred said, nudging him in the ribs with a grin. “Our big

brother's very fanciable." He wiggled his eyebrows salaciously. "Bit old for you, mind, but whatever makes you happy."

"I don't fancy your brother!" he hissed in an aggressive whisper, sure he'd never been redder in his life. He glanced around to check the others weren't listening. "I don't," he repeated insistently. The twins shared a skeptical look.

"*Sure,*" they said in sarcastic unison. Harry glared at them. He didn't even like boys like that!

Okay. That was a bit of a lie.

And Bill *was* really attractive.

But that didn't mean Harry fancied him! He could think people were hot without fancying them. Besides, he much preferred blondes...

His cheeks burned when he realised what he'd thought. Where had that come from??

Either way, he wasn't interested in Bill Weasley. He was basically family!

"What are you three whispering about back there?" Ron asked suspiciously as Mr Weasley finished paying the muggle campsite manager, heading off into the field.

"None of your business!" the twins retorted cheerfully. Ron scowled at them.

Harry could hardly believe some of the tents they walked past, each more elaborate than the next. Wizards were ridiculous! The tents Mr Weasley had borrowed were much more ordinary-looking, and Harry shared a glance with Hermione when they walked in, wide-eyed at the space inside.

"I love magic," he muttered, and she giggled, nodding in agreement.

He, Ron and Hermione were sent off to find water in short order. Harry wasn't sure why they couldn't just conjure some, but Mr Weasley seemed determined to have as much of the muggle camping experience as possible. It was still pretty early, so there weren't many people up and about, but the more they walked the more the campground began to come to life. Harry could see several familiar faces; it looked like half of Hogwarts had managed to get tickets!

While Ron and Hermione were talking to Seamus and Dean, Harry caught sight of Ernie Macmillan, and waved cheerfully, jogging over to the stocky Hufflepuff. "Hi, Ernie! Good summer?" he asked, as if he hadn't been owling the other boy semi-regularly.

"Oh, y'know, not bad," Ernie replied. "Yourself?"

"It's been great," Harry replied. "Got to learn a bit about my family. Get to know some new friends a little better," he said vaguely. Ernie's smile widened.

"Excellent, excellent. Glad to hear it. I've got to get going, but we'll catch up properly at school, yeah?" Harry nodded, letting the Hufflepuff get on with his morning. He hurried back

to Ron and Hermione, who were just finishing up their conversation.

“Who were you talking to, Harry?” Ron asked as they walked, and Harry shrugged.

“Just some people from school. Oh, look, there’s the tap.”

On the way back, Harry was almost bowled over by Oliver Wood, who jumped on his back in greeting and ruffled his hair, dragging him towards his tent to introduce Harry to his parents. “Charlie told me the news, by the way. That’s amazing, Oliver, congratulations!”

Oliver glowed with pride. “Thanks, Harry. You’ll have to come to a match once the season starts back up!”

Just then, a familiar head ducked out of the tent beside Oliver’s family. “Oliver, I swear, are you going on about Puddlemere *again*?” He looked up and blinked at the sight of Harry. “Potter!”

It was Cassius Warrington, one of Harry’s tentative new allies. “Warrington,” he greeted neutrally, unsure exactly how to interact with the older boy in public, though they’d been writing all summer. He glanced between the two. “Are you two friends or something?” He hadn’t thought they knew each other outside of quidditch rivalry. The pair shared a look, glancing away quickly.

“Nah, just coincidence,” Oliver dismissed. “Randomly assigned campsites, y’know? Anyway, I don’t want to keep you too long. Write to me when you’re back at school, yeah? I want to know what the new keeper ends up like.”

Harry bid the two farewell, still eyeing them bemusedly.

Eventually, they made it back to their campsite, which seemed to have gained a few more members. The eldest three Weasley boys had arrived, and Bill and Charlie seemed to have amassed a crowd of their own.

“You guys took ages!” Fred complained, taking the water from Ron.

“Met a few people,” Ron replied with a wave of his hand. “Dad still not got the fire going?”

“He’s having fun with matches,” George said. They turned to see the man, sat surrounded by spent matches, and Hermione let out a fond sigh.

“I’ll help.” She sat down beside him, gently taking the matchbox.

Harry left her to it, wandering over to Bill and Charlie’s group curiously. He didn’t recognise any of them; presumably they were friends the older Weasleys had at Hogwarts.

“Alright, Harry?” Charlie greeted companionably, beckoning him closer. “We’re having a bit of a reunion. Harry, this is everyone. Everyone, this is Harry Potter.”

“I thought you were taking the piss when you said you knew Harry Potter!” a blond man blurted, slapping a hand over his mouth immediately. Charlie laughed.

"Nah, he's mates with all the younger ones," he replied, gesturing to his scattered siblings.

"Mum's basically adopted him," Bill agreed, clapping Harry on the shoulder. "Don't mind André, Harry. He gets a bit star-struck."

"Wotcher, Harry!" A woman with bright green pixie-cut hair waved at him. "I'm Tonks." That prompted a round of introductions, and Harry only remembered about three names, but they quickly moved on to talking about people and events that Harry didn't know, reminiscing their old Hogwarts days, and Harry discreetly excused himself from the conversation, heading over to where Mr Weasley now had the fire going.

Bill and Charlie's friends didn't stick around much longer, all having other places to be, and the two eldest Weasley boys rejoined the family in time for lunch, while Mr Weasley kept up a running commentary of people he knew walking by. Percy emerged from the tent at the smell of food, muttering about how much work he still had to do.

They were joined by Ludo Bagman, and later Barty Crouch, and Harry hadn't realised just how many people at the Ministry Mr Weasley was friends with. Harry tried to stay out of the conversations the best he could, listening in interest but trying not to draw attention to himself; after spending the summer thus far with only three people, all of whom couldn't give two shits about his scar or celebrity status, it was exhausting having to go through the Famous Harry Potter fuss with every other person who stopped by.

Several hints were dropped about what was happening at Hogwarts this year — mostly by Percy Weasley, who seemed all too smug to know something his younger siblings didn't. Harry merely hid his smile, pretending to be just as oblivious as his friends. They'd find out soon enough.

At last, it was time to head to the match. Harry was surprised to hear they were up in the top box, making him wonder exactly what kind of favours Mr Weasley had called in — and how many times he might've dropped that he was planning on bringing Harry Potter with him. It made something uneasy settle in his stomach; sure, he was glad to be going to the cup, and glad that all the Weasleys got to go too, but the idea that someone he trusted was using his name to curry favours without his consent made him feel a little bit sick.

Harry put the thought out of his mind, determined not to let anything put a damper on his enjoyment of the day. Even Ron's whining about not having enough money to afford souvenirs. He was at the final of the Quidditch World Cup, and nothing would bring him down. He wouldn't let it.

.-.-.-

The match was incredible.

Things got off to a bit of a rocky start in the top box, when Minister Fudge arrived and immediately started showing Harry off to the Bulgarian Minister like some sort of national landmark. Harry's name had *definitely* been involved in getting ten top box tickets. Then the Malfoys arrived, and Ron immediately started making disparaging remarks about Draco. Harry, who had brightened up slightly at the sight of the blond, merely had to settle for

making pointed eye contact with both him and Narcissa, and glaring at Lucius Malfoy when he mocked Mr Weasley quietly.

However, Bagman arrived and quickly kicked things off, and from there it was fantastic. Harry didn't get all starry-eyed over the veela unlike most of the other boys — he noted Draco didn't either, staying in his seat with a look of mild entertainment. Ron would've dived off the edge of the box if Hermione hadn't yanked him back to his seat by his collar.

The entire stadium could've been filled with veela and Harry wouldn't have noticed once the match began. He kept the Omnioculars pressed to his face for most of the match, watching eagerly as the players zoomed around the pitch and passed at frightening speeds. The Irish chasers really were a force to be reckoned with, but it was Viktor Krum Harry couldn't keep his eyes off. The man's flying was *incredible*.

Both seekers looked a right mess when they made it up to the top box for the award ceremony. Harry watched the players in awe, wondering exactly how one went about becoming a professional quidditch player.

That would be a pretty cool career...

The entire campground was a riot of celebrations when they headed back to their tents; even the tents decorated in Bulgarian red and black seemed to have decided to join in the fun and celebrate a snitch well caught. The Weasley family celebration was a little more subdued, but Charlie still pulled a crate of butterbeer from somewhere — and a bottle of firewhiskey for the adults. The twins tried to sneak some, but Bill was used to his brothers' tricks, and hexed them so all their fingers were stuck together at the tips.

It was only when Ginny fell asleep at the table and knocked over her hot chocolate that Mr Weasley declared it bedtime, sending the girls off to their tent. Harry wondered how all his other schoolmates were celebrating; was there a big group of Hogwarts students out there somewhere, cheering and singing under the firework-strewn sky? He was surprised the older Weasley boys weren't off celebrating with their friends, but he supposed they didn't see their younger siblings all that often. Harry was glad for the extra company; Bill and Charlie were a lot like the twins, and it was great fun having them around.

Harry crawled into his bed with a yawn— only to bolt upright seconds later when an earsplitting scream echoed from outside the tent. That was *not* a scream of joy.

He and Ron rushed into the living room, where all the other boys were stood looking alarmed. "What was that?" Percy asked cautiously. Several more screams rang out, and it sounded like huge groups of people were running. Mr Weasley hurried back into the tent, face pale in the dim light.

"Death Eaters," he declared grimly, and the eldest three Weasleys cursed. Harry felt sick.

"Are you sure?" Bill asked urgently, already grabbing his wand. Charlie and Percy were doing the same.

"Positive. Kids, hurry — grab your jackets and get outside, now. I'm going to get the girls." Mr Weasley left again, and Harry ran to grab a jacket and his boots, double checking his wand was safe in its holster. He, Ron and the twins ran outside the tent, skidding to a halt when they saw the chaos outside. People were fleeing from a group of people in robes and masks, spells flashing and drunken jeering echoing behind the screams. Above the masked group was... *oh God*. The muggle who ran the campground, and his family. The masked wizards were levitating them high in the air, flipping the woman over and laughing when her nightdress rode up.

Hermione and Ginny emerged from their tents, horror immediately setting in on their faces. A second later, the three eldest Weasley boys stepped out, fully dressed and wands out, their sleeves rolled up. "We're going to help the Ministry," Mr Weasley shouted over the noise. "You lot get into the woods, and *stick together!* I'll come fetch you when it's safe. Fred, George, look after your sister," he added, getting two grave nods before he was off following his eldest sons towards the chaos.

Fred grabbed Ginny by the hand, tugging her towards the woods. Together they all sprinted for safety, falling in with the crowds of fleeing people.

The rest of the night was a blur.

They lost track of Ginny and the twins within minutes, but Harry knew the twins would keep the youngest Weasley safe. He and Hermione went to light the way, at which point Ron realised he'd lost his wand. "I have to go back and look for it!" he insisted. "Mum and Dad'll kill me if they have to get me another one." He started walking against the flow of traffic, and Hermione looked at Harry with a mix of fear and exasperation.

"Ronald!" she called, hurrying after him. Harry made to follow, but a flash of blond caught his eye.

"Malfoy," he called, aware he was in public. Draco, who was leaning against a tree and watching things through a gap in the woods, turned with raised eyebrows.

"Potter. Don't tell me you're out alone in this?" There was a hint of concern in his voice. Harry edged closer, keeping an eye out for his friends.

"Ron and Hermione are back there. Ron lost his wand."

"Idiot," Draco muttered, shaking his head.

"Are you alright?" Harry met his gaze, looking past his unaffected facade to the worry deep in his grey eyes. "Where's your mother?"

Draco's lip quivered. "Father insisted she stay by his side." His words were stiff, and comprehension dawned on Harry. He stared at him in horror.

"She's not— they're not—" Draco nodded. His parents were out there in masks, hurting the muggles and causing chaos. Hailing Voldemort.

"He wouldn't take no for an answer. The only reason he let me go is that I'm underage."

Uncaring that anyone could walk by them, Harry reached out and grabbed Draco's hand, squeezing tight. "She'll be okay," he said, wishing he could promise that. Draco looked down at their interlocked fingers, then back up at Harry. "She's been through this before. She knows how to blend in with a group like that. She'll be fine."

Slowly, Draco nodded.

There was the crack of a twig snapping, and a muffled cry that could only be Ron. Harry let go of Draco's hand quickly, stepping back. "You alright there, Ron?" he called out.

"There you are, Harry! Yeah, fine, just tripped on a root. No sign of my wand."

"With feet that big, I'm not surprised," Draco drawled, his Ice Prince mask firmly back in place. It made something in Harry's chest twist painfully.

"Malfoy," Ron growled. "What are you doing here?"

Harry tried to stop the exchange descending into a brawl, taking Draco's veiled warning and ushering Hermione deeper into the woods, urging Ron to leave Draco alone. "You don't even have your wand, you can't hex him," he pointed out.

"Yeah, but you could," Ron retorted. "Merlin, Mum's gonna be furious if I can't find it."

"I'm sure it's back in the tent," Hermione said, though she sounded doubtful.

They kept walking, keeping an eye out for the twins and Ginny, and almost lost Ron to three veela in the woods. When they reached a small clearing, Harry suggested they stop and wait.

That was where everything went wrong.

Soon, he found himself staring up in horror at the enormous skull and snake hovering in the sky; the Dark Mark, in all its glory. They barely managed to make it a few steps away before they were surrounded by Ministry wizards, ducking a barrage of stunning spells. Harry instinctively had his wand in his hand when he got to his feet, though there was no need; Mr Weasley was running through the crowd, yelling for the wizards to leave them alone.

What followed was the most disastrous attempt at an investigation Harry had had the misfortune to witness; in the back of his mind was a voice that sounded awfully like Snape, calling everyone dunderheads and imbeciles as the wizards proceeded to accuse three teenagers — one of whom was *Harry Potter* — of conjuring Voldemort's sigil, followed by Mr Crouch's house elf. Harry's heart broke for the poor elf he'd seen in the top box earlier, watching her sob as her master dismissed her. Sirius had taught him about house elves when he'd asked about Ceri; they needed to be bonded to houses, or their magic would start to go wonky and make them sick. They'd die if they stayed free for too long. Harry wished he'd known that when he'd freed Dobby. Then again, he doubted whatever happened to a free elf could be any worse than working for Lucius Malfoy.

Ron's wand being used to cast the Mark didn't do them any favours, but they eventually got it all sorted out and made it back to their tents, where luckily the rest of the Weasley family were waiting mostly unharmed. Bill had a cut across his cheek and Percy's right sleeve was a little charred, but other than that they were fine. Ginny was chalk-white, tucked into Charlie's side.

They gathered in the bigger tent, no one willing to tell the girls to go back to bed after that ordeal. The trio ended up sharing what had happened to them, and Ron asked about the Dark Mark, not understanding why it was such a big deal. Harry stayed silent through Mr Weasley's explanation, but forgot to pretend to be unaware of such things — all the things Snape and Remus had taught him over the summer, about the first rise of Voldemort and why it was such a bad sign that Snape's Dark Mark was hurting again. Mr Weasley shot Harry an odd look when he didn't react to Bill's remark that the crowd was obviously Death Eaters who had lied to keep themselves out of Azkaban. Harry covered it with a yawn, hoping the man would just believe he was zoning out due to exhaustion. It had been one hell of a day.

They were all sent to bed shortly after, though Harry lay awake for a long while, listening to Charlie's soft snores. He wished there were a little more privacy in the tent; he had the two way mirror in his bag, and he was desperate to talk to Sirius and tell him what happened. He'd no doubt find out from the *Prophet* in the morning. If Snape didn't know already. Had he been part of the group? To keep his cover?

Harry's nerves tied knots in his guts as he squeezed his eyes shut, imagining Remus staying up late worried about his partner, Sirius pacing the living room and demanding to go check Harry was okay. He'd call them in the morning, as soon as he could get some time to himself.

.-.-.-.

They'd only had a few hours sleep when Mr Weasley woke them all up, and soon they were packed and trudging back to the crowded portkey departure point.

Mrs Weasley was waiting anxiously when they returned, rushing forward to meet them at the garden gate. She threw herself into her husband's arms, before hugging each of her children in turn, then Harry and Hermione. "Oh, thank goodness! I was so worried! The paper said there were *bodies*, oh, you're alive!" She doubled back to hug the twins, sobbing about having yelled at them before they left.

Breakfast was a somber affair, Mr Weasley and Percy barely staying long enough to wolf down some toast before they headed into the Ministry to start dealing with the aftermath. Harry didn't know who Rita Skeeter was, but he already didn't like her; that article was causing more fear and worry than the Death Eaters themselves!

He got his chance to slip away when the other Weasleys decided to start up a game of quidditch in the garden. Promising to be out in a minute, he hurried up to Ron's room and dug through his backpack for the two-way mirror. "Sirius Black," he said quickly — it was barely a second before Sirius' worried face filled the glass. He'd obviously been waiting for the call.

"Harry! Are you alright? Remus, it's Harry!" There was a beat, and Remus' face squeezed in beside Sirius', Sirius having to hold the mirror a little further out so they could both see.

"I'm fine, everything's fine," Harry assured hurriedly.

"What happened? The *Prophet* article was full of so much bullshit it's hard to tell what the truth is," Sirius said, ignoring the scolding look Remus gave him for swearing.

Harry gave the pair a quick summary of the night's events, including the events with Crouch's elf and the Dark Mark.

"Barty Crouch has always been a heartless bastard," Sirius growled, his eyes dark. "You're sure you're alright?"

"Completely, I promise," Harry insisted. He wished he could reach through the mirror and hug his godfather; he'd gotten far too used to the easy affection over the summer. "Sirius, you have to send a letter to Mrs Malfoy. I— Lucius was part of the group, and Draco said he made her be part of it too."

Sirius and Remus shared a grim look.

"I'll ask Severus to check in on her," Remus promised. "He's away at the moment, doing some damage control."

"He wasn't there last night, was he?" Harry asked, relieved when Remus shook his head.

"No, he was home. Had no idea about it all until it was too late. Obviously they were only involving people who were already at the cup."

"Who could have cast the Dark Mark?"

Both adults shrugged, and Sirius ran a hand through his hair. "It could've been any number of people. We'll look into things, but don't dwell on it too much, alright pup? Enjoy the rest of your summer, leave this to the adults." He let out a long sigh. "Merlin, I'm so glad you're safe."

"I miss you," Harry confessed in a whisper. "All of you." Even Snape, to his surprise.

"We miss you too, cub," Remus replied. "It's been far too quiet without you around. Except for the fireworks Sirius let off in the entrance hall," he added with a reprimanding look. Sirius grinned, giving an over-exaggerated innocent face.

Harry knew they were just trying to cheer him up, but he couldn't help but laugh all the same. "I should go, the others will be wondering what's taking me so long." He'd told them he was going to the bathroom. They probably thought he'd fallen in.

"Let us know if anything else happens. Keep in touch, and have a good week. We love you, pup." Sirius kissed his fingers, pressing them to the mirror's surface. Harry's heart clenched.

He reluctantly ended the call, taking a minute to compose himself before tucking the mirror back in his bag and heading out to the garden with his broom in hand, plastering a smile on his face when he saw the Weasley siblings already airborne, Hermione reading a book on the grass below. “There you are, mate! We’ve been waiting for you!” Ron called, waving him over. Harry kicked off into the sky, trying to leave his worries on the ground. There was nothing he could do about it all now.

.-.-.-

Severus returned home just in time for dinner, and the first thing Remus said was that they’d heard from Potter. “He’s fine, they’re all fine,” he assured. Severus felt the dread inside him build with every word as Remus relayed what had happened in the woods.

“Narcissa is well,” he informed his partner and Black when Remus mentioned Harry’s worries. He’d been to see her and Draco earlier, while Lucius was at the Ministry. “Shaken, but well. She was indeed part of the group involved in the muggle-baiting. She believes the whole thing was Lucius’ idea — or at least, he was involved in the planning. She said he didn’t tell her a thing beforehand, but he knew exactly where to go when it started.” It was exactly the sort of thing Lucius Malfoy would do, wanting to cause chaos and horror at such a public event. If he and the other loyal Death Eaters were getting the same signs he was, they would of course get braver and bolder in their hateful acts. If they believed the Dark Lord was on his way to returning, they would want to drum up as much fear as possible before that day arrived. “This is only the beginning, you realise.”

The two Gryffindors looked grim, hardly touching their dinner. “Snape,” Black said eventually. “I know we have a difficult history.” Severus snorted; that was the biggest understatement he’d heard in a while. “And I know we still have our differences, despite the things that bring us together.” Here he glanced at Remus, who bumped his knee against Severus’ under the table. “But please, for Remus if not for me, *please* look after Harry when he’s back at school. He can’t defend himself properly, not with Dumbledore lurking over his shoulder. If anything were to happen to him...” He didn’t need to finish; it would devastate both men if something were to befall Potter. “Just, please. He needs all the allies he can get. I can’t be there for him, but you can.”

Severus pursed his lips. Were they really going to make him say it? “I’ll admit, I have come to... tolerate the boy,” he said, as if the very confession pained him. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Remus try to hide a fond smile. Damnable wolf. “This summer has made me realise he’s not as arrogant as I initially believed. When he’s not being antagonised, he’s... not terrible.” There, that was as good as they were getting. Truthfully, Severus actually quite liked the Potter boy now; he was unexpectedly witty, and his Slytherin tendencies showed through in interesting — and sometimes amusing — ways. He now saw what Remus said when he said Potter — *Harry* — was so much like Lily. Sometimes his words, those green eyes staring back at him... it was like having her back.

“I’ll watch over him, as faithfully as you would,” he vowed to the pair of Gryffindors. Not only because he knew his life would not be worth living should Remus hear he’d let something happen to the boy on his watch. He didn’t want any harm to come to Harry either.

"I will still need to keep up appearances, but his safety is my priority." He'd risked his life for the boy before, back when he hated him. He could certainly do it now Harry was tolerable.

"*Thank you,*" Black breathed, his eyes grateful. "Snape... Severus. Thank you."

It was strange, hearing his given name come from the Gryffindor's lips without a hint of mockery or derision. At the beginning of the summer they'd agreed to be cordial, for Remus' sake, but the more time they spent together the more Severus was realising that Black wasn't the bullheaded little brat he had been when they were teenagers. Harry wasn't the only one who had become tolerable.

"We are on the same side, Sirius," he said, the name feeling odd on his tongue. "If war is to come, then there is no place for childhood grudges here."

Sirius nodded to him across the table, the understand passing between them. Beside him, Remus beamed with pride.

"I knew you two would warm up to each other eventually," he said fondly. Severus scoffed.

They weren't friends, by any stretch of the imagination. But maybe between Remus and Harry and the oncoming darkness, they could be something like it.

Chapter End Notes

Also, for those of you asking if the chapter count is accurate - yes, there are indeed 109 chapters in this bad boy. Buckle up, friends.

Chapter 18

Despite the hectic start, the rest of Harry's time at the Burrow was much the same as it always was. Mr Weasley and Percy were barely present for the week that followed the World Cup, drowning in work and howlers and more scathing articles from Rita Skeeter. Harry felt bad for them; even Percy didn't deserve that.

Having the two eldest Weasley boys around was a nice change in the dynamic, too. They weren't always home, taking the opportunity to visit British friends they hadn't seen in a while, but when they were around they were usually fairly game for whatever shenanigans the teenagers had planned. Harry made sure to spend plenty of time talking to them, remembering what Hannah had said the year before about the two likely being the next heirs to the Weasley and Prewett seats. He never quite managed to bring up the subject with them, but he got to know them well enough to tell they were probably trustworthy.

The one thing Harry couldn't quite get used to was not using his wand. He'd gotten so used to being able to cast spells without hesitation at Seren Du, he kept finding himself with his wand in his hand before he could catch the habit. It earned him some odd looks from Ron and Hermione, but Harry suspected they just thought he was jumpy after the Cup.

Whatever time Ron and Hermione had spent together before Harry had arrived at the Burrow, they'd clearly used it to talk through the last of the issues they'd had from the previous year, when Ron had accused Hermione's cat of eating Scabbers and been awful to her for half the school year. Then again, finding out that rat was actually a Death Eater in disguise had probably gone a long way to easing that argument. Things were almost back to normal between the trio — except Harry was still keeping secrets, and Ron and Hermione didn't seem to realise that he'd grown up some in the last year while they'd been busy arguing. Ron didn't like it when Harry shot down all his disparaging remarks about Slytherins, and Hermione had nearly exploded when Harry had refused her offer to help him finish his summer homework.

"I got it all done at the Dursleys'," he insisted. "Thanks, but you guys go ahead." The offer had only come when Ron had realised he still had a stack of essays to complete, and Hermione had pestered him into getting them done *before* they were on the train to school.

"I can go over them for you, then," Hermione replied dismissively. Harry bristled at the insinuation that his work wasn't good enough.

"I don't need you to go over them for me, Hermione, but thank you." He tried to stay polite. Even if she didn't know he'd already had Remus go over his summer homework, who was she to just *assume* his work would need checking and correcting?

"Don't be silly, Harry, I really don't mind. You'll be better off for it."

"I'm happy with my work how it is," Harry replied between clenched teeth. "I'm going to go find the twins." He slipped out of the room before she could argue with him further, rolling his eyes when Ron complained about having to study when Harry wasn't.

Last year, Hermione had been too busy with her overloaded timetable and Buckbeak's appeal to care much about Harry's grades. If she was going to spend the whole next year insisting he needed her help, ignoring the fact that he was clearly capable by himself, they were going to have issues.

.-. .

One afternoon, a couple of days before they were due to go back to school, they were all out in the garden, enjoying the last dregs of the summer sunshine. Hermione and Ginny were stretched out on a blanket by the pond, talking quietly and giggling every now and then; the two girls were thick as thieves this summer, and Harry sort-of wondered what they talked about all the time. From some of the looks they sent him before bursting into giggles, he probably didn't want to know.

Harry and the other boys were, as they often were, high in the air on their brooms. Bill had brought an old quaffle home with him, and they were tossing it between them, thinking up increasingly ridiculous forfeits for anyone who dropped it. Harry was currently having to sit sidesaddle on his broom, which made it even harder to catch future passes. He was doing alright, though; Charlie was working with one hand spelled behind his back, and it was not doing him any favours.

"This is ridiculous," the dragon tamer complained when the quaffle dropped to the ground below him. "I was never a chaser for a reason!" He swooped down to grab it, zooming back to the same level as the rest of them. "They're putting us seekers through our paces, eh?" he added to Harry with a grin. "If we had a snitch, we could show them."

Harry remembered the little wooden box tucked away in his trunk. "I've got a practice snitch," he volunteered. Charlie stared at him.

"And you're just mentioning this *now*? Poor show, Potter!" He shook his head exasperatedly. Then he grinned, eyes flashing in challenge. "Fancy a seeker's match?"

Harry, who — other than the one glorious day when Draco visited — had been chasing the snitch all summer without any real competition for it, smirked. "You're on." He landed and raced up to Ron's bedroom, squeezing through the extra beds and piles of clothing to get to his trunk, digging through until he found the box containing his practice snitch. When he got back out into the garden, all the boys had landed, and even Ginny and Hermione had abandoned their blanket, interested in the proceedings.

Bill held a hand out, and Harry passed him the box. "Alright, seekers," he announced, taking the whole thing incredibly seriously, though there was a curve to his lips he couldn't quite hide. "Here's the rules. Snitch gets a ten second head start, with your eyes closed. If it goes over the property line, we'll have to summon it back; don't want the muggles seeing anything they shouldn't. And I want a good, clean match, alright?" He was channelling Madam Hooch, and it made both seekers snicker.

Harry and Charlie shook hands, then mounted their brooms but kept their feet on the ground. Bill flicked the lid of the box open, and Harry's eyes were on the little golden ball as it unfurled its wings and shot off into the air. Bill cleared his throat, and Harry squeezed his

eyes shut. The other Weasley siblings started up a loud countdown, and even Hermione got involved halfway through. “Three... two... one... GO!”

Both seekers were off like a rocket, Harry much faster than Charlie. The older seeker was on one of the newer model Cleansweeps; an excellent broom, but no match for the Firebolt. He did a wide loop around the back yard, keeping his eyes peeled for a flash of gold.

Unable to help himself, Harry threw in a few of the tricks and rolls he’d been working on over the summer, earning whoops and cheers from their small audience. Charlie laughed as he tailed Harry through a particularly sharp Wollongong Shimmy. “You’ll have to try better than that to lose me, Potter!”

Grinning at the challenge, Harry shot up high, and Charlie followed. All of a sudden, Harry caught a glimpse of the snitch down below, and his smirk widened. Time to *really* show off a bit. Turning the nose of his broom to the ground, he dived full speed downwards, Charlie following him with a shouted curse. Harry kept going, picking up speed, growing closer and closer to the grass. The rest of the world faded away, his focus narrowed entirely to his broom and the snitch hovering above the ground. He was vaguely aware when Charlie pulled out of the dive, not willing to risk his neck, but Harry waited until the last second, veering off course and reaching out as his toes skimmed the grass, grabbing the snitch on his way past.

Slowing to a halt, he held the gold ball up to a gobsmacked Charlie, winking. “Found it,” he said. The redhead gaped.

“You certainly did, didn’t you,” he agreed faintly, drifting closer. “Blimey, Harry. I think Oliver might’ve actually been *underplaying* you a bit in his letters. That was some serious flying!” He ruffled Harry’s hair, and Harry grinned at him. They returned to the ground, where the audience was cheering, and he even saw money exchange hands between Fred and Ron, the latter looking put-out.

“You bet against me?” Harry asked in mock-offence, watching Ron’s ears redden.

“Well, no offence mate, but Charlie was *really* good, and—“ He stuttered out some half-hearted excuses, and Harry laughed.

“You could’ve just said you were showing family solidarity.” He was still a little breathless, exhilarated from the tense flying. He turned back to the dragon tamer. “Want to go again? Swap brooms this time?” He wanted to make sure he wasn’t relying too much on his fancy broom to get ahead. Charlie’s eyes lit up.

“You’ll let me ride your Firebolt?” he gasped. Harry nodded. “You’re on! Best three out of five?”

“What do I get for winning?” Harry asked cheekily, making Charlie bark out a laugh.

“Cocky little sod. If you win, I’ll owe you a favour. To be called in at any time you like, no questions asked, *even* if it’s to hex one of my siblings. Also I’ll let you take the rest of that bottle of firewhisky to school,” he added as an afterthought. “If I win, you’ll owe *me* a

favour, no questions asked. And I get to use your Firebolt as much as I like before you go back to school.”

Harry would’ve let Charlie borrow his Firebolt anyway, so he agreed to the terms. Though he did wonder what kind of favour the dragon tamer might ask of him. He didn’t plan on losing, so it was a moot point.

“So we’re at one to Harry. Firebolt trades hands every round, and if it looks like whoever’s riding it is winning because of that, Harry can take my broom,” Bill declared, still in referee-mode. “Ready?”

They traded brooms, and the match began anew. Charlie was having a whale of a time on the Firebolt, zooming around and whooping in joy. Harry kept up with him fairly well on the Cleansweep, getting used to its speed and turning radius. Within the first few minutes, he had eyes on the snitch, and was off. Charlie was hot on his tail, overtaking him quickly, but Harry pulled out a tricky little manoeuvre that had him pulling in front again, hand closing around the snitch. They slowed to a halt, and Charlie stared at him. “Aw, fuck,” he muttered. Harry snorted.

But it wasn’t over that easily. Charlie won the third round, the snitch drifting by him while he and Harry were at opposite ends of the garden. The fourth round was extremely close, but Harry managed to just edge out in front.

“And that’s 3-1 to Mr Harry Potter!” Bill announced over the cheering of their spectators. Charlie cursed, but he was smiling as he landed.

“Bloody hell, Harry. That’s seriously impressive.” They shook hands.

“You made it hard for me, though!” Harry insisted. “Considering you’ve not played a proper match since you graduated, wow.”

Charlie chuckled. “You flatter me, but thank you. I suppose I’ll just wait for you to call in your favour then, hmm?”

Harry had no idea what he might need the Weasley brother for, but it was always good to have options to call on. He put the snitch carefully back in its box, taking his Firebolt back from Charlie.

They were called in for dinner shortly after, and Harry left his broom in the hallway with the others, heading for the delicious scent of food coming from the kitchen.

“Oh, I hope they’re home soon,” Mrs Weasley fretted, looking from the two empty spots at the table to the clock in the corner that declared them to be at work. “Arthur hasn’t had to work this much since the war.”

All the kids shared uneasy glances. “I’m sure they’ll be home in a bit, Mum,” Bill soothed. “Probably just got held up chatting, you know what Dad’s like.”

Luckily at that minute, the hands moved from ‘work’ to ‘travelling’, and a pair of quiet pops heralded the arrival of the last two members of the family. Mr Weasley looked worn-out, greeting his wife with a kiss on the cheek and sinking wearily into his chair. “Merlin, what a week,” he sighed, shaking his head. “I’ll be glad when this all blows over. It would’ve done ages ago if Skeeter didn’t keep pushing those awful articles.”

“At least it’s getting people to take the search for Bertha Jorkins seriously,” Percy pointed out. “Mr Crouch has been saying for weeks that someone needed to look for her.” Behind his back, the twins fluttered their eyelashes and mock-swooned, mouthing ‘*Mr Crouch*’ over-dramatically. Harry sniggered into his stew.

“Crouch is very lucky Rita hasn’t found out about Winky,” Mr Weasley retorted irritably. “And is probably just hoping it stays that way.”

That set Hermione off about house elves, and Harry winced. He appreciated the sentiment, but she really needed to learn to research something properly before forming an opinion and mouthing off to anyone who would listen.

“Why don’t you all go up and finish packing,” Mrs Weasley cut in before Hermione could really get on her soapbox. “I put all your new school things in your rooms. Hermione, dear, I got that book you asked for. And I finished the laundry.”

“Thanks, Mrs Weasley,” Hermione said automatically, diverted from her tirade. For now.

Everyone of Hogwarts age trudged upstairs, and Harry heard rain thundering against the windows. “Sounds like we finished flying just in time,” he mused, heading up to Ron’s room. All the twins’ things were still in their room, which was housing Bill and Charlie for now. Except, of course, the bag full of Weasley’s Wizards Wheezes stashed in Harry’s trunk, just in case Mrs Weasley decided to do one last search.

Harry hadn’t really *unpacked* since arriving, so repacking his things didn’t take long once he’d ducked downstairs to go get his broom, trying not to eavesdrop on the conversation the adults were having in the kitchen. Sirius had told him to stay out of it and let the adults handle things, and he was going to try his best to follow that.

When he returned to Ron’s room, the redheaded boy was holding up what looked like a long maroon velvet dress, with mouldy-looking lace at the cuffs and collar. His face was a clear mask of disgust. “What the hell is this?”

Harry had a strong sense of foreboding as the answer popped into his mind. They all had dress robes on their school requirement list this year; Snape had said there was always some sort of formal event involved in the Triwizard Tournament. Harry had, with Remus’ help, chosen a set of dark green robes with gold accents. He actually thought he looked quite dashing in them.

Surely Mrs Weasley wasn’t expecting Ron to wear *that*?

The woman in question knocked on the door, entering with a pile of freshly laundered school robes draped over her arm. “Here you are, Ron, dear. Harry, are you absolutely sure you don’t

want me to do yours as well? I can get them done tonight.”

“It’s fine, thanks, Mrs Weasley,” Harry assured. Ceri had taken care of all his clothes before he’d left, including his robes and his new cloak.

“Mum, you’ve given me Ginny’s new dress,” Ron said, holding out the offending garment.

Mrs Weasley confirmed that they were indeed Ron’s dress robes, and Harry was torn between laughter and sympathy at the look on the redhead’s face. “I had to get them second-hand, there wasn’t a lot of choice,” she snapped, flushing.

“I’m not wearing them!” Ron insisted hotly. “I’d rather go starkers.”

“Fine. Harry, make sure you get a picture; I could do with a good laugh.” Mrs Weasley stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind her. Ron threw the dress robes at his open trunk, making an angry noise.

Harry left him to sulk, slipping out of the room and heading downstairs to see what the twins were up to. “What’s going on upstairs, then?” Fred asked as Harry shut the door behind him. Harry grimaced.

“Ron just found his new dress robes. They’re... not pretty.” He glanced over at the wardrobe, where two sets of dress robes that had to belong to the twins were hanging, ready to be packed. They were clearly second-hand, but still nicer than Ron’s. Both in similar shades of dark purple, one with silver embroidery around the cuffs and hem, the other with bronze piping around the edge. Not a scrap of lace in sight.

“Poor Ronnikins,” George mock-sighed, shaking his head. “So hard done by. He should’ve sucked up his pride and agreed to borrow Bill’s old dress robes, like Mum offered before you got here. He said they were too *girly*.”

“They had a little bit of pink on them,” Fred elaborated, rolling his eyes. “Pretty snazzy otherwise, if you ask me. I’d have worn them if Bill wasn’t so bloody tall.”

Harry snickered; maybe Mrs Weasley had bought the frilly robes on purpose, after all.

.-.-.-.

It was pouring down with rain the morning they had to catch the Hogwarts Express. As they waited in the hallway for the taxis Mrs Weasley had arranged, Harry glanced at the fleet of enormous Hogwarts trunks stacked by the door. “Mrs Weasley,” he piped up tentatively. “Should we maybe use shrinking charms on the trunks? Muggle taxis might not have enough space for all this.” It would be bad enough travelling with Pig and Crookshanks — Hedwig was off delivering a letter to Gorvak, under the guise of Harry writing to Sirius. Mrs Weasley, already flustered from her husband’s unexpected disappearance to deal with Mad-Eye Moody, looked up with a worried expression on her face.

“Harry’s probably right,” Bill agreed, pulling his wand from his jacket pocket. In short order, he and Charlie had the trunks shrunk, and they ended up in Mrs Weasley’s enormous

handbag.

As Harry suspected, the three taxi drivers seemed utterly bewildered at the owl in the cage; Pig wasn't helping, making quite the racket as he was wedged into the back seat on Ron's lap. Crookshanks wasn't thrilled either, and by the time they all reached King's Cross, Harry, Ron and Hermione were covered in scratches.

"I'm really sorry," Hermione said for the hundredth time as they stepped through the barrier onto platform 9 & 3/4, her cat tucked securely under her arm. They stepped to the side, and Charlie started resizing everybody's trunks.

After they'd found a compartment and stowed their luggage away, they all returned to the platform to say goodbye to Mrs Weasley, Bill and Charlie. "Keep in touch," Bill urged with a grin, pulling Ron into a hug once he was done with the twins. "You lot are in for one hell of a year, I want to hear about all of it. You too, Harry," he added, hugging the dark-haired teen tightly.

"I might see you all sooner than you think," Charlie confessed, releasing Ginny with a kiss on the forehead.

"Why's that?" Fred asked quickly. Charlie tapped his nose conspiratorially, winking.

"Secret," he insisted. "Don't tell Percy I mentioned it. It's 'classified information until the Ministry sees fit to release it,'" he droned with a roll of his eyes. Harry's gaze narrowed thoughtfully; did that mean Charlie was involved in the Tournament somehow?

The two eldest Weasley boys delighted in taunting their siblings with veiled references to the secret surprise right up until the whistle blew, and they had to hurry to catch the train. Harry spotted Neville wandering with his trunk as they headed for their compartment. "Oi, Neville!" he called, waving an arm. The round-faced boy looked up. "Wanna sit with us?"

Neville grinned, nodding, and the four of them took their seats, shoving Neville's trunk into the luggage rack with their own and shutting the compartment door. "Why wouldn't they just tell us what's going on this year?" Ron groused. "We wouldn't tell anyone."

"From the sounds of things, we'll find out tonight anyway," Harry placated, as if he didn't already know the secret. "How was your summer, Neville?" He acted as if he hadn't been writing to the other boy regularly, and Neville grinned at him.

"It was great! Gran let me put a whole section for aquatic plants in the greenhouse." As he enthused about all the new specimens he had, Harry's mind turned to the dilapidated greenhouse at Seren Du. He'd intended to start clearing it out over the summer, maybe grow some potions ingredients — he actually enjoyed gardening at the Dursleys — but it had turned out to be a much bigger project than any of them had anticipated. Remus and Sirius had promised to get it emptied out ready for the next summer. Maybe by then Harry would be able to tell Neville about it and get some advice. Neville didn't even know the truth about Sirius, yet.

Several familiar faces stopped in on them throughout the journey, and with each one Ron's retelling of the events of the Quidditch World Cup got more and more elaborate. While he gave Neville a fairly accurate recount, by the time Seamus and Dean reached them he was describing their narrow escape from a pack of Death Eaters, who apparently almost hexed him several times. Harry and Hermione merely shared an exasperated glance.

At one point, they managed to turn the conversation to the match itself rather than the chaos after it, Neville listening enviously as Harry and Ron described it all.

"Gran didn't want to go," Neville said miserably. "She's not into quidditch. It sounds amazing, though."

Ron jumped up to rifle through his trunk, pulling out his little figure of Viktor Krum. "Look at this! We saw him right up close, too. We were up in the top box—"

"For the first and last time in your life, Weasley." The familiar drawl made Harry's head snap up, and he was glad for his darker skin when he felt his cheeks heat ever so slightly. Draco's hair was a little longer than it had been at the Cup, falling into his silver-grey eyes. He looked good. Behind him were Crabbe and Goyle, looking appropriately menacing.

"Don't remember asking you to join us, Malfoy," Harry said coolly, hoping to head off any truly explosive argument before Ron could get a word in. They all had their roles to play, of course, but he didn't want to get into a fight before the term even began.

Sadly, it was not to be. As much as Draco and Harry were friends now, the same couldn't be said for him and Ron, and Draco took any chance to taunt the redhead. "Weasley, what is *that*?"

A sleeve of Ron's dress robes was sticking out of his trunk, obviously dislodged when Ron had grabbed the Krum figurine. It was swaying with the motion of the train, the lace cuff very obvious. Ron made to shove it out of sight, but Draco was too quick, and soon he was holding the robes out in front of him.

"Good Merlin!" he exclaimed. "Weasley, you weren't thinking about *wearing* these, were you?" He looked them over in consideration. "I'm sure they were the height of fashion in, oh, about 1890..." he trailed off with a laugh, Crabbe and Goyle laughing right along with him. Ron's face was burning bright red. Harry tried to bring himself to be offended on his friend's behalf, but he just couldn't do it; the robes *were* awful. Ron should've just taken Bill's old ones, pink or no pink.

"Shove off, Malfoy," Ron scowled, snatching the robes back and tossing them into the corner of the compartment. Even Neville was eyeing them with a grimace.

"Maybe you should think about entering. There's money involved, you know; you'd be able to buy some decent robes then." Harry knew that Draco knew underage wizards wouldn't be able to enter; he was just trying to get a rise out of the redhead. The Slytherin laughed at Ron's confusion. "You mean you don't know?" He chanced a look at Harry, who shook his head slightly. Draco's smirk widened. "Oh, that's just *precious!* My father told me ages ago. I suppose yours just isn't senior enough to have been told about it."

"Or Ron's father just respects when things are supposed to stay *secret*," Hermione said icily. Draco laughed.

"As if everyone else's parents didn't tell them immediately. They probably just don't talk about the important things in front of him." Happy with his annual pre-sorting mocking of Ron Weasley, Draco let it go, his eyes turning to Harry once more. Harry wished he could somehow arrange a way to talk to the blond in private, but that would have to wait until they got to school. The train was far too crowded to risk it. Instead he merely quirked his lips in the briefest smile, which turned into a glare when he caught Ron looking at him. When Draco left, Ron slammed the compartment door shut so hard the window cracked.

"Oh, honestly, Ron," Hermione muttered, whipping out her wand to fix it. "You shouldn't let him get to you like that."

Ron, who had been sulking on and off for various reasons since he'd been given the dress robes, merely scowled and squashed the last remaining cauldron cake between his hands. Harry shared an uneasy look with Neville. Rooming with Ron in such a mood was going to be interesting; hopefully he would perk up once the Tournament was announced.

When they reached Hogsmeade station, they hurried to the carriages, not wanting to be out in the deluge of rain any longer than they had to be. "Has the weather ever been so bad they can't take the first years across in boats?" Harry wondered aloud, watching Hagrid lead the group of tiny, bedraggled eleven year-olds towards the lake.

"I don't think so," Hermione replied. "I've certainly never read about it. They always find a way."

Harry cast a quick Drying charm over himself, even though he knew he'd just end up getting soaked again when he reached the castle. It beat having to sit in the carriage in sodden robes.

Thankfully, he was eventually at the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall, spelled dry for the third time — thanks to Peeves and his water balloons — and eagerly awaiting the start of the feast. As the soaking first years were led in, leaving a veritable stream of water in their wake, Harry realised it was the first sorting he'd actually been present for since his own. He was surprised when the Sorting Hat's song was completely different, impressing upon them the virtues of each house individually. Harry's mind cast back to Sirius' words the night before he'd left Seren Du; his insistence that the war would only be won by the houses working together. Perhaps the hat was trying to tell them something.

There seemed to be a thousand first years to sort as Harry's stomach rumbled expectantly, the golden plates in front of him staying frustratingly empty. He tried to pay attention, to keep an eye out for any names that sounded familiar from all his books about the Wizengamot, but other than the Carrow twins — both of whom went to Slytherin — there weren't any he recognised.

At last it was time to eat, and Harry ravenously filled his plate, tuning out most of the conversation around him. He grimaced when Nearly-Headless Nick let slip that Hogwarts was staffed by house elves, immediately setting Hermione off again. That was going to be a problem this year, wasn't it?

At the end of the feast, Dumbledore stood to make his start-of-term speech. Harry hadn't realised the Triwizard Tournament would mean cancelling quidditch, and his outrage was echoed by several others from every house. He caught Cedric Diggory's eye across the room, the boy looking upset at the news. So much for that rematch.

The interruption of Mad-Eye Moody was an unexpected one. Harry felt uneasy when the man's magical eye landed on him, unnaturally bright blue. It felt like it was piercing his soul — he made a mental note to ask Sirius exactly what that eye was capable of.

He didn't know much about the man, just what Mr Weasley had told them that morning, but it was clear he was at least friends with Dumbledore. That didn't exactly inspire confidence in Harry. He'd have to be careful around Moody until he'd got the measure of him.

Harry pretended to be just as startled by the announcement of the Tournament as everyone else. The twins, unsurprisingly, were among those not pleased with the news that only wizards who were of-age by the end of October would be able to enter. "We're so close, we're practically seventeen!" Fred insisted as they walked up to Gryffindor Tower.

"There's got to be a way to get around it," George agreed. "Once our names are in the running, they won't be able to turn us down."

Harry doubted it would be that simple, but stayed quiet as the pair plotted ways to hoodwink the impartial judge. When they extended the offer to Ron and Harry, Harry snorted. "I think I get into enough trouble in the average school year without seeking it out, don't you?" he pointed out dryly. Fred shrugged.

"Yeah, mate, you're probably right. Ah well, more glory for us!"

They went off to their respective dormitories after bidding everyone goodnight, and Harry grinned at Dean's new poster of Viktor Krum. Maybe he should've brought his Holyhead Harpies poster with him instead of leaving it in his room. He could explain it away as a birthday present, or something. Though he'd have to figure out a reasonable explanation for *why* it was the Harpies. Maybe he could buy a Puddlemere poster in support of Oliver instead.

Changing into his pyjamas, he put all thoughts of quidditch and posters out of his head, drawing his curtains around his bed and setting the usual privacy charms. Now he was back at school, all his plans for the year came rushing back to the forefront of his mind. He wanted to get the heirs closer together, even the Slytherin ones — if he could get them all working together before either Dumbledore or Voldemort managed to get to them, they might have a chance at sorting out the shambles of the wizarding world *after* the war was over. It was all well and good planning for battle, but someone needed to have a good idea of what came next, or they'd end up doing exactly what they'd done after the last two wars; sticking their heads in the sand and letting Albus Dumbledore take care of everything.

As well as that, he had to keep his head down and out of Dumbledore's way, and figure out just who he could trust within the castle. Right now, it was a pretty short list.

Chapter 19

The next morning Harry woke up early, so he left the dorm quietly and headed down to breakfast alone. There was only a handful of students in the Great Hall already, and as Harry walked towards the Gryffindor table, someone slammed into his shoulder. “Watch where you’re going, Potter.” It was Draco, glaring harshly at him, and Harry returned the look even as he brightened up internally, shoving a hand in his robe pocket and wrapping his fingers around a scrap of parchment that hadn’t been there a second ago. He waited until he was sat down before unfolding it under the table. *Tonight, after curfew, fourth floor Charms room?*

He glanced up at the Slytherin table, giving Draco the barest of nods, trying not to outwardly smile.

“Morning, Harry!” The cheerful greeting came from Susan Bones, sat on the Hufflepuff bench nearby, absently braiding her wavy copper hair over her shoulder.

“Hi, Susan. Good summer?”

“Wasn’t bad until the Cup happened. Aunt Amelia’s barely been home since, it’s all madness.” Harry remembered that her aunt was the head of the DMLE, and grimaced; no doubt she’d been even busier than Mr Weasley was. “Did you end up listening to that lecture I told you about, by the way?” In one of Susan’s last letters, she’d told him about a lecture that was being broadcast on the Wizarding Wireless, all about how the lack of information for muggleborns entering the wizarding world was leading to a slow muggle-fication of their society, and it was going to lead to them being discovered eventually. It was an incredibly controversial topic.

“Yeah, it was really interesting!” Harry enthused, straddling the bench so he could eat his porridge while keeping up the conversation. “He had a lot of good points, but I did think it was a bit extreme. The wizarding world can be dragged into the future without getting overrun with muggles. I mean, wouldn’t it be so much easier to use pens and notebooks in class instead of quills and a million rolls of parchment? Or hell, computers! They’re getting more popular with the muggles. If someone could figure out how to make muggle technology work with magic, it’d be a total game-changer.”

“That would just increase the likelihood of the wizarding world being discovered, though,” Hannah Abbott pointed out, jumping into the conversation. Her dad was muggleborn, having taken her mother’s pureblood surname when they married, so she was fairly familiar with muggle technology. “Imagine, even if someone managed to figure it out and we had a whole separate internet for the wizarding world. All it would take is one particularly tech-savvy muggle to crack it and we’d be out in the open for everyone to see.”

She made a fair point, and Harry hummed thoughtfully. “Okay, maybe not *that* much of a cultural exchange, then. But you can’t argue against pens.”

“Oh, Merlin, no! Dad’s been saying the wizarding world should switch for years. One of these days I swear I’m gonna do my homework in biro just to see what the teachers say,”

Hannah said with a laugh.

“The fact of the matter is, if we keep pushing away everything muggle and refusing to learn about them, we’ll only stand out more,” Susan continued, bringing them back on track.
“Harry, you were at the World Cup, weren’t you? You saw what half the older folks thought was a good example of muggle clothing! How do they expect to stay incognito if they’ve got no idea about muggle life?”

Harry remembered some of the more... interesting outfits he’d seen at the Cup. Susan was right. How could wizards blend in with muggles if they didn’t know the first thing about them?

They were interrupted by the arrival of Ron and Hermione, who looked bewildered by the company Harry was keeping. “There you are!” Hermione said by way of greeting, dropping a stack of books on the table beside her. How she could have so many when they didn’t even have their timetables yet, Harry didn’t know.

She and Ron both seemed set on ignoring Harry’s Hufflepuff companions, talking to him as if he was alone. The two girls shared an annoyed look, getting to their feet. “See you later, Harry,” Susan said.

Once they were gone, Ron turned to him. “What you talking to Hufflepuffs for?” he asked suspiciously. Harry raised an eyebrow.

“I didn’t realise it was such a big deal,” he retorted a little sharply. “We were talking about the World Cup.” Sort of. Eventually. Tangentially.

Ron seemed a little wrong-footed that Harry didn’t immediately see the problem in speaking to those outside his own house. “Really, Ron, it’s not like they’re Slytherins,” Hermione pointed out diplomatically, buttering a slice of toast.

Harry wondered what they would’ve done if he *had* been talking to Slytherins, and scowled into his orange juice.

McGonagall came around to hand out timetables, and Harry eyed his over. Herbology with the Hufflepuffs first thing. Maybe Harry would sit with Hannah and Susan instead of Ron and Hermione, just to show them.

He couldn’t, though. He couldn’t risk Dumbledore getting suspicious of him, and it would be an obvious sign that the Compulsion charm was gone if Harry started socialising with people outside his own house. He was supposed to be the perfect little Gryffindor — and evidently that involved only valuing the opinions of other Gryffindors.

Was it normal, he wondered? Kids spending their whole Hogwarts career only talking to people inside their own house? He glanced around the hall; no, there were plenty of groups with mixed colours on their robes. It wasn’t *common*, but it wasn’t unusual either. Finishing his breakfast, Harry slowly began to plot. If he could get all the houses mixing together more without it being just him, maybe Dumbledore wouldn’t realise Harry knew the truth. He could pass it off as school unity in the face of international competition; they would all have

to rally behind the Hogwarts champion, whoever it ended up being. That would be a good start.

He ignored Ron and Hermione bickering about house elves and stood up, making a vague excuse about needing to get his Herbology book. As soon as he could, he'd have to get the heirs gathered and start tossing ideas around; between them they could surely think of something.

Baby steps, but they'd get there eventually. He was playing a dangerous game, going against Dumbledore right under the man's nose. But as much as Harry had promised Sirius he wouldn't go looking for trouble, he wouldn't just sit and do *nothing*. Whatever Dumbledore's plan for Harry was, it was clearly supposed to come to a head before he turned seventeen; the goblins had assured him that with the block on his core, Harry wouldn't have survived his coming of age. That meant he was running out of time to get the upper hand.

He'd spent most of last year keeping his head down. It was time to get the pieces moving.

.-.-.

That night, Harry donned his invisibility cloak and made his way towards the fourth floor Charms room, grinning when he saw Draco waiting for him, deck of cards in hand. The blond perked up when Harry removed the cloak. "You're late," he reprimanded, and Harry offered an apologetic look.

"Ron wouldn't go to sleep," he explained. "Are you alright?" Harry was still a little shaken from watching Moody turn Draco into a ferret and bounce him all over the hall. Ron thought it was the funniest thing he'd ever seen, but Harry was horrified a teacher would use that sort of magic on a student. He was glad McGonagall seemed equally horrified.

"I'm fine. Uncle Severus gave me something for the bruises," Draco assured. "It's just my pride that's wounded."

"Moody's a dick," Harry declared. He paused, thoughts turning to graver matters. "How did things go after— after the Cup?"

"It could've been worse. Father was fairly happy with how things went at the Cup; no one got caught, and with all those articles that bloody Skeeter woman put out it's certainly made it memorable." Harry made a face; that was an understatement. "But... Harry, I heard some things this summer. Father... Father said the Dark Lord is coming back."

Harry pursed his lips, staying silent. Wishing he could assure Draco it wasn't true. The blond's face crumbled. "We don't know how, or when," Harry said quickly. "But it's inevitable now. Snape says his Mark is getting darker." He told Draco about the prophecy Trelawney had made at the end of the year before, and how Wormtail was probably with Voldemort now, judging by the dream he'd had.

Not only did Draco know most of Harry's secrets — he was the only one of Harry's friends who knew about Seren Du, after all — but between his father and Dumbledore he was

walking the tightrope almost as much as Harry was. It was a relief, being able to talk freely with someone who *understood*.

By the end of it, Draco was even paler than usual. Both of them had abandoned their cards, and Harry's foot was bouncing anxiously. He was aware that in this particular circumstances, Draco was in far more danger than Harry. "If he comes back, what if—what if Father tries to make me join him?"

Harry reached across the table, taking Draco's hand tightly in his own. "I won't let anything happen to you, or your mother," he vowed. "You can come hide at Seren Du if it comes down to it. No one will find you there. And even if he does come back, surely your father won't expect you to do anything until you're of age?"

Draco scoffed, looking bleak. "You don't know my father."

"If he wants you, he'll have to go through me," Harry declared fiercely. Draco met his gaze with a hesitant smile, then his eyes dropped down to their joined hands. Harry blushed, letting go and hastily picking up his cards.

Voldemort wasn't getting to Draco. Not if he had anything to say about it. Draco was Harry's.

Harry was only just starting to realise how desperately he wanted that to be true.

.-.-.

Thanks to a note passed to Hannah in Herbology, and another to Daphne in Transfiguration, Harry managed to have all the trustworthy heirs meet him in one of the abandoned sixth floor classrooms after dinner the first Thursday back. He made an excuse to Ron and Hermione about having detention with Snape — a cover the man would probably be happy to corroborate if needed — and hurried up to the little-used corridor, slipping into the room after checking no one was watching him.

He seemed to be the last one there. He looked around the familiar faces; eleven of them in total, twelve including him. Harry was amused to realise that between them, they had an equal number from each house. "What's this about, Potter?" Cassius Warrington asked, leaning back in his chair, eyebrows raised. Harry perched on the edge of the teacher's desk, eyeing the group.

"Partly I just wanted to check in, see how everyone was doing. I know a lot of you were at the Cup. But mostly... mostly I had an idea, and I was wondering if you would be willing to help me."

Eleven faces stared at him expectantly. "Voldemort is coming back," he declared. Several people gasped. "Don't ask me how I know. Just call it special Boy-Who-Lived sense." He tapped at his scar pointedly, hoping that was enough of an explanation. He couldn't exactly tell them he'd seen Professor Snape's Dark Mark and it was growing clearer. Or that he'd watched Peter Pettigrew escape and Professor Trelawney had predicted he would aid Voldemort back to power. They'd think he was bonkers. "I don't know how long it'll take, but it's coming. We can't afford to wait until we're all of age to start making changes."

“What do you want us to do, march into the Wizengamot and demand to take our seats early?” Sullivan Fawley scoffed. Harry shook his head.

“No, no, that won’t work. I had something a little more... simple in mind. Dumbledore’s counting on house rivalries to keep people isolated — not just with the Slytherins. If people don’t socialise outside their house, they get more and more narrow-minded, until no one can see anyone else’s point of view. And those who need help aren’t willing to ask for it because it often means going to someone outside their house. If people keep telling Slytherins they’re all dark wizards, of course they’re going to end up going down that path. I was thinking that, since the theme of this year seems to be international magical cooperation and unity and all that bollocks, we could start off a little closer to home.”

“Hmm.” Padma frowned thoughtfully. “What did you have in mind?”

“I’m not really sure yet. Obviously I’d like to spend more time with all of you, but it can’t just be me — if Dumbledore thinks I’m up to something, he’ll start pushing. He’s got a lot riding on me being the good little Gryffindor Golden Boy.” He hadn’t told them about the Compulsion charm, but everyone with eyes could see that the way Dumbledore treated Harry wasn’t a normal headmaster-student relationship. “If all of you start hanging out with people in other houses — it doesn’t even have to be the people in this room, it could be anyone — then when I start doing it, it won’t look as out of place. I hope.”

“What about a study group?” Hannah suggested. “We could have a smaller, private group — just us, meeting every other week or so, to make plans. But then outside of that we could have a big group, any house welcome, any year. We could say that with the tournament disrupting the school year so much, we want to make sure we don’t fall behind in our classes. I bet a bunch of the fifth and seventh years would go for it, too; they’ve got exams they won’t want to fail. Then it doesn’t have to come from you, Harry.”

“Hannah, that’s brilliant,” Harry enthused. “It wouldn’t even have to involve everyone meeting up together all at once; they could meet based on year and subject, get everyone studying the same thing studying together.” If there was one thing that would give people common ground, it was complaining about homework.

“I’ll talk to some of the other prefects,” Cassius volunteered. “It might be too early to start yet; term’s only just begun, and the tournament hasn’t even started yet. Besides, half the sixth and seventh years are planning on entering the tournament, so they’re a little preoccupied. But we can start branching out our friendship groups in preparation.”

“What about the rest of the Slytherins?” Ernie asked, holding his hands up defensively when Daphne whipped around to glare at him. “Obviously you three are alright, but how do we know who else is trustworthy? We don’t know who might already be on You-Know-Who’s side.”

“Do you really think anyone who’s still a school kid can be on his side?” Harry pointed out wryly. “Even if they think they are, they have no idea what war is really like. I’m not saying go out and hug every Slytherin, but don’t treat them any differently than you would a Ravenclaw or Gryffindor or Hufflepuff. If we automatically write them off just because of their house, we’re as bad as Dumbledore.” How many Slytherins could they save just by

reaching a hand out in friendship? From what he'd learned from Remus and Sirius over the summer, everyone assumed the Slytherin kids were lost to the dark from the moment they were sorted into the house. That's how Voldemort ended up with such a huge following; they had nowhere else to go.

"So that's your grand plan?" Blaise asked with a raised eyebrow. "*Friendship?* You do realise you couldn't sound more Gryffindor if you tried?"

Harry grinned at him. "That's exactly why it's so perfect. Dumbledore couldn't possibly get angry about all his students being *friends*, not without having to face some serious questions." The headmaster would have no choice but to encourage them. "Think about it; all the school-sanctioned clubs are single-house only. Quidditch teams, study groups, hell, even the *gobstones club* is separated by house. It's like they don't want us interacting with each other. Shouldn't they be trying to encourage inter-house unity? We're all supposed to work together once we leave Hogwarts, after all." The only attempt at inter-house cooperation was pairing them together for classes, but even then that often stayed with one house on one side of the classroom and one house on the other.

"It is a bit weird," Parvati agreed. "Even when Padma and I got sorted into different houses, people acted like I was supposed to just stop talking to her. She's my *twin sister*."

"So we make friends, then," Susan declared. "And when the time is right, we start up the study group."

"We can start small," Neville suggested, balking a little as every eye in the room turned to him. "Asking to borrow a quill, complimenting someone's hair. Being nice to Slytherins. It'll look weird if we all suddenly want to be best friends with people outside our houses."

"Neville's got a point," Harry agreed. "We don't want to look suspicious."

"I hope you aren't expecting me to be *nice* to people, Potter," Daphne drawled. Harry snorted.

"Wouldn't dream of it," he replied sweetly. "Just be a bitch to everyone equally and you'll be fine." That made Daphne laugh. After a summer writing letters to the Slytherin girl, Harry was pretty sure he had a handle on her particular brand of humour.

"If we're starting a study group, can we start now?" Sullivan asked, glancing around the group. "You've all done third year Transfiguration. This essay on mammal transformations is doing my head in."

It turned out a lot of them had brought their books with them, having come straight from lessons, and it was an easy transition to working together. Most of them were fourth years, after all. Cassius, the one sixth year of the group, was saved when he admitted he had Herbology homework, and Neville jumped at the chance to help with the advanced work. It made Harry smile to watch his shy Gryffindor friend slowly gain confidence as he explained things to Cassius, who took diligent notes.

Maybe it wouldn't be so hard after all.

....

Hedwig was a smarter owl than Harry gave her credit for; rather than swooping in at breakfast with the rest of the morning post, she waited up in Harry's dorm window, letter securely attached to her leg. Harry was alone when he found her — no need to make up an excuse to hide the letter from Ron and Hermione. As if they had any right to read his mail!

He unfolded the parchment, quickly scanning the goblin's neat cursive handwriting.

Dear Mr Potter

The news of your scar is troubling. I will set my best team on the matter and let you know if we have any results, though this is unlike any prior cursebreaking we have come across in recent memory. It may not be something we can assist with.

The matter of your vault is an easier one, however. I have made arrangements with Farlig for your vault security to be upgraded — no one will be allowed access without you present beside them, unless you have given us prior, in-person permission that can be verified by magical signature. If certain people ask, we will excuse it as standard security changes.

I have also enclosed a list of vault transactions in the last fourteen years — if any of these are unauthorised or unwelcome, we are happy to take recompense from the offender's personal vaults. You are also within your rights to demand any items removed from your vaults are returned.

May your vaults be ever full,

Gorrak

Sr Inheritance Manager, Gringotts Bank

There was a second piece of parchment folded beside the first. Harry opened it up, his heart sinking to the pit of his stomach the more he read.

It had the most recent transactions listed first; Harry's name was written next to almost every one of them. However, there were several that didn't add up — a withdrawal of 30 galleons from Molly Weasley this summer. She hadn't bought anything for Harry; why was she taking money from his vault??

The further Harry read back, the less things made sense. A handful of withdrawals from Molly Weasley over the last three years, all for more than she possibly could have spent on Harry's school supplies. Not enormous amounts, but certainly not necessary. And then he got to the withdrawals from Dumbledore.

Regular money withdrawals — far larger sums than Molly Weasley ever withdrew — as well as what looked like several Potter family heirlooms; books, jewellery, art, all sorts. The listings went right back to November 1981; mere weeks after Harry's parents had died.

Even if Dumbledore had been sending the Dursleys some sort of stipend for caring for Harry — which, he knew from their multiple complaints on the subject, he *hadn't* — that didn't

excuse the heirlooms. That didn't excuse the withdrawals during the school year, when the Dursleys didn't even have Harry.

He'd expected this, but he felt sick. Dumbledore had been stealing from him since he was a baby, when he was supposed to be the man responsible for Harry's safety and welfare. And Mrs Weasley...

He refused to believe it was how it looked on paper. There had to be some other explanation. His school supplies maybe cost more than he expected, or something. Surely she wouldn't steal from Harry. Surely she knew that if she needed it, Harry would happily share whatever he owned with her family?

Harry wrote a quick reply, asking Gorراك to keep the transaction list in the same place he was keeping the magical signature, but otherwise do nothing; if he started reclaiming things from Dumbledore now, it would give the game away. He was furious at the thought of his family's belongings in the claws of that manipulative old man, but there was nothing he could do about it now. The new security measures would stop Dumbledore from taking any more, at least.

As for the other issue, Harry couldn't bring himself to do anything about it yet. Thinking about Mrs Weasley being on Dumbledore's side made him feel anxious and itchy. If she was working for him, how many of her children were? Was Mr Weasley? Could he trust *any* of them?

He could trust the twins, he told himself. They'd known about him looking into his heritage for a whole year and hadn't said anything to anyone. As for the rest... he'd find that out in time.

He would block access to his vaults, and see if anything came of it. There was little else he could do, yet.

.-.-.-.

Harry had revised his opinion of Professor Moody. The man wasn't a dick. He was *insane*. Everyone else seemed to be in awe of his approach to teaching, but as Harry left the classroom with green light burned into his eyelids, seeing Neville chalk-white and shaking, he couldn't possibly condone the man's methods. At least Moody had confirmed they'd only have to put up with him for the one year. Everyone around them was talking about it like it was some sort of fantastic show the man had put on — even Ron couldn't stop going on about how the spider had died 'just like that!'

Harry pushed past him and hurried after Neville, slinging an arm around the taller boy's shoulders. "You alright?" he asked quietly. Neville's eyes were glazed over, like he wasn't really present.

"I think I might be sick," he admitted in a whisper. Harry urged him over to a nearby alcove, nudging him into a sitting position.

“Breathe, Nev.” In their summer correspondence, Harry had learned a lot about the other boy, including what had happened to his parents. Harry could hardly imagine what it was like; having your parents alive, but them not recognising you or anyone else, their brains destroyed by excessive torture.

From Moody’s words, they were going to be studying the Unforgivables a lot over the next term. Harry wished it would be worth anything to go to Dumbledore. The man had probably happily consented to showing fourteen year-olds the worst curses known to wizard-kind. Fourteen year-olds with families destroyed by those curses.

There was an odd clunking sound, and Harry turned to see Moody walking towards them. He scowled at the professor.

“It’s alright, sonny,” Moody assured, clapping Neville on the shoulder. “Why don’t you come up to my office, have a cup of tea?” He glanced aside. “You alright there, Potter?”

“I’ve been better,” he bit out.

“I know it seems a little harsh, but you’ve got to know. No point in pretending... anyway. Come on, Longbottom. I’ve got some books that might interest you.” Neville sent Harry a pleading look, and Harry reached out to grab Neville by the arm gently.

“Actually, Professor, Neville and I were going to go finish our Charms essays before dinner. If you don’t mind.” He tried to stay polite, aware that the man still *was* a teacher, but he was reaching the end of his tether. His vision still flashed green every time he closed his eyes.

Moody stared him down for a moment, then nodded, stepping back. “If you’re sure, Potter. You boys watch yourselves. *Constant vigilance!*” With that he limped back to his office, and Neville let out a shaky breath.

“Thanks, Harry,” he murmured. “I just... I can’t, right now. Not after seeing him do that. You know what they say about the Unforgivables — for them to work, you’ve got to *mean* it.”

Harry swallowed harshly. Moody certainly meant it back in the classroom, with the spiders. Had the auror used the curses on people before, too? Surely even aurors weren’t allowed to use that kind of force.

“What was that about, then?” Ron and Hermione appeared from nowhere — apparently they hadn’t gone back to the Tower like Harry thought. Ron seemed entirely oblivious to the tension in the air. “Some lesson, eh? He really knows his stuff. The way that spider just *snuffed it*, wow, I—“ He seemed to realise who he was talking to, growing quickly silent. Harry’s patience snapped.

“Fuck off, Ron,” he muttered, putting an arm around Neville and heading for the library. He didn’t feel like being in Gryffindor Tower right now.

When he and Neville eventually ran out of excuses to be away from the common room, they made their way back. Harry saw Hermione and Ron in the corner of the common room; Hermione was holding what looked like a collection box, speaking very quickly. Ron looked like he'd rather be anywhere else. He brightened up when he saw Harry, apparently having already forgotten the dark-haired boy was mad at him. "Great! Harry! Hermione, you can tell Harry all about spew, look."

"It's S.P.E.W!" Hermione corrected, but Ron had already vaulted over the back of the armchair and headed up to the dormitory. Harry shared a confused look with Neville.

"What's in the box, Hermione?" Harry asked, already sure he was going to regret doing so.

Hermione's following tirade about house elf rights was the last straw for Harry. "Hermione," he cut her off mid-sentence, "have you ever actually spoken to a house elf?"

"Well, no, but—"

"Did you do *any* research whatsoever into the specifics of a house elf's bond with its family?" Harry continued. Hermione faltered.

"It's really hard to find information on it in the library."

"Hermione, house elves get sick if they're not bonded to a house," Neville piped up, looking puzzled. "I thought everyone knew that."

"They what?" Hermione was round-eyed.

"Their magic needs the bond to balance it. Without access to the family magics that come from being bonded to a house, the elf's magic gets unstable and starts turning inwards. It's awful to watch, I've heard. Back in the olden times they could survive in the wild on the natural magic in the forests, but then the muggles started chopping them all down, so the house elves started bonding themselves to wizard families instead," Neville told her. Harry would bet anything a family like the Longbottoms had at least two house elves. According to Sirius, the Black family had one at every property, and the Potter family had two at their ancestral home and a few others scattered about. Harry wasn't old enough to claim the Potter properties and elves yet, but he would one day.

"Well... that doesn't excuse them from not being paid! If anything it's worse — they can't leave, so they're forced to do all the work."

"House elves *like* doing work," Neville told her. "Our elf Hetty was devastated when I decided to start tending the greenhouse myself."

"Maybe you should do a little more research before you start jumping in where you're not needed, Hermione," Harry suggested gently, his heart going out to the crestfallen witch. She was just trying to do the right thing. "By all means, focus on laws to make house elves treated better with their owners. But don't assume what they want without even talking to them." He ran a hand through his hair, wincing against the brewing headache. "Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to bed. It's been a hell of a day."

"I'll head up too," Neville said quickly, clearly not wanting to be left alone with Hermione after that minor explosion. On the way up the stairs, he put a hand on Harry's arm. "Are you sure you're alright? Seeing that curse in Moody's class couldn't have been any easier for you than it was for me." His eyes were knowing, and Harry sighed. At that minute, all he really wanted was a hug. He hated Sirius and Remus a little bit, for getting him so used to seeking comfort over the summer. He didn't have that anymore.

"I just want to sleep," he admitted, dragging a hand over his face.

And yet, when he was in bed, curtains drawn, he found himself staring up at the ceiling of his four-poster bed, wide awake.

Chapter 20

Harry should have known Ron and Hermione wouldn't stay oblivious forever.

Strolling into the common room after a quick meeting with Draco after dinner — one of their rare pre-curfew meetings — Harry was surprised to see Ron and Hermione sitting on the sofa by the fire. Hermione wasn't doing homework, which was a novelty in itself. "Where have you been?" she asked suspiciously. Harry shrugged.

"Library," he replied, his usual response to excuse his absences. Whether it was meeting with Draco or the other heirs — they'd started their own study group early, because it turned out there were quite a few intelligent people in the group, and between them they had just about every subject covered. Sullivan said his grades had never been better.

"No you weren't. I was in the library and I didn't see you there," Hermione argued. Harry bit back a sigh.

"It's a big library, Hermione. But I was there, and then I finished my Potions essay, so I went for a walk. If you must know." He sank down into the armchair, dropping his bag on the floor. "What does it matter where I was, anyway?"

"You're always disappearing on us these days, mate," Ron accused. "Feels like we barely see you anymore."

He wasn't wrong there, but Harry didn't feel entirely bad about it. There were so many parts of his life he just *couldn't* share with them, but a lot of them he just didn't want to. If he'd tried hard, he could have told them about his inter-house study group without saying a thing about them being heirs. Hermione was oblivious to all of that politics, and Ron actively hated anything that might give him something in common with Malfoy, so he wasn't knowledgeable enough to put the pieces together either. But Harry liked having people in his life that weren't them. Ron and Hermione wanted to know *everything*. He thought about his first two years of school, when they acted like it was a personal offence if he didn't share every secret with them, and he went with it because he didn't know how else friendship was supposed to go. Even now they were constantly asking him if he'd heard from Sirius, as if it was any of their business. Harry was just glad they didn't know anything about the dream he'd had in the summer.

And there was still that small voice in the back of his mind that said he couldn't trust them. The voice that said they were more loyal to Dumbledore than him. That voice had never been wrong yet.

"I just like having a little time to myself these days, is all."

"Hermione was wondering if you'd got a girlfriend you weren't telling us about," Ron teased, wiggling his eyebrows at Harry. The dark-haired boy went bright red.

"What— why would you say that? I don't have a girlfriend!" he spluttered. Ron laughed.

"Exactly, that's what I said! I said you'd tell us if you did." He sounded confident.

"Not if she's someone he thought we wouldn't approve of," Hermione retorted. She turned to Harry, giving him a sympathetic look. "If you do, you can tell us. We won't judge you, Harry."

So many answers ran through Harry's mind at that. *I've been hanging out with Slytherins. I like boys. I think I have a crush on Draco Malfoy.* He doubted they'd be so accepting then. Instead he shook his head stubbornly.

"I don't have a secret girlfriend," he promised.

"Mione, did you really think someone could date *Harry Potter* and keep it secret?" Ron pointed out, chuckling. "She'd be all over the school with the news."

Harry grimaced. Girl or boy, he'd never date anyone who was excited by his fame like that. Surely they knew that? "If I ever get a girlfriend, you two will be the first to know," he said, confident that would never happen. He was pretty sure that girls just... weren't his thing. Regardless of the blond Slytherin who seemed to be taking up far too much space in Harry's thoughts.

He ignored Ron and Hermione bickering about what sort of girl he might date, digging one of the muggle fiction books Remus had bought him out of his bag and settling in to read. It was hard to pay attention with so much going on inside his mind — when had his friendship with Ron and Hermione changed so much that he felt like they hardly knew him any more? And why was he still trying?

.-.-.-.

Harry stormed out of Moody's classroom as soon as the bell rang, walking too fast for anyone to catch up with him. His knees were aching from slamming into the desk multiple times, and his hands were shaking so hard he couldn't get them to stop.

How the hell could Dumbledore *approve* of that? Putting underage kids under the Imperius curse! No matter whether it was good for them to know what it felt like, it was wildly illegal, and they definitely should have been sent some sort of consent form for their guardians to sign.

He was furious and in pain and his head still felt all funny from being Imperiused multiple times, and he didn't even know where he was heading as long as it was *away*. Which is why he was utterly baffled when he found himself in the dungeons, outside Snape's office. He bit his lip; Sirius and Remus did say that he could go to Snape if he was having problems during the school year. The man had actually been fairly decent to Harry in Potions class so far, all things considered.

Harry knocked cautiously.

"Enter," came the curt response. Harry eased the door open, watching the Potions professor's eyebrows rise. "Potter."

Harry opened his mouth to speak, but Snape raised a hand first, lifting his wand and performing several warding charms. Only then did he lower his hand with a gesture for Harry to speak. “Do you know what Professor Moody is doing in his classes, sir?”

“I know he recently performed all three Unforgivables,” Snape said with a disparaging curl of his lip. “I do not know if anything more recent has occurred.”

“He’s putting us under the Imperius curse.” Snape dropped his quill. Harry continued. “He says that Dumbledore wants us to know how it feels, so we can learn to fight it.”

One of Snape’s long-fingered hands rose to clasp the bridge of his nose, and he let out a frustrated sigh. “Of course he does,” he muttered derisively. “Potter, you’re shaking.” He got to his feet quickly, urging Harry into the chair opposite his desk.

“I almost threw it off the first time,” Harry told him. “Professor Moody put me under it another four times, until I could ignore his orders completely.”

When he looked up a few moments later, Snape was thrusting a vial of Pepper-Up potion his way. “Five Imperius curses in a half hour period? You’re lucky you can still form sentences,” he muttered. “What the hell is he playing at? Dumbledore’s Golden Boy is no good to him with his brain leaking out of his ears.”

After the potion, Harry immediately felt better. “No one else in the class was able to throw it off. I think he just wanted to get the better of me.”

“I told Albus it was a foolish idea to bring that madman out of retirement,” Snape said. “He’s had one too many curses to the head.”

“What am I supposed to do?” Harry asked helplessly. “I can’t go to Dumbledore because it was his idea. But I can’t go to anyone else because then it’ll be obvious to Dumbledore I’m not obeying him anymore.” A thought occurred to him, and he froze. “Will he know I got rid of the Compulsion charm? Since I was able to shake the Imperius?” The charm was supposed to make him more suggestible, after all.

“If anything, this probably works in our favour. He’ll believe his Compulsion charm is so strong it overrode even Moody’s Imperius,” Snape assured him. “But I agree, you can’t say anything about it.” He pursed his lips, silent for a moment. “I’m sorry to say, Potter, that I think you’re going to have to just keep at it. With any luck, once you can throw off the curse every time, Moody will get bored and move on. And it *is* a good skill to have. Even if the methods are... questionable.” He took the empty vial from Harry’s still-trembling fingers, setting it aside. “Just be careful; repeated short-term exposure to the Imperius curse can be dangerous. I want you to come to me if you feel any unusual symptoms, or if he puts you under more than three times in a row again.”

“Yes, sir.” Harry bit his lip. “Not Madam Pomfrey?” Snape frowned in response.

“Until I have ascertained who on the staff is under Dumbledore’s thumb, I think it best we keep this to ourselves,” he said eventually. “Regardless of Poppy’s loyalties, I don’t like the idea of you spending any length of time in the Hospital Wing. It’s much easier for the

headmaster to access you there, with plenty of privacy in case he decides you need a little more magical control.”

The thought of Dumbledore cursing him while he was asleep made Harry sick to his stomach. “Going a whole school year without a trip to the Hospital Wing is going to be a tall order, sir,” he remarked with a weak laugh. Snape’s lips quirked.

“I gave you those potions for a reason, Potter. And if you need assistance, you can always come to me. I assume that map of yours will show you the way to my private quarters?” Harry nodded. “Then you have permission, *in an emergency*, to come to me there if needed. Don’t abuse that permission, Potter.”

“I won’t,” Harry promised, and he meant it. Snape was on their side. Like Sirius said, he was basically family now. Harry didn’t want to do anything to upset the truce they seemed to have reached.

“I want you to sit there for twenty minutes,” Snape instructed. “Read if you must, but I need to make sure you aren’t going to have any aftershocks. You can leave when it’s time for dinner.”

“Yes, sir.” Harry dug through his bag for his book, but he didn’t open it, instead leaning back in the chair and letting his eyes fall shut. If anyone told him last year he’d feel so relaxed in *Snape’s* office of all places, he would’ve laughed himself sick, but it was just so nice to be somewhere *quiet*. Somewhere no one expected anything of him, or wanted answers. A little bit of the refuge he’d had at Seren Du.

God, he missed that place. It was going to be a long, long school year.

.-. .

Once the announcement of the arrival of the foreign schools went out, it was all anyone could talk about. Even Draco, when he and Harry met up a few nights before Halloween, slipped in a mention of the two French girls he’d met over the summer, and how they wouldn’t be coming as they were still underage. Harry couldn’t find it in him to be sad about that.

At last, they were all gathered in the Entrance Hall, which was gleaming after its minor makeover. “This way, outside! Stay in line,” McGonagall instructed, fussing and scolding until all Gryffindors were in neat rows by year group outside the school. The other houses were organised the same way, their heads of houses keeping everyone in line. They waited.

Harry was reluctantly impressed by the arrival of both the delegations. Mostly he was glad for the warming charms Remus had put on his school cloak before he’d packed. When the students had emerged from both the carriage and the ship, they all started to head back inside; until the Durmstrang delegation grew close enough for everyone to see their famous member.

“*Viktor Krum!*” The whisper echoed through the crowd of students; Harry saw Krum duck his head and forge onwards, resolutely ignoring the squeals and mutters of his name. Harry could sympathise there.

“Harry, it’s Krum!” Ron hissed, as if Harry might not have noticed.

“For heaven’s sake, Ron, he’s only a quidditch player,” Hermione said with a roll of her eyes. Ron looked at her like she’d gone mental.

Harry rolled his eyes as they descended into quiet bickering, jogging forwards a couple of steps until he was between Neville and Parvati instead. Parvati was still starry-eyed, but she was a little more composed about it. “I knew he was young, but I had no idea he was still in school!”

“Imagine trying to keep up your grades alongside a professional quidditch career,” Harry muttered with a grimace.

They all settled at their house tables, and waited for the foreign students to choose their places. The Beauxbatons students decided on the Ravenclaw table, while the Durmstrang delegation — following Krum’s lead — made for the Slytherin table. Harry didn’t know what was funnier; watching Draco trying to play it cool as Viktor Krum sat right next to him, or watching Ron quietly fume about it.

Harry studied the foreign delegations curiously; each school had clearly sent only the students who were of age, as they had about fifteen students each. Beauxbatons seemed to be a pretty even mix of boys and girls, while he could only see two girls in the Durmstrang group. Dumbledore stood at his podium, and a hush fell over the room.

All he did was greet their guests and declare the start of the feast, and Harry was surprised at the number of foreign dishes on offer. The house elves had outdone themselves!

“Oh, you should try this, boys,” Parvati urged, gesturing to a large crock pot filled with some sort of stew. “It’s gyuvech, I had it in Bulgaria once with my family. It’s delicious.” Harry and Neville shared a glance, then shrugged, each spooning some of the stew onto their plates. The whole point of the tournament was cultural sharing, after all.

Ron and Hermione were a little further down the table, and Ron finally seemed to have realised Harry wasn’t sitting with them. Unfortunately — or fortunately, depending on how you looked at it — he was promptly distracted by a beautiful blonde French girl coming up and asking to take one of the dishes. Ron was completely tongue-tied over her, and Hermione waspishly gestured for the girl to take the bowl, glaring at the redhead. Harry noticed several other boys goggling at the blonde as she walked back to the Ravenclaw table.

“D’you think she’s part veela or something?” Neville asked curiously, his eyes following the girl as well. Harry raised an eyebrow.

“She could be.” It would explain why all the boys were staring. Did veela not affect women?

“Oi, Harry, there’s room for you up here,” Ron called once dessert appeared on the table, gesturing to the empty seat beside him — the seat he’d cleared for Viktor Krum.

“I’m alright, thanks, Ron,” Harry waved him off, helping himself to cake. Neville snorted at the outraged look on Ron’s face.

“The Golden Trio isn’t so golden anymore, is it?” he murmured knowingly. Harry shrugged.

“My priorities are different now. Theirs... aren’t quite matching up.” He was hoping to spend as long as possible avoiding the inevitable confrontation when they realised he was mostly avoiding them. He just felt so *suffocated* around them. Ron especially, but if that friendship fractured he couldn’t guarantee what side Hermione would land on.

When the plates were cleared, Dumbledore stood once more, and Harry realised that the two empty chairs at the staff table had been filled. When had Bagman and Crouch arrived?

Filch hauled in the huge casket, which revealed the Goblet of Fire — an impressive object, to be sure. Harry should’ve known the ‘impartial judge’ was a magical artefact. Wizards did love giving decision-making power to inanimate objects.

When they all gathered to head up to their common rooms, Harry found himself bookended by Ron and Hermione once more, though the twins quickly nudged them aside. “An age line!” Fred crowed. “That’s easy to fool! And once our names are in the Goblet, we’re golden!”

“How about it, Harry? Sure you don’t wanna try for it?” George asked. Harry laughed, shaking his head.

“Nah, it’s not for me. But good luck with that.” He doubted something as simple as an Ageing Potion would fool the line, but then again, it was Dumbledore. He was all about encouraging reckless rule-breaking.

At the door to the Entrance Hall, they met up with a cluster of Durmstrang students and their headmaster, Karkaroff. Harry stepped back to let them go through, hoping Karkaroff hadn’t seen him, but it was too late. The man was staring. Harry tried not to squirm; Snape had warned him about Karkaroff. The man was a Death Eater, and a slippery one at that.

Karkaroff’s eyes were fixed firmly on his scar, and behind him his students were staring too, whispering to each other as they realised who Harry was. The only one not staring was Krum. “If you don’t mind, Igor,” Snape’s voice carried over the hushed crowd. “Potter’s ego is big enough as it is without foreigners gawping at him as well. His head may not fit through the door if you keep at it much longer.”

Karkaroff seemed to have realised he’d gathered a crowd, and coughed, heading through the doorway. Harry shot Snape a grateful look, but the man ignored him.

And so it began.

. . .

It didn’t escape Harry’s notice that the day the names would be drawn from the Goblet was also Halloween. He woke up with a bad feeling in his gut, and slipped from the dorm before anyone else was awake, wrapped in a dark blue knitted jumper that still smelled faintly of the detergent Ceri used at Seren Du, and the cloak he’d been given for his birthday. He put the two-way mirror in his pocket on his way out, slowly drawing together a plan in his mind.

Even with the excitement about the Goblet of Fire, Harry was still up early enough that only a handful of people were milling around the Great Hall. He could get used to this; it was nice having breakfast in the quiet. He watched Cassius and a couple of other Slytherins toss their names into the flames, and smirked. Imagine if the Hogwarts champion was a Slytherin?

As things got a little busier, Harry finished off his porridge and left the hall, right as the Durmstrang delegation entered. Each of them had a piece of parchment in their hands. Harry lingered in the doorway to watch them throw their names in one by one, then slipped out of the castle and towards the lake, wrapping his cloak snugly around himself. He found a quiet little nook beside a tree near the bank, setting up his usual privacy charms before taking the mirror from his pocket and speaking Sirius' name. After a few beats, his godfather's face appeared.

"You're up early," Sirius greeted. Harry offered a half-smile.

"So are you," he pointed out. "It's one of those days."

Sirius met his gaze knowingly. "It is, isn't it," he agreed. "How are things at school? The champions are being announced tonight, correct?"

Harry told Sirius everything that had happened since he'd spoke to the man a few days ago, including his little moment with Karkaroff. The mere mention of the man made Sirius scowl. "Stay away from him if you can, Harry," he warned. "He's no good."

Harry had surmised that much for himself. "How are things at home? What are you up to today?"

"Just spending time with Moony. Gonna light a Samhain fire later. Today is... hard, for both of us." Neither of them needed to say why. The death of Lily and James Potter hung over all of them, the wound still achingly fresh after thirteen years.

"I wish I could be there with you," Harry sighed. He hated having to spend Halloween at school. Everyone was too cheerful, and something *always* went wrong.

"We do too, pup. Make sure someone gives you a hug today, yeah? For me. I'd tell you to go to Severus for one, but I think he might explode if you asked," Sirius joked, making Harry grin.

"Okay. You give Moony an extra hug for me, won't you? For both your sakes." One day they'd all be able to spend the day together, mourning properly. Probably not until after Harry graduated Hogwarts, but... it was a nice thought.

He chatted to Sirius about inconsequential things for a while, basking in the warm feeling he got from having an adult who actually cared about the little things in his life. Not just wanting to talk to him when he was in trouble, or in danger, or they needed something from him — one of the few adults in Harry's life who actually *cared* about him. Not the Boy-Who-Lived.

Eventually however, Sirius had to go, and Harry pocketed the mirror with a sigh, staring out over the lake. What if he just sat there all day until the feast? What if he didn't even go to the feast? He'd find out who the champions were in the morning. He didn't really care either way.

His privacy charms made external noise a little fuzzy, so he dropped them to let the sounds of nature wash over him; the gentle lull of the lake's tide, the birds and other creatures in the forest chattering away. Very faintly, he could hear the noise of students up at the castle, but it was just far enough that he could pretend they didn't exist. Until someone cleared their throat. "Mind if I join you?"

It was Draco, his pale face half covered by his Slytherin scarf. Harry shuffled over a little, making room for the blond. "What are you doing out here?"

"Pansy wanted to try and get a better look at Krum," Draco explained. "I left her to it. Are you okay? You look sad."

"Just spoke to Sirius." Harry bit his lip, then sighed, meeting Draco's gaze earnestly. "I miss him. Especially today."

"Today? Oh." Draco quickly put the pieces together. "I'm sorry," he murmured. "It must be hard for you. Seeing everyone else so happy."

"It's not just that," Harry said. "It's... something bad always happens on Halloween. Every year. I feel like this year won't be any different, and I'm so sick of it all. I just want today to be over already." His heart hurt, his head hurt, and he was already so *tired*. The day had barely started and he was ready for it to be done.

"If it makes you feel better, the Weasley twins tried to put their names in the Goblet. The age line spat them back out with beards longer and greyer than Dumbledore's," Draco informed him, smiling slightly. "It was hilarious. I guess they're serious about making sure no one underage goes in."

Harry chuckled. "I wish I'd seen that." He felt a little bad for the twins, but really he was glad they wouldn't be risking their necks for some money and glory.

The pair sat in silence for a while, Draco's shoulder warm against his, both of them watching the giant squid prod curiously at the Durmstrang ship. "At least tomorrow all the fuss will be over," Draco murmured. "The champions will be chosen and the rest of us can just get on with things until the first task."

"Yeah." Harry wished the tournament was the least of his problems. "Draco, I don't know what to do. I can't let Dumbledore know I'm onto him, but I can't just keep pretending I'm oblivious, it's *killing* me. Trying to pretend Ron's comments about Slytherins don't bother me, that Hermione's nagging isn't overbearing. I can't even hang out with Neville without them getting suspicious, let alone anyone else." The other heirs were doing well in starting some inter-house friendships, but Harry still felt trapped. "Sometimes I just want to say fuck it and come sit with you at the Slytherin table, let the pieces fall where they may. What does it matter if Dumbledore knows I've ruined his plan? He's going to find out eventually."

“Antagonising Dumbledore is a dangerous game,” Draco warned. “He’s more manipulative than any Slytherin, and sneaky about it. If you go against him outwardly without the proper precautions, you could end up expelled, or worse. Being the Boy-Who-Lived won’t protect you from everything.”

“I know,” Harry said with a groan. “I know I can’t. I just... it feels like I’m letting him win.”

“If you were letting him win, you wouldn’t be sat here talking to me,” Draco pointed out. “Not every battle is a big Gryffindor confrontation, y’know. You keep telling me you have a Slytherin side; let that out to play for a while. Work in the shadows. Be sneaky.” He smirked. “Beat him at his own game.”

Harry let the idea roll around in his head for a minute. He’d have to start slowly. “I think I need to send some letters,” he said eventually. “I’m going to need allies outside of the castle as well as in it.” It was time to start letting some of his secrets out; time to find out who he could really trust. He couldn’t dismantle Dumbledore’s grasp on the wizarding world without some help, after all. He’d been toeing around the edge of it, afraid Dumbledore would find out and he’d be done for, but Draco was right. He had a Slytherin side, it was time to use it.

“Right now?” Draco asked, tensing. Harry shook his head.

“Later.” He was far too comfortable to leave just yet. “For now I just need a bit more peace and quiet.”

“Oh. I can go, if you’d...”

Harry rolled his eyes, tugging on Draco’s hand before the blond could go anywhere. “You don’t count, you daft git,” he said with a roll of his eyes, his cheeks pink. It was definitely just because of the cold.

Draco settled back down, his hand still in Harry’s. Boldly, Harry leaned in closer, letting his head fall onto Draco’s shoulder. “I hate Halloween,” he muttered under his breath. Draco’s cheek tilted to press against his hair, his body a warm line against Harry’s.

“I’m sorry about your parents,” he said softly.

The pair sat there under the tree for almost half an hour, Harry’s head on Draco’s shoulder, breathing quietly in the cold October morning. By the time they parted — Draco worried Pansy would be looking for him, and Harry thinking the same of Ron and Hermione — Harry still had the bad feeling in his gut, but he felt calmer. More ready to face the day.

It wasn’t quite the hug Sirius had ordered, but it was good enough.

. . .

True to his word, he went up to the Owlery after parting ways with Draco, calling Hedwig down. “Hello, girl,” he greeted fondly, stroking her head. “Won’t be a minute.” There was a writing desk in the corner of the Owlery, and Harry dug a quill and some parchment out of his bag, sitting down with a thoughtful frown.

The first letter on Harry's list was to Bill Weasley.

Dear Bill,

Hope it's okay that I'm writing to you. You did say to keep in touch, after all. I expect the others have already told you about the tournament, but the champions get chosen tonight. From what I heard, the twins tried to put their names in, but they didn't get past the age line.

I was wondering something — you work for Gringotts, right? Do you know a goblin called Gorrik? I had some dealings with him the summer before third year, and I was wondering how he was doing. What exactly does a curse-breaker do? You said you brought home treasure — is all of your job raiding old Egyptian tombs, or do you ever break curses on people, too?

Hope you're doing well,

Harry

There. Enough of a hint for Bill to hopefully connect some dots — and enough that if Bill was in Dumbledore's pocket, he would go to the headmaster about it, and Harry would know soon enough. If Dumbledore thought Harry was aware of the curse on him, he'd no doubt start sniffing around.

He grabbed a second piece of parchment, thinking a little longer before writing this one.

Dear Charlie,

The secret is out; the tournament is almost underway. Are you planning to come watch some of it? Is that why you said you might see us sooner than expected?

It's a shame the tournament means quidditch is cancelled, though. I was looking forward to using some of the stuff I practiced this summer in a real match. I guess it'll have to wait until next year.

I'm curious — is the Ministry in Romania like the Ministry here? The Durmstang students are pretty quiet about where they're from and how things work, and I was wondering if all European wizarding communities were the same. Do they have a Wizengamot like we do? Are the seats inherited in the same way? No worries if you don't know, I just thought I'd ask. I've been looking into things like that a little more here, and I'd be interested to see if it's much different elsewhere.

Hope you're doing well,

Harry

If Bill and Charlie put their letters together, they could probably get a pretty clear idea of what Harry was really implying. Harry sealed the letters and tied them to Hedwig's leg, hoping both Weasley boys were still living at the Burrow for now. He didn't want to accidentally send her to Egypt or Romania!

She soared off into the horizon, and Harry sighed to himself, officially out of excuses for avoiding Ron and Hermione. He had other letters to write, but they could wait until Hedwig was back.

He thought about going to the library, pretending to do homework until Hermione eventually found him, but it was no use; halfway down the main staircase, he heard a call of his name. “There you are!” The pair hurried towards him. “Mate, you missed it — Fred and George tried to put their names in, but the age line wasn’t fooled by the potion. They got these massive beards, it was brilliant!” Ron enthused. “Where were you?”

“Owlery.” Let them think he was writing to Sirius.

“Oh. Well, we thought we’d go visit Hagrid, we haven’t been to see him yet this term.”

While Harry didn’t really want to spend that much time with Ron and Hermione today, he couldn’t think of a good excuse — and he did owe Hagrid a visit. So he found himself outside once more, this time heading towards the hut. The Beauxbatons carriage was parked close by, no doubt so Hagrid could keep a close eye on the enormous horses.

Visiting with Hagrid was just like old times — if a little bizarre, what with Hagrid wearing his interesting-looking suit. All became clear when they went to head up to the castle for the feast, and the headmistress of Beauxbatons stepped out of her carriage.

“We’ve lost him,” Harry declared when Hagrid started walking alongside the large woman, oblivious to his student companions. Hermione giggled.

The three of them headed up to the castle, which was abuzz with excitement. They found a seat by the twins, who looked no worse for wear after their experience with the age line.

“I hope it’s Angelina!” Fred enthused. “But any Gryffindor will do.”

“As long as it’s not Pretty-Boy Diggory,” Ron muttered under his breath. Harry rolled his eyes.

It was the fastest a Hogwarts feast had ever been eaten. Everyone was wolfing down their food, desperate for the champions to be announced, but up at the head table Dumbledore seemed to be savouring every bite.

After what felt like an age, the plates cleared, and he stood.

Harry’s pulse ticked up, but he couldn’t tell if it was in exhilaration or dread. He still had that bad feeling, he’d been carrying it around all day, and now the champions were about to be announced his stomach was bubbling with something that wasn’t entirely excitement.

Viktor Krum, the first champion. A strong choice — if Krum was as good at magic as he was at flying, he’d be a real contender. He’d already proven he could think on the move.

Fleur Delacour — the girl who looked like a veela. Harry knew literally nothing about her, but her schoolmates seemed disappointed. Though perhaps that was just because they hadn’t been chosen.

When the Hogwarts champion was announced, Harry was almost knocked off his bench by the force of the noise coming from the Hufflepuff table. He beamed, getting to his feet and applauding. “Nice one, Cedric!” he called, ignoring Ron’s scowl at his side. Cedric turned and grinned at him on his way up. Harry was glad; Hufflepuff deserved a little glory.

Sitting down, Harry finally let himself relax, grinning as it took several minutes for the Hufflepuffs to quiet down enough for Dumbledore to speak. There, it was done, the champions were chosen, he had survived another Halloween feast.

And then the fire in the Goblet turned red again.

Harry’s heart turned to ice as the parchment shot into Dumbledore’s hand. The entire hall was so silent you could have heard a pin drop. Everyone stared at Dumbledore, who stared at the parchment. Then he looked up. His eyes fixed on Harry. *Oh, no.*

“Harry Potter.”

Chapter 21

Harry's knees barely supported him as he started walking down the aisle between the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff tables, keeping his head down and his gaze forward. Whispers were filling the hall, the eyes on him like a physical pressure against his skin. No one was applauding.

Dumbledore urged him through the same door the three champions had walked, into a small side chamber. The three looked up at him, confused.

"Cedric, I didn't do it," Harry blurted, speaking for the first time since his name emerged from the Goblet. "Please, you have to believe me — all of you. I didn't put my name in, I didn't do it."

Cedric's brow furrowed, but before he could ask for an explanation the door opened once more, and Ludo Bagman strode in, beaming. Cold dread entered Harry's heart when the man introduced him as the fourth Triwizard champion.

"I can't be!" he insisted. "I'm too young, I didn't put my name in!"

"But 'e is just a boy?" Fleur Delacour said, a puzzled look on her face. "Zis 'as to be some sort of joke, non?"

"No joke! Harry's name came out of the Goblet, he's magically bound to compete, just like the rest of you!" Bagman's voice was far too cheerful considering the circumstances.

There was a loud noise, and the door slammed open. All three heads of school entered, followed by Mr Crouch, as well as Professors McGonagall and Snape. Harry glanced at Snape with a helpless expression; the man's face was tight, and pale. Nobody looked happy, except Bagman.

Fleur immediately hurried to her headmistress, speaking in rapid French, and the tall woman surveyed the gathered crowd with contempt. "Dumbly-dorr," she said eventually, her voice icy. "Explain."

"I don't remember anything in the rules saying the host school is allowed two champions," Karkaroff agreed. Dumbledore had a look of mild concern on his face, but otherwise seemed quite unruffled. Harry glared at him; was this his fault?

The two heads of the foreign schools continued to question Dumbledore, furious that not only had a second Hogwarts champion been chose, but an underage one at that. Eventually, Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Harry, did you put your name in the Goblet?" he asked, as if he was merely commenting on the weather. Harry glared at him.

"No, I didn't!"

"Obviously 'e is lying!"

“Did you ask an older student to put your name in for you?” Dumbledore continued, still in that frustratingly calm tone.

“No! I don’t want this. I don’t want to be part of the tournament!” Harry insisted. Surely there had to be a way out?

“Well, it’s a bit late for that!” Bagman crowed, chuckling. “The Goblet of Fire is a binding magical contract! Pretty dire consequences for breaking it.”

“But I didn’t enter!” Harry argued. “How can I be bound in a contract I didn’t consent to?”

“Headmaster, I really don’t think we should be rewarding Potter’s... *theatrics* by allowing him to compete,” Snape sneered. If Harry didn’t know better by now, he would’ve been raging at the man. Beside him, McGonagall was wringing her hands anxiously.

“I demand to be allowed to resubmit the names of my students!” Karkaroff said, Maxime nodding at his side.

The argument continued, Karkaroff threatening to leave, and things just went downhill when Moody entered the room. Even though he was saying all the things Harry was thinking — that someone was doing this to put him in danger, that it had to be someone powerful to fool the magic of the Goblet — it rankled to have the man be the only person outwardly on his side, speaking in such a way that it was immediately dismissed as the ramblings of a paranoid old auror.

When things came to a tense silence, everyone seeming to realise there was nothing they could do about it, Bagman clapped his hands together with a grin. “Right, shall we crack on, then? Champions,” he announced, drawing the attention of the four teens. “The first task is designed to test your daring, so we’re not going to be telling you what it is.” Harry stared flatly at the man as he went on about courage in the face of the unknown — was he serious? They were just going to *do the tournament*? Was no one but Harry even *slightly* alarmed by the circumstances?

When they were given all the information necessary, Maxime and Karkaroff didn’t stick around long, taking their champions with them. Dumbledore sent Harry and Cedric off, and soon Harry found himself in the Entrance Hall, walking alongside the Hufflepuff. He paused, looking up at the tall boy. “You believe me, right, Cedric? That I didn’t put my name in?” Cedric looked somewhat conflicted, and Harry’s heart sank. “Right, no, of course you don’t. Why would you? Who wouldn’t love to be in the Triwizard Tournament? As if I haven’t had enough of life or death situations. As if *Famous Harry Potter* could possibly need more attention.” His tone was bitter, and Cedric winced.

“I didn’t say that! I just... it’s all a bit mad, isn’t it?”

Harry snorted. “Just a bit. Seriously, Cedric, even if I did manage to get my name in, how the hell would I have tricked the Goblet into picking a fourth person? I don’t want to compete! I want *you* to be the Hogwarts champion, I was thrilled when you got announced! Please, just... I didn’t do this. I don’t want to compete against you, or anyone, but I’m stuck here. I just need you to believe me.”

Cedric stared at him for a long moment, then his shoulders slumped, and he ran a hand through his hair. “I believe you.”

Harry blinked, the words echoing in his head. “Really?”

“Really. You’re clearly not happy about this, and I don’t think you’re that good a liar,” the Hufflepuff added with a brief grin. “Besides, like Moody said; I reckon you have to really know what you’re doing to mess with the Goblet like that.”

Harry couldn’t help himself; he wrapped his arms around the Hufflepuff’s waist, relief flooding him. “Thank you,” he breathed. That was one person — one student — who believed him. He let go, flushing. Cedric’s cheeks were pink too. “I’m sorry about all this. You were supposed to be the one, and I came in and stole your thunder.” Hufflepuff finally had a moment in the sun, and Harry had to ruin it all. Cedric shrugged.

“Not your fault,” he dismissed. “And it’s all for Hogwarts, eh?”

Lips pursed, Harry didn’t respond. He doubted the rest of the school would see it that way.

They parted ways at the stairs, but Harry didn’t go up to Gryffindor Tower. He wasn’t ready to face that yet. Instead he went to the dungeons, only one destination in mind. A place he’d never been, but seen on the map enough times to find his way to. He knocked cautiously. The door opened, and dark eyes greeted him. “I thought you might show up.”

Snape beckoned him into his quarters, and Harry barely got the chance to look around before he was wrapped in a tight hug. “Oh, cub!” It was Remus, his grip almost painful. “I came as soon as Severus told us. Merlin, Harry, what happened?”

“I don’t know!” Harry said once Remus’ grip loosened, looking up earnestly at the two adults. “I didn’t put my name in! Dumbledore says I have to compete; it’s a binding magical contract, apparently!”

“Unfortunately, he’s right,” Snape declared. “The Goblet of Fire is a very old, very powerful magical artefact. Once it selects you for the tournament, you must compete in each task unless you die or are disqualified, or risk losing your magic.”

“How do I get disqualified?” Harry asked. Snape’s face was grim.

“Previously, champions have been disqualified for trying to kill or severely injure another champion.” Oh. Maybe not, then.

“So I’m screwed, is what you’re saying?” Harry surmised. “Great. Whoever’s trying to kill me is finally going to get their wish. Do you think it was Dumbledore? He didn’t look all that put out by it all. And he’s certainly powerful enough.”

“I think the headmaster has other plans for you, and he wouldn’t risk them on something like this,” Remus said gently. “I think this came from… the other side of the board.”

Voldemort, then. Fantastic. Harry felt his hands begin to shake, the shock setting in, and within moments he was being led to a chair and handed a mug of hot chocolate. “Breathe,

cub," Remus murmured, his hand solid on Harry's shoulder. "Just breathe."

"I can't do this!" Harry said, his voice strangled. "I'm fourteen! I don't know nearly as many spells as the others, and sheer dumb luck will only get me so far! I'm going to die in this sodding tournament!"

"*You will not die.*" The words came in a firm hiss, and Harry's head snapped up, meeting Snape's near-black eyes. "You're not an idiot, Potter. You're a darn sight more powerful than you give yourself credit for, and after teaching you this summer I have every faith in your ability to survive this tournament. You will have help wherever you should need it — surely you didn't expect us to just throw you to the wolves?"

Harry blinked. Snape took a step back, looking a little surprised by his own outburst. By his side, Remus smiled. "Severus is right, Harry. You're a talented young man, and we'll do whatever we can to make sure you get through this in one piece. Now, why don't you head up to bed? I daresay after all this excitement you could use the rest."

Now that the shock was fading, Harry *was* pretty exhausted. He gulped down the hot chocolate, feeling the sugar rush through him. "Okay," he said eventually, once his pulse had returned to normal. "It'll be fine. Everything is fine." He looked up at the two adults. "You really think I can do this?" The tournament was supposed to challenge even the of-age wizards. How could Harry compare?

"Absolutely," Remus assured. "You don't have to win. You just have to finish." He took Harry's empty mug, setting it on the coffee table. "Now go on, up to the dorms with you. Call Sirius when you get there, would you? He wanted to come with me, but we didn't want to risk it."

Harry got to his feet, eagerly accepting one last hug from the werewolf. "Thank you," he murmured. "Both of you." He glanced up to Snape. "I'm sorry to barge in. I just... I needed..." He trailed off, the words not quite making it to his throat. He needed reassurance, and he had come to *Snape*, regardless of whether Remus had been there or not. What was the world coming to?

To his surprise, Snape put a hand on his shoulder, just for a second. "I told you to come here if there was an emergency," he reminded. "I rather think this qualifies."

Harry offered the man a tentative smile, which didn't last long when he geared himself up to head to Gryffindor. Time to face the music.

.-. .

To his surprise, Gryffindor Tower was in the middle of a party when he arrived, and he was immediately dragged into the middle of it. "Brilliant, Harry!" Katie Bell cheered.

"If it couldn't be me, at least it's a Gryffindor!" Angelina enthused. Harry was congratulated and slapped on the back by people he barely even knew, the common room full of cheering and applause. Harry tried to insist he hadn't put his name in, but no one wanted to listen.

A hand wrapped around his shoulder, and Harry fought it as it yanked him backwards, only to find himself looking up at a familiar freckled face. “Alright, Harry?” Fred asked, brows furrowed in concern. He’d pulled Harry up into the dormitory stairwell, and George was leaning against the wall opposite.

“I didn’t do it,” Harry insisted. “I don’t want this!”

“We know,” the twins said, and Harry faltered. George grinned at him.

“You were pretty vocal about not wanting it, mate,” he pointed out.

“And if you’d figured it out, you would’ve told us,” Fred agreed.

“The question is, whodunnit?” George’s words made Harry grimace.

“Moody thinks whoever did it is trying to get me killed. I’d say he’s pretty on the money there.”

Both twins shared a grim look. “Well, you’ll show ‘em, won’t you, Harry?” Fred said, clapping him on the shoulders.

“Yeah, if anyone can do it, it’s you!” George grinned, brown eyes bright. “Give Diggory a run for his money, won’t you?”

Harry appreciated their optimism, but he didn’t want to compete against Cedric. Really all he wanted right now was to go to bed. He said as much, and George ruffled his hair. “We’ll get this winding down, don’t worry. You’d better scarper quick, though,” he added, glancing over Harry’s shoulder. “Creevey brothers, incoming.”

Harry winced. “Thanks, guys.” He squeezed past them and hurried up the stairs, ducking into his dormitory with a relieved sigh. To his surprise, he wasn’t the only one in there. Ron was lying on his bed, an odd expression on his face when he looked up at Harry.

“There you are,” he said. “Congratulations, I guess.”

“What do you mean?” Harry asked warily, though he could already see where the conversation was going. His stomach churned.

“You figured it out. Got your name in the Goblet. You could’ve at least told me, we could’ve both entered.”

“I didn’t put my name in, Ron,” Harry insisted, tiredness creeping into his voice, making him sound snappish. God, he just wanted to go to sleep. “Someone else must have done it.”

“Yeah, right,” Ron said, still with that awkward smile-grimace on his face. “You can tell me the truth, y’know. You were gone all morning, did it take you a while to figure it out?”

“I told you, I was in the Owlery this morning! I don’t know how my name got in the Goblet, but I don’t want this, Ron!” Harry was getting angry, now, and so was the redhead.

"I'm not stupid!" he argued. "All that talk about not wanting it, that was just to throw us off, wasn't it? I guess even you can't resist a thousand galleons of prize money."

"Is that really what you think of me?" Harry asked. "That I'd put myself in this much danger for *money*? And lie about it?"

"Well what else am I supposed to think?" Ron retorted hotly.

"You're supposed to *trust me!*" Harry grabbed his pyjamas, throwing them onto his mattress. "But there's not been much of that, lately, has there? I'm going to bed."

"Right, sure — got to get your beauty sleep," Ron taunted. "Probably got a photo call in the morning, or something."

Harry gave the redhead one last glare, then climbed onto bed and dragged his curtains shut forcefully, putting up his privacy wards. Safe in the silencing bubble, he let out a frustrated scream. Ron was infuriating!

Though, he supposed, he couldn't exactly get at the boy for not trusting Harry. It wasn't like Harry had done that in return, after all. Even if it was things like this that proved why.

Not bothering with his pyjamas just yet, Harry dug the two-way mirror out of his bag, leaning back against his headboard to talk to Sirius. When the man's face appeared, the concern in those grey eyes made a lump rise in Harry's throat. "Oh, pup," he murmured softly, knowing. Harry swallowed back a sob. How had things gone wrong so quickly? "Pup, it's okay," Sirius soothed. "You're going to be fine. I love you. It's okay."

Harry squeezed his eyes shut, taking a deep breath. He wished he could believe that.

.

After Harry left, Severus and Remus sat in silence, staring into their mugs of tea. "Could it be Karkaroff?" Remus suggested. Severus shook his head.

"Too obvious. He'll know he's being watched." Severus ran a hand through his hair, and Remus' heart ached. His cub was in danger, and he just had to sit back and let it all happen!

"Are we sure this isn't some plot of Dumbledore's?" he asked doubtfully. The headmaster had proven he was happy to risk Harry's safety in the past. "Some kind of test of Harry's skills?"

"I don't think he did it, but he's certainly willing to sit back and let it happen," Severus said. "He looked quite pleased about it, actually. Which is why I think it's the Dark Lord's doing — Dumbledore wants him to return before Harry is seventeen, that much is clear. If this is the first step towards that, he's not going to stop it."

Remus couldn't stop the growl that emerged at that. The thought of Harry being used as some pawn in Dumbledore's awful schemes made him sick to his stomach. He opened his mouth to speak, but was interrupted by a knock at the door. A look of annoyance flashed across Severus' face.

“What now?” he grumbled, getting to his feet. Remus stayed carefully out of sight, ready to duck into the bedroom should it be someone who wasn’t supposed to know he was there. To his surprise, it was Draco Malfoy. “Uncle Severus,” the boy breathed desperately.

Severus ushered his godson into the room, shutting the door. “What’s the matter?” he asked, concern in his dark eyes. “Is something wrong?”

“Someone’s trying to kill Harry, aren’t they?” Draco said, his already pale face near-transparent with fear. “Getting him involved in this *bloody* tournament. Is it my father’s fault? Is this what he’s been planning all summer? I should’ve tried harder to listen in—I could have stopped this!”

Severus brought Draco into a firm hug; probably the only person other than Remus he’d willingly show such affection to. “Draco,” he murmured, one hand on the boy’s hair. “This is not your fault. I doubt it’s your father, either — Lucius is far too much of a braggart to have planned something like this without getting me involved.” Remus stifled a snort. “Whoever put Harry’s name in the Goblet is likely out to harm him, yes. But it’s nothing you could have prevented.” He released Draco to look him in the eye. “Draco, you must be careful. If there are Death Eaters in the castle that we don’t know about, they could be watching you. It wouldn’t do for someone to go to your father with word of your… change in loyalties.”

If possible, Draco got even paler, but he clenched his jaw and nodded tightly. “I’ll be discreet,” he promised. “I— you’ll tell me if you learn anything, won’t you? About Harry?”

“Potter’s circumstances are not yours to worry about,” Severus pointed out, his voice surprisingly gentle. “All you need to do is support him, and keep yourself safe. No one can know how you feel about him.”

That finally brought some colour to the young Malfoy’s face, his cheeks turning pink. “Uncle Severus, I—” Draco sighed. “I suppose.” He looked up, his eyes finally landing on Remus, and his shoulders tensed as he realised the Gryffindor had witnessed everything. “Professor Lupin, I…”

“I’m not your professor anymore, Draco,” Remus said warmly. “I told you in the summer, you’re welcome to call me Remus. Don’t mind me here, I didn’t want to interrupt. But I am glad Harry has you to look out for him.” He gave the boy a knowing look, and Draco’s blush rose higher.

“Well, the idiot Gryffindor isn’t very good at looking out for himself, is he?” he muttered. He took a step back, reaching half-heartedly towards the door. “I should go to bed. I’m sorry for disturbing your evening.”

“Nonsense,” Remus waved him off. “Severus is your godfather, you have every right to come to him. If you need some privacy…”

Draco shook his head. “It’s almost curfew, I really should go.” What little vulnerability the boy had dared show his godfather was locked up tight at the presence of a near-stranger. It made Remus’ chest ache, but he didn’t blame the boy.

"Be careful, Draco," Severus warned again, squeezing the boy's shoulder. Draco nodded, hurrying from the room, and they were alone once more.

Remus crossed the room, laying gentle hands on Severus' shoulders, his chest pressing to the Slytherin's back. "Look at you," he murmured with amusement, lips dragging across the man's jaw. "Two teenagers in one night coming to you for comfort. One of them a Gryffindor, even." He grinned impishly. "You've gone soft, Severus."

The Slytherin growled, turning sharply to pin Remus with a glare. "I have *not*," he insisted. Remus chuckled.

"It's okay to admit it," he teased, a hand sliding down Severus' lapel. "You can glare all you want, but I know the truth. I know there's something here." He gave a gentle pat to the man's ribs, right over his heart. "I've been rather selfish with it all these years, but I suppose I can learn to share." Honestly, seeing Harry start to warm to Severus, seeing the Slytherin let down his barriers in turn — Remus had never been more in love with him in his life. For the first time, it felt like he could truly have this. All of it. All the best parts of his life, *together*.

Suddenly, Severus' arm snaked around his waist, pulling him in close. Severus' breath was hot on his neck, sending a thrill down Remus' spine. "I assure you, wolf," he murmured, in that dangerously sexy drawl. "Despite what those foolish teenagers may believe, despite what you think — the last thing I am is *soft*." His thigh slipped between Remus', making the Gryffindor aware of a rather large bulge in his trousers. Remus smirked.

"Hmm, I suppose you're not, are you?" he agreed, allowing Severus to push him towards the bedroom door, his blood running hot through his veins. In the morning, they'd have to deal with the oncoming shitstorm that was the Triwizard Tournament, and Harry's unexpected involvement in it. But the morning was a long way off.

.-.-.-.

There was a heavy knot of anxiety in Harry's stomach when he woke up on Sunday morning, and it took him a minute to remember why. The events of the evening before came rushing back to him, and he pulled his duvet up over his head with a groan. What if he just didn't get up? Ever? They couldn't make him compete if they couldn't get him out of bed.

Sadly, he knew better. A quick Tempus charm showed him it was well into breakfast time, and he grimaced. He had no hope of avoiding everyone at this time of day.

He was the only one in the dorm when he drew his curtains back, and he was glad for the silence as he got dressed. He wasn't ready for another argument with Ron, yet.

Unfortunately, once he got down to the common room he was greeted by another round of raucous applause. The thought of going to the Great Hall and dealing with the people down there sounded like hell, but he needed to eat, and he couldn't stay in Gryffindor Tower when it was like this. He could already see the Creevey brothers on their way over. Maybe he could sneak into the kitchens for breakfast; he'd seen it on the Marauder's Map.

The decision was taken out of his hands, however, when he stepped out of the portrait hole to be greeted by Neville Longbottom's smiling face — and a sausage sandwich wrapped in a napkin, which was quickly shoved his way. "Brought you this," Neville said by way of greeting. "Figured you wouldn't fancy going down to breakfast."

"Neville, you're a godsend," Harry declared, accepting the sandwich graciously. "Is it bad down there?"

Neville winced. "It's... not great." That admission meant it was likely *terrible*, and Harry cursed. It would be second year all over again, only instead of thinking he was out to kill them, half the school merely thought he was trying to steal the limelight and break the rules. Fantastic. "Want to go for a walk?" Neville offered. Harry nodded; anything to avoid the crowds of people.

Harry didn't have his cloak, but he did have his Silverling's jacket on, so the pair of them headed down to the Entrance Hall and out to the grounds. Everyone they passed stared at Harry, and whispers followed in his wake. It was awful.

"Of course I knew you didn't do it," Neville said with a roll of his eyes, when Harry asked if the round-faced boy believed him. "You hate attention. Ron's still being an idiot about it, though — I don't think he really believes you did it, but he's jealous all the same." The taller Gryffindor snorted. "If he was going to have an issue with being sidelined, he shouldn't have befriended the Boy-Who-Lived," he added in a mutter. "Maybe he thought being friends with you would get him some glory of his own."

The offhand remark reminded Harry suddenly of the letter from Gorvak, and the revelation about Mrs Weasley. *Some glory of his own...* The pieces were coming together, and Harry didn't like the picture they were making.

He glanced around. They were by the lake, not far from where Harry had sat with Draco the day before, and there was no one around. "Neville," he said slowly. "I know I've asked you to keep a lot of secrets for me so far. But there's a few more I haven't told you yet. Can we— would you sit down with me for a bit?" He gestured to the tree he'd sat by yesterday. Neville's face was serious.

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to, Harry," he said. "It's okay." Harry shook his head.

"No, I want to. I trust you." He did — Neville had proven himself a solid friend in the last year, and Harry hated to think there were things Ron and Hermione knew that he didn't. Besides, maybe the other boy could help him make sense of it all. He needed people on his side.

The two of them settled down at the base of the tree, facing each other, and Harry put up the strongest privacy wards he knew. Only then did he tell Neville everything — about Sirius and Remus, everything that had happened the year before and over the summer, right up to the letter from Gorvak. Neville listened patiently, his face going through a myriad of emotions. The only thing Harry didn't tell him was the truth about Snape's relationship with Remus, and his status as a Death Eater spy; some secrets weren't his to share.

“Blimey,” he said when Harry finally finished. “I thought it was bad when you told me about the magic block. You have been busy, haven’t you?” Harry snorted.

“Just a bit, yeah,” he agreed. “So you see where I’m at. I need to start getting things together — I can’t just sit around and wait until Dumbledore reveals his plan. I can’t let him get away with stealing my money *and* my magic. I have to be ready to reveal it on my own terms.”

“Well however me and Gran can help, we’d be happy to,” Neville assured without hesitation. Harry’s shoulders slumped in relief. “I figured you weren’t at your muggle relatives this summer, from some of the things you said in your letters. But... I’m glad you’ve got somewhere to go that’s safe, where you’re happy.” Harry raised an eyebrow at him, and Neville’s gaze grew pointed. “I’ve seen the bruises, Harry, and the scars. And I can tell from the way you talk about them. Those muggles aren’t good people.”

Harry grimaced; he hadn’t realised Neville had seen so much. The boy was more observant than anyone gave him credit for. “All that doesn’t matter, now,” he dismissed, not wanting to get into it about the Dursleys. “I won’t have to stay with them for more than a day or so, hopefully.”

“That’s good,” Neville agreed. He grew pensive for a moment. “This is serious, isn’t it, Harry? Like, world-changing serious.”

“Yeah, you could say that.” Harry bit his lip. “Look, Nev, if you want to stay out of it, I completely understand. Being around me is always a bit chaotic, but things are only going to get worse.”

“Shut up, Harry.” The force in Neville’s voice made Harry blink, taken-aback. “I might not be the bravest Gryffindor around, but you’re my friend, and what’s happening to you isn’t right. Dumbledore — he can’t be allowed to just keep doing whatever he wants and manipulating people for the Greater Good. I’ve been thinking about it ever since you told me what he did last year. I can’t promise to be much help, but I’m in this with you, whether you like it or not.”

Harry had never seen Neville so firm about anything — he was starting to see what the Sorting Hat had in mind when he put Neville in the house of lions. “Okay, then,” he said eventually. “That’s — yeah. Thanks, Nev.” Neville was blushing now, and Harry smiled. “You’ve already been loads of help. I wouldn’t have learned Occlumency without you, and your gran. I was going to write to her, actually — when I make my move, when it all comes out, I’ll need to change my Wizengamot proxy. If we can’t get Sirius’ name cleared... d’you... would she be willing?” He couldn’t take the Slytherin seat from Dumbledore’s hands, but he could take the other three.

“She’d be honoured, Harry,” Neville assured. Harry grinned; that was one load off his mind. It wouldn’t happen for a while yet, but it was good to know he had something in place.

“Good. And —” he paused, hesitant. “I’ve been thinking about telling the other heirs the truth. About Dumbledore, and even Sirius. If I can get them on my side, it’ll be easier to get him out of power when — when I need to.” It made him a little queasy, the thought of actively conspiring against the headmaster, but it would need to happen eventually. The wizarding

world couldn't be brought forward with Albus Dumbledore holding it back. "I just don't know if I can trust all of them."

"Well, no one's said anything about you being an heir yet," Neville pointed out. "None of them trust Dumbledore. I think they'd be willing to listen to you, if you wanted to tell them. They're good people."

Harry realised that Neville must have known most of them for far longer than Hogwarts; they probably played together as children. Grew up together. If Neville said they were trustworthy, he believed him. "Oh, and there's one more thing," he added, bracing himself for perhaps the most volatile secret of all. Neville's brows drew together warily. "Y'know last year I said Draco Malfoy wasn't as bad as we thought he was? I'm sort of— friends with him, now?" In all his story he hadn't said a word about Draco, but it didn't seem fair to be trusting Neville with so much but not that.

Neville stared at him. "That's it, right? No more secrets after that?" he checked. Harry ran over things in his mind.

"No, no, don't think so. That's the last one." Well, there was the slight maybe-crush he'd developed on the blond Slytherin, but Neville didn't need to know about that. He'd warm him up to the idea of Draco being his friend first.

"Okay," Neville said eventually. "If you're friends with him, he can't be as bad as he seems."

"Really? Just like that?" Harry had expected some sort of argument, at least. Neville shrugged.

"I thought Cassius was kind of a prat before I started talking to him, but he's actually alright. Even if he is crap at Herbology. If you say Malfoy's not a prat, then I believe you."

"Oh, no, he's definitely still a prat," Harry assured with a laugh. "But... a good one?" He felt his cheeks turning red, and hoped Neville didn't notice.

"Well, you're a bit of a prat sometimes, too, so I s'pose it all balances out," Neville said with a teasing grin. Harry made a noise of offence. "You went after a basilisk, *knowing it was a basilisk*, with nothing but your wand at the age of twelve! You spent all of last year wandering about at night when there was a murderer out there who wanted to *kill you!*" Neville pointed out. "Hell, you followed Quirrell down to the Philosopher's stone in first year without a second of hesitation!"

Harry was beginning to regret having told Neville the truth about his first two years at Hogwarts over the summer. "Okay, yeah, but in my defence I was under a Compulsion charm for the first two years," he pointed out.

"And what's your excuse for last year?" Neville asked, lips curled up at the edges. Harry sighed, running a hand through his hair.

"I'm a prat?" he admitted eventually, shrugging apologetically. "I don't know what you want me to say, Nev — we both know I'd be lying if I said I won't do it again."

Neville laughed, shaking his head. “As long as you’re aware of your faults,” he said magnanimously. He glanced at Harry in consideration. “I take it Ron and Hermione don’t know about any of this?”

“They know Sirius is innocent. They were there for that bit,” Harry told him. “But they don’t know about Seren Du, or about Dumbledore. Or Draco. I, uh, wasn’t planning on telling them. Not until I can be sure.”

“If Ron’s mum is on Dumbledore’s side, they might be as well,” Neville realised softly. Harry nodded.

“I always thought it was a bit weird how right as I got to the platform, a wizarding family appears and just starts talking really loudly about muggles,” he admitted. It all felt a little *too* coincidental, the way the Weasleys had been there to help him, and Ron had been the first friend he met on the train. Even with Hermione and the troll, though he knew Quirrell had been the one to let it into the school, how had she been the only one in danger? He didn’t like to believe it, but now he knew how manipulative Dumbledore could be, he wouldn’t put it past the man. Ron and Hermione were the perfect best friends to keep him oblivious. To keep him in check.

“You deserve better than Ron, anyway,” Neville said with a huff. “He’s always been jealous of you. You don’t even realise when you’re holding yourself back for his sake. Like all those new clothes you got that you hardly ever wear. Your trunk’s full of them, but you’re still in the same five shirts that are way too big.”

“You really have been paying attention, haven’t you?” Harry mused, watching Neville blush bashfully. “Do you know how Hermione’s taking the whole champion thing, by the way?” Harry hadn’t seen her since the Halloween feast.

“She was telling a couple of third years last night that you didn’t put your name in by yourself,” Neville told him. “But she’s not stupid, of course she can see that. That...”

“That doesn’t mean she isn’t one of Dumbledore’s,” Harry finished for him. He sighed, looking out across the lake. “I guess I’ll stick with it and see. Ron’s not talking to me, which is fine, but if I start pushing her away I’ll let Dumbledore in on my plans a little earlier than expected. Besides, maybe she’s trustworthy. I don’t know yet.”

“Maybe,” Neville agreed.

Harry knew they had to go back inside, he had to face the crowd eventually. But his head was spinning with all the information he’d given Neville, all the new information he’d gained from that.

So much for a quiet, normal year.

Chapter 22

Going into the castle for lunch was exactly as awful as Harry thought it would be.

The Great Hall was full of people when he and Neville entered, and all of them looked up at his entry, immediately breaking out into whispers. Harry made to turn around, but Neville yanked him forward. “You’re not going to the kitchens,” he insisted. “Come on, let’s sit with Parvati.”

The Indian girl looked up when the two boys sat beside her, and she glanced at Harry. “You look awful,” she declared, making him snort.

“Thanks.”

Her gaze turned considering. “Some people are saying you didn’t put your name in.”

“I didn’t,” Harry insisted. The Hogwarts rumour mill was a vicious thing, but there wasn’t a single scrap of it that didn’t end up past Parvati Patil or Lavender Brown at some point or another. If Harry wanted an accurate idea of peoples’ opinions, she was the one to ask. “What am I looking at, here?” He pointedly ignored all the people staring and murmuring around him. Parvati twirled a lock of hair around her finger, lips pursing.

“Obviously there are those who think you tricked your way in. Others think you bribed someone else to put your name in for you. Most people are realising that still wouldn’t explain how there’s four champions. But they don’t care whether you did it on purpose or not — they’re just angry it happened at all. Especially the Hufflepuffs,” Parvati reported. Harry sighed; it could be worse, he supposed.

He didn’t really blame the Hufflepuffs, to be honest. He’d be angry too in their shoes. He was stealing the glory from their rightful champion, overshadowing Cedric with all his drama. They had a right to be pissed about it.

He helped himself to some chicken, staring resolutely at his plate, even when the whispers rose dramatically. He didn’t look up until a throat cleared behind him. Expecting some nosy person asking about the Goblet, Harry turned with a scowl on his face, which dropped quickly when he saw the person stood there. “Cedric?” he greeted, bewildered. Cedric flashed him a nervous smile.

“Hiya, Harry. Mind if I sit here?” He gestured to the seat beside him. Harry blinked.

“At the Gryffindor table?” he asked dumbly.

“Yeah.” Cedric had his shoulders squared, but his eyes looked like he might bolt any minute. Everyone was staring at them.

“Yeah, go ahead.” Harry scooted up the bench to make room for the sixth year, staring at him incredulously. “What’re you playing at, Cedric?” he asked under his breath. Cedric’s smile

widened, more confident, and he reached for a bread roll.

“We’re in this together, aren’t we?” he said, loud enough for his voice to carry over the whispers of people shamelessly eavesdropping. “Both Hogwarts champions and all. Besides, if the rumours are true, and someone is out to do you in over this, then I reckon it’s my responsibility to help you through this in one piece.”

Harry could hardly believe what the older boy was saying. He was willing to give up his moment, to share it with Harry, just so people would leave him alone? “You are *such* a Hufflepuff,” he hissed. Cedric beamed.

“Thanks, Harry. Knew you’d see it my way. Pass the soup, would you?”

.-.-.-.

After Cedric’s little display at lunch, things got easier. Several of the Hufflepuffs still seemed resentful, but they were keeping it to themselves; if Cedric wasn’t angry with Harry, they couldn’t be either. After a couple of days, people had mostly settled down about the whole thing. Parvati was right; people didn’t care *how* it had happened, they just wanted to see what would happen next. And a fourteen year-old boy, Boy-Who-Lived or not, being part of the most dangerous event to happen in centuries... that was something to talk about.

Harry got used to hearing people discuss his chances of survival as he walked through the halls. He told himself it was better than hearing them jeer at him, or call him a glory-hunter. He just had to not let it get to him.

Easier said than done.

Hermione didn’t seem to know what to do with herself, flitting between Harry and Ron with an anxious look on her face, refusing to abandon the redhead but not wanting Harry to think she was on Ron’s side. If that wasn’t a clear sign to Harry that he couldn’t trust her, he didn’t know what was; if she was really his friend, she’d tell Ron that he was being a jealous arsehole and needed to get over himself. How could she be like that after the way he’d treated her last year, when he thought Crookshanks had eaten Scabbers?

Because of that, Harry was spending most of his time trying to avoid people, hanging out in the dorms — when Ron wasn’t there — or in the library. It was one such afternoon that Harry was walking through the common room, on his way up to see if his dorm was empty, when an arm draped over his shoulder. “Hey, Harry. Mind if I borrow you for a bit?” It was George, and Harry automatically looked around for the other Weasley twin. He was nowhere to be found. How odd.

“Yeah, sure.” Perhaps Fred was waiting wherever George was taking him; he braced himself for some kind of prank planning. Instead, he was surprised when George led him to his own dorm room, which was empty. Harry had never been in there before; it was messier than his own, with evidence of Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes all over the place. One of the beds had the curtains firmly shut, and a two-foot radius of clean floor all around it. George shut the door, heading over to the bed warily. “Oi, Kenny, you in here?” He edged closer to the bed, knocking on the invisible wall that surrounded it. There was no response. He turned to Harry,

grinning. "Kenneth always keeps his bed warded when he's not in here. Says he doesn't trust us." He had a look of wide-eyed innocence, as if he couldn't possibly understand why. Harry snorted. It must be hard, being in the same dorm as the Weasley twins. "Anyway, Harry, take a seat."

George gestured to the bed next to his own, which Harry assumed was Fred's, and Harry perched hesitantly on the mattress. "What's this all about?" he asked. "Where's Fred?"

"He's off with Angelina," George replied with a fond grin. "I won't ask what they're doing."

Harry snickered; he hadn't realised Fred and Angelina were a thing. "What do you need me for, then?" Surely George wasn't pulling a prank without his brother's assistance?

George sat on his own bed, facing Harry, a surprisingly serious look in his eyes. Harry's pulse ticked up. What was wrong? "When I was about your age," George started, looking like he was choosing his words very carefully. "I started realising some... things. Things I didn't even tell Fred about, at first. It's a weird thing, growing up — so much stuff happening, you're not sure what's normal and what's not. I bet it's even worse for you, what with the people out to kill you and whatnot."

Harry stared at him, utterly baffled, but George ploughed on. "It was getting to the point where even Fred noticed I was acting funny, but I still didn't say anything. We'd always been the same, you see, and I didn't want to start admitting that there might be something different in there. Then Charlie came home for a visit, and he could tell right off the bat. He sat me down, much like we are now, and he talked to me, and he gave me this book. And... now I think it's time I pass that on, because I might be wrong, but I think you need it more than I do, now."

The redhead reached under his blanket, pulling out a slim hardback book with a plain blue cover. He held it out to Harry. "The cover is charmed, so people don't know what it is just by looking at it." He tapped it with his wand, and suddenly it changed, the title written across the front in black lettering. '*A Wizard's Guide To Wizards: A How-To for Male Homosexual Relationships*'.

Harry's cheeks burned.

"Like I said, I could be wrong, in which case, feel free to tell me to fuck off," George said hastily. "And even if you're not sure yet, or you're not ready, or whatever, that's totally fine. You can read the book, decide it's not for you, and give it back. But... I can't imagine how torn up about it I would have been if I hadn't had that little gesture of support from Charlie. It might've taken me years to tell Fred, or anyone else. And talking to Lee about it, he said muggles can be a bit funny about that sort of thing. I didn't know what kind of tripe they might've filled your head with."

George shuffled forward so his knee bumped Harry's, his brown eyes earnest. "I just don't want you going through this alone, Harry. You're our little brother, regardless of what Ron thinks, and it's my brotherly duty to make sure you know we love you regardless." He smirked wickedly, and there was that Weasley twin mischief. "And, of course, to make sure you're properly informed about everything." He winked salaciously, and Harry blushed

impossibly redder. But George sobered up again, tapping the book cover until it was plain once more and nudging it into Harry's hands. "It's all yours. If you've got any questions, you can come to me. Or write to Charlie, he'll listen. And if you're not ready — hell, if you're *never* ready — that's fine. The offer's good for whenever. I'm giving you the information, but I'm not pressuring you to make any sort of decision or announcement. Only you can know when it's time for that."

Harry stared at the book in his hands, flipping it open to the index page. *Homosexuality in wizarding culture... Marriage rights for same-sex couples... Helpful spells for intercourse...* That one made his eyes go wide, and he slammed it shut again. George chuckled.

"Yeah, it's a lot to take in. You don't have to read it all at once. It's just... information is a good thing to have. Even if it might not be relevant to you."

For a moment, Harry thought about giving the book back to him, saying 'thanks, but no thanks' and leaving, never speaking of it again. This was different than the twins teasing him about being a little star-struck over Bill. This was all the conversations his dorm-mates had about girls that Harry didn't feel part of; all the times he found himself glancing at boys in the halls, or in the quidditch locker rooms, or on the street; all the times his heart beat faster when Draco Malfoy smiled at him. This was listening to Uncle Vernon going off about 'queers' and wondering if the man was right, if he really was a freak after all.

This was real.

"Do many people know? About you?" he asked quietly. George shrugged.

"Fred, and Charlie, and Bill. I think Ginny knows. Lee, obviously. Angie and Katie and Alicia, and Oliver. Few others here and there; boys I've kissed, some of their friends, y'know. I don't hide it, but I don't exactly go around telling everyone I meet. Mum and Dad know, though I don't know if Mum's really come to terms with it yet. Merlin knows she still hasn't about Charlie or Bill. At least with Bill there's still hope for grandkids. He likes both," he explained. "As if there aren't other ways of having kids than just knocking a girl up."

"There are other ways?" Harry asked, perplexed. A tiny bubble of hope rose within him; did that mean that even if he was... he could still have kids?

"Well, there's always adoption," George pointed out. "But there's a spell that can take the stuff from two blokes and put it inside a woman and make a baby. It's all in the book. As long as you've got a woman willing to be pregnant for you, you can have a kid. Rumour has it there's some wizard in Spain working on a potion to make men get pregnant, but that all sounds a bit much if you ask me," he added with a grimace. Harry's eyebrows shot up — men being pregnant? Magic really could do anything!

"Wizards don't really care about it all," George continued. "At least, they never used to. With more and more muggleborns coming in, people are getting weird about it. But two blokes or two girls can get married and everything. Their kids are legal heirs — or they can name other heirs, if the family magic is compatible and they don't want kids of their own. You're always going to find people who are dicks about it, but that's life, unfortunately."

“What’s it like?” Harry’s question was barely louder than a whisper, and he couldn’t bring himself to elaborate. Luckily, George seemed to get what he meant.

“I’d imagine it’s about the same as being in love with a girl,” he said slowly. “I’ve not been with many guys. If you want to talk logistics, that’s a very different conversation.” Harry shook his head quickly, feeling like he was going to burst from all the blood rushing to his cheeks, and George snorted. “Maybe after you’ve read the book. But without getting all mushy on you, being able to be honest about it, being *myself*... it’s like finally putting on shoes that actually fit, after ages of wearing three sizes too small.”

Harry knew what that felt like, quite literally. His whole body *ached* with the need to feel that way. Was it really just that simple? “Hey, George,” he said tentatively.

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for the book. I think it’ll be really informative.” He sounded like he was thanking him for a book about Herbology!

“You’re welcome, Harry.”

Come on, Potter, he told himself. *Gryffindor courage*. “And... George?”

“Yeah, Harry?”

“I... I like boys. I’m gay.”

There. He’d done it. George’s eyes went wide. Harry realised his hands were trembling.

“First time you’ve said that out loud, innit?”

Harry nodded, wondering why his heart felt like it was about to hammer right through his ribcage. It was just two little words! George quickly moved across the gap, sitting beside Harry, and drew him into a tight hug. “I’m proud of you, kid,” he murmured. “It’s gonna be alright, you’ll see.” George held him for a long moment. Harry focused on remembering to breathe. “You’ve got loads of people on your side, whether you choose to tell people or not. Because you don’t have to, if you don’t want to. I won’t even tell Fred.”

“No, it’s okay,” Harry assured. “I don’t mind family knowing. I just... don’t want the whole world to know, yet.” As much as he liked to pretend it wouldn’t be a big deal, he knew better. He was Harry Potter. He couldn’t sneeze without making the front page of the *Prophet*.

“Don’t blame you, mate.” George had his chin propped on Harry’s head, and he pat him on the back gently. “I’m gonna let go now. That alright?” Harry nodded, and they separated, George offering him a grin. “Thanks for trusting me, Harry.”

“It’d be dumb not to when you’d already figured it out,” Harry pointed out.

“I didn’t know for sure,” George insisted. “I just... had a feeling. And regardless, even if you weren’t gay, it’s good to offer all sorts of information. The spells in that book should be taught alongside the usual contraception charms. Well, maybe not *all* of them,” he added,

turning pink beneath his freckles. “But the important ones. People need to know the information is there.”

Harry remembered the excruciatingly painful assembly last year, in which the entire third year class had spent an hour listening to Madam Pomfrey talk about hormones and birth control and ‘the changes of the body’. Not one word had been said about relationships that weren’t between a man and a woman.

“So, while we’re in a sharing mood,” George perked up, smirking once more. “Do you have a thing for my big brother, Harrikins? Any of them. Well, not Percy. Please, Merlin, not Percy.”

Harry made a face at the prospect. “I don’t fancy your brother!” he insisted. “Any of them. I told you! And I don’t fancy Cedric Diggory either,” he added hastily, when George made to open his mouth again.

“Really? I do a little bit,” George admitted shamelessly. “He’s proper fit. A bit too nice, though. And straight. Mad for that Ravenclaw girl, what’s her name, the seeker. Chang.” He shook his head mock-sadly. “Can’t win ‘em all. So is there anyone? What sort of wizard gets your wand going?” He cackled at the mortified expression on Harry’s face. “Come on, Harrikins! If the other boys can talk about which girl’s boobs they want to touch, I’m pretty sure you and I can talk about blokes. No? Too soon?”

“Draco Malfoy,” Harry blurted, eyes shut. He couldn’t help himself. It was the truth, he could finally own up to that. He had feelings for Draco Malfoy.

George stared at him. “So, like, you hate him but he’s pretty so you want to snog him, or...?”

“We’ve been friends since last year, in secret.” If he was trusting George with all his other secrets, he could trust him with this. “I... I really like him, George. Genuinely.” A lot more than he probably should. He didn’t dare look at George, wondering if that was a step too far. Liking boys was one thing; liking Slytherins was another.

“I mean, I don’t really see it, personally,” George said eventually. “But I guess you have always been a bit obsessed with him. And he is quite pretty, objectively. Too pretty for my tastes, but to each their own. Blimey, Harry, you’re not making it easy on yourself, are you? Does he know?” He shook his head. “Of course he doesn’t, you said you’ve not told anyone but me. I think you’re in luck, though, mate — no boy who cares that much about his appearance is completely straight.”

Harry blinked, sure he was imagining things. George grinned at him. “What, you think I haven’t had my fair share of crushes on snakes? Not all of them are evil. And sometimes even the evil ones are frustratingly attractive. I’m more surprised by you two being secretly friends than the fact that you fancy him.” He shuffled around until he was lying on his stomach on the bed, head propped in his hands and feet kicking in the air, fluttering his eyelashes over-dramatically. “Tell me *everything*, Harry,” he gushed, as if they were at a pre-teen sleepover or something. Harry laughed.

And he did.

....

The biggest surprise of his fourth year so far was quite possibly how much he enjoyed his Potions class, now that Snape didn't actively hate him. Sure, he had to play his part, but much like arguing with Draco, it was far easier to deal with when Harry knew the other party didn't mean it. He graded Harry (mostly) fairly, and Harry knew that whatever was going on outside the dungeons, Severus Snape would never give one single flying fuck about it. He didn't care about Harry's fame, or the Triwizard Tournament, or anything. Even the other teachers were treating him differently — Professor Sprout took five points off him for 'misting incorrectly' the other day. In the dungeons, he was Just Harry.

That meant Harry was actually somewhat looking forward to Potions on Friday afternoon, Hermione walking with him down to the dungeons, chattering on about Summoning charms. Harry indulged her — well, ignored her — having perfected the Summoning charm over the summer with Remus. When they arrived outside the Potions classroom, Harry realised all the Slytherins were wearing some kind of badge — and seemed to be waiting for him to notice. Seeing the smirk on Draco's face, Harry looked closer.

Support Cedric Diggory — the REAL Hogwarts Champion

"That isn't all they do," Draco said loudly. "Look." He pressed the centre of his badge, and the red lettering changed, turning green and forming the words '*Potter Stinks*'. Unable to help himself, Harry snickered.

"Oh, really funny," Hermione spat, pulling Harry away by the arm. "Very witty."

"Want one, Granger?" Draco drawled, holding out a badge. "I've got plenty. Only, don't touch my hand, I've just washed it."

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Ron step away from the wall with a furious expression on his face, wand in his hand. Harry ignored him, smirking at Draco. "I'll take one, Malfoy," he said. The Slytherins all stared at him.

"Excuse me?"

"I'll take a badge. Are they free?" Harry almost laughed at the expression on Draco's face; one he was becoming very familiar with. It was the face that said 'I'm not sure what the hell you think you're playing at but I know better than to try and use logic when it comes to you'. Complete with the little furrow on his forehead, it was quite adorable.

"Harry, don't antagonise him." Hermione seemed to think he was joking. "Just walk away."

"Listen to your little pet bookworm, Potter," Draco said, giving the curly-haired girl a disparaging look. That set Ron off, the redhead clearly spoiling for a fight. He raised his wand, but Draco was quicker. At the exact same time, both of them spoke.

"Furnunculus!"

"Densaugeo!"

The two spells met in mid-air and ricocheted off; Harry ducked, but Hermione wasn't quick enough, and Malfoy's spell hit her square in the face. Ron's spell bounced over to hit Goyle, and the large Slytherin bellowed, covering his face with his hands. When he lowered them, his skin was covered in huge, oozing boils.

Hermione, too, had her hands over her face — her mouth, specifically. She wouldn't move them, letting out tiny, panicked squeaks. Ron lunged forward, dragging her hand away. Her front teeth were starting to resembling that of a beaver, growing out past her bottom lip and well on her way towards her chin.

"What is going on out here?" The voice was soft, but it carried through the hallway. Snape had arrived.

Draco and Ron began stuttering excuses, and Snape looked exasperated behind his glare. "Goyle, Hospital Wing," he said, when Draco pointed out the damage done to the Slytherin.

"Malfoy got Hermione, too!" Ron argued.

"I don't see any difference, Professor!" Pansy Parkinson crowed, laughing. Tears began to gather in Hermione's eyes.

"Granger, go," Snape dismissed. Hermione grabbed her bag and practically sprinted from the corridor. "The rest of you, inside, now."

The class began to file in, and Harry slid into line behind Draco. "Oi, Malfoy," he hissed. Draco glanced back, shooting him a panicked look. Harry smirked at him. "I was serious about that badge."

The look on Draco's face said that he clearly thought Harry had finally cracked, but eventually he gave an irritated huff and turned to his table, shoving past Harry.

As he did, something large and round dropped into Harry's robe pocket. Harry grinned.

.-.

They barely got five minutes into class before there was a knock on the door. Snape glared like he was going to set someone on fire for the disruptions; which only increased when it turned out to be Colin Creevey, requesting Harry for... *photographs*? Harry shot Snape a desperate glance, begging him to refuse, to keep Harry down in the dungeons. The man merely curled his lip in distaste.

"Potter, take your things and get out. I expect ten inches on the proper method for deriving an antidote by next class."

Groaning under his breath. Harry shouldered his bag and followed Colin Creevey out of the classroom, the third year beaming up at him in awe. "Isn't this amazing, Harry? You being the fourth champion and everything?"

"Yeah. Amazing," Harry repeated flatly. "What's all this about, Colin?"

"They didn't really tell me, I was just sent to get you. They want all the champions — I think it's for the *Daily Prophet*?" That made the boy beam even wider.

"Great. Fantastic." Harry ran a hand through his hair. "Just what I need." A thought occurred to him, and he reached into the pocket of his robes, pulling out the badge Malfoy had given him. He fixed it proudly to his chest, ignoring Colin's look of confusion.

When they arrived at the right room, Colin waved a cheerful goodbye, and Harry entered in trepidation. It was a small unused classroom; he and Draco had used it to play cards in a couple of times. Almost all the desks had been pushed against the wall, except three that had been stood end-to-end and draped in velvet, with five chairs behind them. Ludo Bagman was there, talking to a blonde witch Harry had never seen before, and he grinned at Harry's entrance. In the corner was a man with a big wizarding camera. All the other champions were there too, looking like they'd rather be anywhere else. At least Harry wasn't the only one.

"There he is! Champion number four!" Bagman's gaze dropped down to Harry's badge, and he faltered. "Ha! Funny joke, there, Harry, very clever. In you come, in you come, it's nothing to worry about. Just the Wand Weighing ceremony — got to check everything is in working order before the first task. Then just a quick little interview with Ms Skeeter here, and you'll be on your way. Have you met before, Harry? This is Rita Skeeter, she's doing a little piece on the tournament for the *Prophet*."

Harry eyed the woman, disgust rising. This was Rita Skeeter, was it? The woman who had caused so much trouble after the cup with her articles. She was wearing lurid magenta robes, her hair done in elaborate curls and her claw-like nails painted vivid crimson, clutching a crocodile-skin purse. She was looking at Harry like she wanted to eat him alive. "Might I have a quick word with Harry before we start?" Skeeter asked, already pulling an acid green quill from her purse. "The youngest champion, you know, to add a bit of colour?"

"Certainly!" Bagman agreed, but Harry shook his head.

"No, thank you." He didn't want to give Rita Skeeter anything she might be able to use against him. Both adults blinked.

"Come now, Harry, it's just a quick interview," Bagman encouraged. Harry held his ground.

"I don't want to. I'd rather my name and picture not be in the paper at all, but with the tournament, that can't be helped. But if you want an interview, you interview all of us. Not just me."

"Really, lad, I don't know why you're making such a fuss." Bagman was sending nervous looks back at Skeeter, who seemed incredibly unimpressed.

"E said non, Monsieur Bagman." It was Fleur Delacour, stepping in front of Harry with her arms folded over her chest.

"Harry's underage, you can't interview him without consent of a guardian anyway," Cedric added, standing by Fleur's side. Bagman chuckled awkwardly.

"Really, I think you're all just getting a little worked up," Skeeter said. "Harry, dear, it'll only take a moment, we'll just pop into the other room for some privacy, just a couple of questions." The 'other room' she pointed at was a storage cupboard.

"What part of no are you not understanding?" Viktor Krum joined the fray now, staring down his hooked nose at Skeeter, eyes cold.

"I'm not going anywhere alone with you," Harry declared firmly. "And I refuse to be interviewed unless it's all of us. I shouldn't be here, anyway. I'm not a real champion." He squared his shoulders in a way that made the '*Support Cedric Diggory*' badge even more obvious.

Skeeter opened her mouth to argue, but the door opened, and Dumbledore walked in followed by the other two heads, Mr Crouch, and Mr Ollivander. Dumbledore surveyed the situation curiously; all three of-age champions stood between Rita Skeeter and Harry, glaring at the blonde woman. "Is there a problem?"

"I was hoping to get a quick interview with Harry here, but it seems the poor dear's being a little shy," Rita cooed, squeezing past Cedric to rest a hand on Harry's shoulder, her talons digging into his robes. He shook her off.

"Please don't touch me," he muttered.

"Well, it's time for the Wand Weighing ceremony, but I'm sure you'll have plenty of time to interview Mr Potter afterwards." Dumbledore's response was cheerful. Harry grimaced.

The five judges took the chairs behind the velvet-covered desks, while the four champions took seats on the other side. Cedric looked down at Harry and grinned. "Nice badge, Potter."

"I thought so," Harry replied with a wink.

Ollivander was introduced, and the Wand Weighing itself was a fairly painless process. The old man's eyes lit up when he saw Harry flick his wand out of its holster, handing it over. Harry mentally begged him not to say anything about the wand's... interesting history. Luckily, all the man did was describe it, looking it over carefully. He took far longer than any of the others. A stab of horror caught Harry unexpectedly — what if there was a curse on his wand, like there had been on his person?

No, surely Dumbledore wouldn't allow the ceremony to go ahead if he knew there was something wrong with Harry's wand, something Ollivander would pick up on. Eventually, the old wandmaker shot a fountain of wine into a conjured glass. "Very good, very good. All four wands are in perfect condition," he announced. "The champions may proceed."

"Excellent," Dumbledore said, getting to his feet. "Thank you all for coming, you are now free to leave."

"Not so fast, Dumbledore!" Bagman called, hopping out of his seat. "Ms Skeeter here would like some photos to go with her article!"

Skeeter smirked, beckoning the man with the camera forward. “Just a few,” she purred. “And then, perhaps, an interview?”

“What do you think, Rita — all the judges, and the champions?” Bagman suggested. Skeeter’s eyes landed on Harry once more.

“And a few individual shots, of course.”

“I do not see why that is necessary,” Krum groused. “We are all champions here.” He looked back at Harry, who sent him a grateful glance in reply. If there was anyone who understood how awful it was to be hounded by the press, it was Krum.

Skeeter got them all lined up for group photos, putting Harry right in the middle and insisting it was due to his height. “Take that silly badge off, Harry dear,” she fussed, but Harry shook his head.

“No, thank you.”

“Really, lad,” Bagman chuckled nervously. “I don’t think it’s really appropriate. These photos are going in the paper!”

“Exactly. I’m showing school solidarity,” Harry insisted, keeping his voice earnest. Behind him, Cedric ducked his head to hide a grin.

“Harry.” Dumbledore’s voice was gently scolding. Harry gave him an innocent look.

“Sorry, sir. Is this better?” He pressed the centre of the badge, until the words ‘*Potter Stinks*’ were emblazoned across his chest. Skeeter cried out in alarm. Cedric lost his battle against giggles.

“Harry,” Dumbledore said again. Harry was sure he was pushing the limits, and about to get himself into trouble, but he refused to let Skeeter walk all over him. The Compulsion charm was supposed to make him reckless, after all.

“You’re right, sir; the original is much nicer.” Harry returned the badge to its original phrase, facing the camera with a smile. “Are we ready now?”

The adults seemed to realise they’d lost that battle, and with an indignant huff, Skeeter took her photos, Harry keeping the badge on. He dug his heels in again when she tried to take individual photos.

“If you’re doing them by school, then Cedric and I should take a photo together,” he said, once she’d already taken pictures of Krum and Fleur.

“But that will upset the balance,” Skeeter protested.

“Just take the photo so we can leave,” Karkaroff snapped. “This has taken too much time already.”

Skeeter paled, and was left with no choice but to take a picture of Cedric and Harry stood side-by-side, with Cedric's arm around Harry's shoulder. The badge was still on Harry's robes.

When they were finally allowed to leave, Cedric burst into laughter as soon as they were out of the judges' earshot. Krum and Fleur were still with them, and even they looked amused. "That was fantastic, Harry!" Cedric wiped tears of laughter from his eyes. "The look on her face!"

"I saw the kind of articles she wrote this summer," Harry said with a scowl. "I didn't want her turning this into the next chapter of the Saga of the Boy-Who-Lived. This should be about you three, you're the real champions here."

"She is not a pleasant woman," Krum remarked, shuddering.

"Shooting 'er down was vairy entertaining," Fleur agreed, smirking. "And per'aps you are not so bad, leetle 'Arry." Harry was fairly sure that was a compliment.

"I'm not here to steal your spotlight, any of you," he promised. "I just want to survive this thing and get on with my life."

The three other champions shared a look, then smiled at him. Harry smiled back, hoping desperately that it meant they were on his side. Or, at the very least, not actively hating him.

.-.-.-.

When he got back to the dormitory after dinner, which had been quite the affair when all the champions sat and ate together — especially once people noticed Harry's badge — Harry found Ron up there, scowling. "You've had an owl," he bit out, gesturing to where Hedwig was sat on Harry's bedside table. "And you've got detention with Snape, for skipping class. Tomorrow night after dinner." He looked less smug than he should have about that, making Harry wonder if he, too, had detention for hexing Goyle. Harry just hoped Snape wouldn't make them serve it together.

Ron didn't stick around long, and as soon as he was gone Harry made a beeline for his owl, offering her a treat from his drawer once he removed the two letters. His stomach twisted, anxiously anticipating what the Weasley boys' response might be.

Hi Harry,

Of course it's okay for you to write! I'm glad to hear from you. Especially once I heard about your name coming out of the Goblet. Are you okay? I expect it's all a bit mad at the school there. The twins said you're handling it well, but if I can help, let me know.

I do know Gorvak, though I don't work for him often, and I'm surprised to hear you met with him. I saw him the other day, actually. He's well, and sends his regards. He also says the matter you last wrote to him about has been taken care of. Is everything alright, Harry?

Being a curse-breaker involves lots of different things — yes, I work on tombs a lot. But I also crack wards on old houses where the owner has died or become unable to give people access, or sometimes where the wards have gone wrong and turned on their owner. And yes, I've worked on cursed people in the past. It's a difficult thing, though; curses interact strangely with a person's magical core, especially if they've been on someone for a long time. Not something you want to go messing around with unless you know what you're doing.

I'm trying to get time off work to come see at least one of the tasks. I know Charlie will be at the first one, if you need to talk to him. He'll pass on a message to me if you need him to, as well.

Look after yourself, Harry,

Bill

Harry let out a long breath, reading the letter over a second time, and then a third. Bill had seen Gorрак — and mentioned him. Had Gorрак let him know about Harry's situation? The redhead certainly seemed to have gathered that something was up; and that Harry didn't want to talk about it in letters. He opened the next one, wondering if it would enlighten him.

Harry,

I can't believe they're making you compete! It's ridiculously unfair. When I got your letter, I thought you were calling in that favour I owe you from our seeker's match in the summer, but then I realised the champions hadn't been announced when you wrote it.

The Ministry in Romania is a little different, as there are fewer old pureblood lines — despite being a big country, it's a fairly small population, compared to Britain. There's sort of a Ministry alliance between a lot of the Eastern European countries — Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Serbia, and the like — that all work together to keep things running smoothly. Their equivalent of the Wizengamot is very much the same, however.

I'm glad to hear you've been looking into that sort of stuff. It's only proper. If you have any questions, Bill or I are always happy to help.

See you soon, kid.

Charlie

PS - I heard Ron's being a twat about the champion thing. Ignore him. You're still family, whether he likes it or not.

The end of the letter made Harry grin, assuaging a worry he didn't even know he really had. He held up both letters, relieved to see that neither of them seemed suspicious about Harry's questions. With any luck, they were oblivious to their mother's dealings with Dumbledore, and could be brought around to Harry's side.

Then his gaze caught on a couple of sentences, and things began to click. *Charlie will be at the first one. I thought you were calling in that favour. See you soon, kid.* He remembered

Charlie's words when he came to see them off at the platform; *I might see you all sooner than you think.*

If he was reading those hints right...

The first task was dragons.

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Harry had almost forgotten about the Wand Weighing ceremony, in the face of potentially having to fight a dragon. Thus, when the article in the *Prophet* came out, it was a bit of a shock.

Somehow, despite Harry's total refusal to give Skeeter anything, she'd managed to make the article about him anyway. It continued over several pages, barely said anything about Fleur and Krum (and misspelled both their names when it did), and didn't mention Cedric at all. There was an enormous picture on the front page that had clearly been cropped from the photos taken of Harry and Cedric together; Cedric's arm was still around Harry's shoulders. The only saving grace was the '*Support Cedric Diggory*' badge on his robes, which the picture version of Harry was delighting in changing to '*Potter Stinks*' and back again every few seconds.

'Harry Potter: The Unexpected Champion'

All of you will be familiar with the tragic tale of the Boy-Who-Lived. He saved us all and lost everything in the process, left orphaned and alone. Now he's grown and at Hogwarts, and appears to be making waves once more.'

Without any real quotes from Harry — though she'd thrown plenty in that Harry didn't recall ever saying in his life — she'd apparently interviewed several people about him. Harry almost choked on his pumpkin juice when he reached the part about his '*close companion and rumoured girlfriend, Hermione Granger*'.

"Well, this is a load of bollocks," Cedric declared cheerfully from the Hufflepuff bench behind Harry, raising his wand and setting his issue of the *Prophet* on fire. "Alright there, Harry?"

After Harry's little stunt with the badge, Cedric and the other Hufflepuffs had warmed considerably to him. The Slytherins had stopped wearing the badges — apparently they weren't funny if Harry wasn't upset by them — but Harry still had his attached to his school bag. "Yeah, just wondering if it's possible to sue for this," Harry replied, frowning at the article. Surely he could get her for something — defamation of character, or slander, or misrepresentation of a minor. Surely it couldn't be legal to publish that amount of information about him.

"You should ask Susan," Neville piped up from the other side of the table. "Her aunt's head of the DMLE, she'd probably know."

Harry kept that in mind, though he didn't run into Susan until his second class of the afternoon. That meant he spent the whole day listening to people — mostly Slytherins — quote their favourite parts of the article at him, laughing.

"Just ignore it, Harry," was Hermione's helpful advice, as if it was that simple. As if he should just let Skeeter write whatever she wanted about him. This wasn't some silly little school-wide paper, this was a *national newspaper*.

Finally they had Charms with Hufflepuff, and Harry made sure to get that early, grabbing Susan as soon as she and the other Hufflepuff girls rounded the corner. "Hi, can I ask you something?"

"Sure, what's up?" Susan was one of the few Hufflepuffs who hadn't hated him for even a little bit of time, and Harry would be forever grateful to her for it. Even now, Sally Anne Perks and Megan Jones were glaring at him over Susan's shoulder.

"I was wondering if you knew if it was possible for me to sue Rita Skeeter for that article in the *Prophet*. I didn't provide any of those quotes — you'll have several witnesses who can assure you that I didn't consent to any sort of interview — and half of what she's said is so wrong it's downright insulting, for me and for the other champions. Can I get her for slander, or something?"

Susan's brow furrowed. "Technically it would be libel, since it's written," she mused, thinking. "If you didn't consent, and your guardian didn't consent, then she shouldn't have even quoted you at all. I don't blame you for being furious, that whole article is just... ugh." She shuddered. "Tell you what, I'll write to Aunt Amelia before dinner and see if she can do anything. She knows loads of lawyers, and I bet there's plenty of them just waiting to give Rita Skeeter what for." She smiled, hitching her bag further up her shoulder as Flitwick opened the classroom door, beckoning them inside. "I'll take care of it, Harry. I'll let you know when I hear back."

"You're the best, Susan," Harry declared vehemently, hurrying to take a seat next to Neville before he could be forced to sit with Hermione. The Slytherins had teased her about the article, too, and she wasn't in the best of moods because of it.

With any luck, Amelia Bones would get back to her niece before much more damage could be done.

.....

The weekend before the task was a Hogsmeade weekend, and Harry let himself be dragged down to the village by Hermione and Neville. On the walk down, he glanced at the dark-skinned girl. "I'd have thought you'd be hanging out with Ron," he remarked cautiously. Since the article, she was somewhat reluctant to be seen with Harry, as people kept asking her if she was his girlfriend.

"Oh. Well." She began to blush. "I thought we might meet up with him at the Three Broomsticks."

Harry stared at her incredulously. "I'm not sitting with him." Ron was still making it very clear he thought Harry was some arrogant little glory hunter.

"Harry, *please*, this has gone on long enough."

"I'm not speaking to him until he stops being a dick," Harry retorted hotly. "If you want to sit with him, that's fine, but I'll be elsewhere." It was a miracle he wasn't wearing his invisibility cloak; the only reason he wasn't was because Hermione didn't know Neville knew about it. He really didn't want to deal with crowds today — he'd much rather be in the library researching dragons — but the pair of them had insisted (separately) that Harry needed to get out and have fun.

He didn't get as mobbed as he'd expected, once they reached the village. The rest of the school seemed to be following Cedric's lead on things, and since he was ignoring the *Prophet* article like the garbage it was, most of them were doing the same. They were all just eager for the tournament to start, now.

Neville dragged them both into Gladraggs, insisting he needed to buy his gran a new hat for her upcoming birthday. Harry wandered the clothing racks absent-mindedly, occasionally picking out something. Since Ron had stopped talking to him, and since Neville had pointed out how much Harry was adjusting his own behaviour to avoid offending the redhead, Harry had started wearing more and more of his new clothes. And, to his surprise, he'd actually grown a couple of inches since last summer. He'd bought the clothes a little big, so most of them were still fine, but... he felt like spoiling himself.

Picking out a couple of shirts and a new jumper, Harry eyed the casual robes curiously. Was it time he bought something a little more wizardly for everyday wear? The only wizarding clothes he had were his school robes and the cloak from Sirius and Remus. He examined a pair of slate blue robes, and Neville appeared at his side. "If you're going for robes, don't get Gladraggs; the size-adjusting charms wear out way too quickly. Go for Malkin's or Twilfitt's, and get them tailored," he suggested. "Also, I think you'd look good in burgundy," he added, gesturing to the rack of soft wool jumpers Harry had just come from. Harry grinned.

"Thanks, Nev." He doubled back and picked up a burgundy jumper in his size.

"Is all that really necessary, Harry?" Hermione asked doubtfully, eyeing the bundle of clothing slung over his arm. Harry shrugged.

"I like them, so I'm gonna buy them."

"But you shouldn't be spending all your money so early in the term!" Hermione protested.

"Why not?" Harry raised an eyebrow at her. "I've got plenty more. Not like anyone else is using it for anything," he added sharply, still a little bitter about Dumbledore taking from his vaults.

"You've never been one to care about fashion, Harry."

He didn't understand why she was making such a big deal about him buying a couple of jumpers. "I've been going around in my cousin's hand-me-downs my whole life. I don't have to anymore. I don't want to."

Hermione didn't have anything to say to that, but the frown on her face made it clear she thought his spending was frivolous. Harry threw in an extra pair of trousers just to spite her,

shoving it all in his bag on the way out. He caught sight of a familiar crocodile-skin handbag, and he threw himself around the corner suddenly. Skeeter walked right by him, chatting away to her photographer friend. “She must be staying in the village,” he muttered to Neville and Hermione. “She’ll be at the first task, then.”

Harry vindictively hoped he had a case built up against her by then. Amelia Bones had written back promptly, assuring him that it was quite illegal to quote a minor without consent, and the entire article was easily a case of libel, but that Rita Skeeter was a tricky one and it might take some time. Harry was just happy to know there was a lawyer working on it.

They finally made it to the Three Broomsticks, where Harry put his foot down once more about sitting with Ron. “Harry, *please*,” Hermione urged, but Harry wasn’t having it.

“Hermione, maybe you should just let it go,” Neville suggested gently.

“Oi, Harry!” Harry whipped around at the call, seeing Cedric sat in a booth with Cho Chang, who was waving at him. “Want to join us?”

Cedric was a *lifesaver*. “See you, Hermione. You coming, Nev?” He didn’t wait for either response, heading straight for the booth. Luckily, Neville was right behind him.

“Hi, Harry,” Cho greeted brightly. “And… Neville, right? Neville Longbottom?”

“Yeah, it’s nice to meet you,” Neville returned.

“You looked like you could do with a bit of a save,” Cho said by way of explanation. “Besides, Cedric keeps ditching me to go sit with you at lunch, so I thought I’d see what all the fuss was about.” She gave him an impish wink, and Harry remembered the time last year where he’d briefly thought he had a crush on her.

“Well, here I am,” he said dryly, holding his arms out as if to say ‘*ta da*’. Cho laughed. “I’m gonna grab drinks, can I get you anything?”

He bought a round of butterbeers for all of them despite their protests, bringing them back to the table with barely a glance over to where Hermione was sat with a scowling Ron. He’d definitely made the better choice, he thought when he took his seat back in the booth. “So how’s it going?” Cho asked, sipping at her drink. “Have you been driving yourself as mad as Ced trying to prepare for the first task?”

Harry shrugged. He hadn’t told anyone of his suspicions about dragons yet, just in case he was wrong. “Kinda. I’ve been brushing up on spells I think I might need, but it’s hard to prepare for the unknown. I figured I’d just wing it and hope for the best.”

“Your approach to all of life’s challenges, then,” Neville cut in with a smirk. Harry rolled his eyes, but couldn’t deny it.

“I hope they don’t keep all the tasks a mystery,” Cedric mused. “That’d be a nightmare.”

“I think it’s just this one. Supposed to test our quick-thinking and all that.” Considering the last time he’d faced an enormous bloodthirsty beast, he’d stabbed it with a sword he’d pulled

out of the Sorting Hat, Harry didn't think his usual method would work for him. All the books on dragons said their eyes were their weakest spot, but he couldn't exactly call Fawkes and have him claw them out. Again.

They tried to keep conversation off the task, but everything turned back to it eventually. It was hard not to, when it was all Cedric and Harry could think about.

He looked up when the door opened, and a familiar imposing figure ducked into the bar. It was Hagrid, walking with... Professor Moody?

The professor's magical eye spun in its socket, landing quickly on Harry. He nudged Hagrid in the side, nodding in Harry's direction. Hagrid grinned, waving, and started trying to squeeze his way through the crowd. "Alright, you lot!" he greeted. If he was confused by Harry's choice in company, he didn't show it. "Harry, I was wonderin' if yeh'd come down to meet me tonigh'? I need yer 'elp with summat. After dark, if yeh don' mind." He gave Harry a pointed look. "It'll be cold, so bring yer *cloak*." The emphasis made it pretty clear to Harry what he was implying, but just made him look like a weirdo to the rest of the table.

"Uh, yeah, sure, Hagrid." What could he possibly want? Hagrid beamed, nodding.

"Great, I'll see yeh then. Enjoy yer afternoon." With that he went to go sit beside Moody at the bar, leaving Harry blinking after him in confusion.

"What was that about?" Cho asked, frowning. Harry shrugged.

"Not a clue." He'd find out tonight, he supposed.

.-.-.-.

Harry's first stop Sunday morning was the library, to scour all the books on dragons a second time. His little outing with Hagrid the night before had confirmed his fears, although at least now he knew he didn't have to fight or subdue the dragon. Just get past it.

Because that was *so* much easier.

It was pretty quiet in the library, as it often was on a Sunday morning. He wasn't entirely surprised to find Viktor Krum sat near Harry's usual table, a stack of books beside him. Harry gathered his own reading material, then approached quietly. "Mind if I join you?" he asked. Krum glanced up, then shrugged, gesturing to the empty seat.

He hadn't spoken much to the Durmstrang champion. They had eaten dinner together a few times, all four champions sitting together, but Krum had stayed mostly silent throughout. Still, he'd stood up for Harry against Skeeter, so that counted for something.

"Only a few more days," Harry murmured. Krum's dark eyes flicked up to him.

"Are you scared?" he asked, sounding more curious than taunting. Harry chuckled breathlessly.

"I think I'd be daft not to be, at least a little bit. You?"

"I haff learnt to ignore fear," Krum replied simply. "In quidditch, fear stops you winning."

"Your Wronski Feint at the cup was pretty fearless," Harry agreed. Krum raised an eyebrow.

"You vere there?"

"Yeah, you were brilliant! I play seeker as well," he added, blushing slightly. "For Gryffindor. Cedric is the Hufflepuff seeker, actually. Maybe it's a sign. We're all reckless and crazy, exactly what the Goblet is looking for." That actually drew a chuckle from the reserved Bulgarian wizard.

"I vonder if Fleur plays quidditch," he mused absently. "It vould be fun to all fly together sometime."

Harry took a moment to realise the international quidditch star had just invited him to fly with him, and almost had a small heart attack. "We'll have to ask," he said instead, trying to keep it cool. Krum hadn't bat an eyelash at him being Harry Potter. Harry refused to kick up a fuss about him in return. "Did you bring your broom with you, then?"

"I bring my broom everywhere," Krum assured. Harry hadn't seen him out flying; then again, he probably kept it secret, so he wasn't disturbed. If the hordes of fangirls got excited about watching him in the *library* — there were three around the corner, even now — they would lose their minds at watching him train for quidditch.

Bored of reading the same paragraph over and over in the hopes it might magically provide him with an answer, Harry let his gaze trail over to the books Krum had out. He froze. Several of them were about dragons. The ones that weren't were on eye-related hexes.

Krum knew about the dragons.

Harry shut his book quickly, straightening up. If Krum knew, and he knew, and Madam Maxime knew — which meant Fleur knew — then... Cedric was the only champion going in blind. Harry couldn't allow that. "I've got to go," he declared suddenly, grabbing his bag and getting to his feet. "I'll see you later, yeah?"

Krum only nodded tersely, going back to his reading, and Harry about sprinted from the library. "Point Me Cedric Diggory," he muttered with his wand out, hoping the older boy wasn't in his common room or somewhere else Harry couldn't get to.

He was in luck. The spell led him to the Transfiguration courtyard, where Cedric was lying on a bench with his head in Cho's lap and a book propped in front of him, surrounded by several other Hufflepuffs. He looked up when Harry came thundering towards him. "Harry? What's the matter?"

"Can I talk to you for a second? Privately?"

Cedric shot him a bewildered look, but stood up and followed Harry across the courtyard and out of earshot. "It's dragons," Harry told him urgently. Cedric's brow furrowed. "The first

task. It's dragons. Krum knows and Fleur knows and I didn't want you to be the only one going in with no idea."

"How— Hagrid," Cedric realised, remembering the odd interaction the day before. "Harry... seriously?" He looked pale.

"Seriously," Harry confirmed grimly. "I'm not sure on the specifics, only that we have to get past it, I think. I know it's cutting it a little close to actually be helpful, but, well; it's a start."

"No, it's great," Cedric assured. "Thanks, Harry. I owe you one."

Harry waved him off, and the two parted ways once more, Cedric no doubt off to the library to do what Harry had just finished doing. As Harry walked away, he heard a different voice call his name; this one much less welcome. It was followed by the telltale sound of Moody's wooden leg on the flagstones. "That was a decent thing you did for Diggory there, Potter," he said gruffly.

"It's only fair," Harry replied, not sure how he felt about Moody eavesdropping on his private conversations. It was bad enough that Snape had done some snooping and confirmed that the eye could see through invisibility cloaks.

"Come with me." It was snapped like an order but he had no grounds for it, and Harry shook his head.

"No thank you, sir; I said I'd meet Neville in the common room." A lie, but Moody didn't need to know that. Harry had no desire to be alone with anybody that Albus Dumbledore trusted.

"Potter!" Moody called, but Harry was already walking.

"Sorry, sir, I'm already late. Another time!" He turned the corner, and hurried for the stairs before Moody could chase after him.

Everybody knew about the dragons. Now Harry just had to figure out what to *do* about it.

.-.-.-.

Harry was dreaming.

He knew that, because while he was on his broom and wearing his Gryffindor quidditch uniform and flying with the rest of his team, the opposing team seemed to be made entirely of dragons. Huge, terrifying Hungarian Horntails, like he'd seen in the woods. It was also definitely a dream because Harry was playing chaser, the quaffle in his hands as he tried to fly past the dragons without getting set on fire, watching Viktor Krum do an effortless Wronski Feint a few feet away. He was so close, the goal was in sight, he just had to fly a little further and...

He woke up with a gasp, eyes snapping open. It took a minute for his heart rate to go down. Even when it did, his eyes were still wide.

Flying.

Could it work? He was only allowed a wand, but... he'd been getting pretty good at the Summoning charm over the summer. Snape always accused him of being a lazy teenager, so Harry had summoned more things just to be a brat. He was pretty confident he could summon his broom from Gryffindor Tower down to wherever the task was being held, as long as he left the dorm window open.

He relaxed into his mattress — at least, as much as he could knowing that in a little over twenty four hours he'd be facing a real live dragon. He had a plan. It wasn't the most foolproof plan in the world, but it was better than him trying to learn a Conjunctivitis curse strong enough to fell a dragon in a day.

Neville looked over at him when he emerged from bed. "Alright there, Harry?"

"Yeah, actually," he admitted, grinning. "Think I've got it all figured out." Neville's eyebrows rose, surprised.

"The task? Really?" Harry nodded. Neville beamed. "Brilliant."

Hermione, on the other hand, was not so convinced. "How can you be so relaxed?" she hissed at him during Herbology, her own anxiety palpable. Harry shrugged.

"I know what I need to do. No point worrying about it any more," he replied. He'd told her about the dragons, only because she wouldn't stop pestering him about studying between classes to make sure he was properly prepared. He appreciated the thought, but why couldn't she believe him when he said he had it under control?

She looked at him like he was mad. "You're going to get yourself killed!"

"It'll be alright," he insisted optimistically.

Now that the task was almost out of the way, he had some other things to be worrying about.

.-. .

Harry skived off Divination, pretty sure that no one would begrudge him that with the task happening the next day. Instead he went down towards the Forbidden Forest, following the path he'd taken with Hagrid. The dragons were, if possible, even more terrifying in the daylight. Harry refused to let it get to him.

He glanced around the gathered dragon tamers until he saw the one with bright red hair, hanging out in front of one of the tents. Harry edged closer, and sent a pebble flying towards the man with a flick of his wand. It hit Charlie on the arm, and he cursed, whipping around. Harry whistled quietly, popping out from behind the trees just long enough to catch Charlie's attention. His eyes widened, and he hurried forwards. "Harry!" he whispered, wrapping the teen in a quick hug, then ushering him further into the trees before they were seen.
"Shouldn't you be in class?"

"It's only Divination," Harry dismissed with a wave of his hand. "I came to talk to you."

“Calling in that favour?” Charlie presumed, glancing back at the dragons. Harry shook his head.

“Nah, I’ve sorted that. This is about the letter I sent you the other week.” That got Charlie’s attention. To Harry’s surprise, the redhead put up several privacy charms, then leaned back against a tree.

“What sort of trouble have you got yourself into now, Potter?” he asked, his tone fondly resigned.

“Did Bill talk to you about the letter I sent him?” Charlie nodded. “Good. See, when I was in Diagon the summer before last year — Ron told you about that, right? Blew up my aunt?” Again, Charlie nodded, grinning faintly. “Right, yeah, well when I was there, I went to Gringotts, and something a bit strange happened.”

He told Charlie what Gorraak and Farlig had found, watching the redhead’s jaw drop.

“Bill wondered if it was something like that,” he admitted when Harry was done. “He said Gorraak only gets called in for really high-profile cases, inheritance theft and magic tampering and the like. And when he spoke to him, asked him about you, well; Gorraak didn’t say anything, but I don’t think he had to.” Charlie ran a hand through his hair. “Shite, Harry. And you’ve been dealing with this alone ever since?”

“Not completely alone, but that’s a whole other story that’ll take too long to tell you now.” Charlie had already been gone for a little while, his coworkers would eventually wonder where he was. “But safe to say, I don’t trust Dumbledore anymore. And...” Here came the hard part. “Recently Gorraak sent me a list of withdrawals from my vault over the years, to see if Dumbledore had taken anything. He had, and I’ll deal with that eventually, but... Charlie, your mum took money out, too. Way more than she could’ve needed to buy my school things for me.”

That threw Charlie for a loop. He slumped against the tree, blue eyes staring at Harry pleadingly. “Mum? Really?” Harry wished he could tell the man otherwise, but he merely shook his head.

“I don’t know if Dumbledore told her to do it, or she just thought she’d go for it since I wouldn’t notice a few extra galleons missing here or there, but... she did it. I didn’t want to believe it either.”

“It’s been hard, raising seven kids on Dad’s salary,” Charlie said with a sigh. “But to think she’d stoop that low...”

“I’m sorry,” Harry started, but Charlie cut him off.

“Don’t, it’s not your fault. She’s an adult, and she makes her own choices. I just... fuck.” He looked like his entire worldview had been rocked. Harry guiltily wondered if he shouldn’t have kept quiet. “If my family have done you wrong, then I swear on the Weasley name I will make it up to you,” Charlie vowed, his words thick with magic. Harry looked up in surprise. Charlie winked. “Heir Weasley, at your service. Bill’s taking the Prewett seat.”

"Well met, Heir Weasley," Harry responded automatically. "Who has the seats now?"

"Dad, but he tends to just give his voting power to Dumbledore. Politics confuse him," Charlie said, grimacing. "It's one of the reasons Bill and I are thinking about coming home, properly. We want to take our seats; you're not the only one who's getting a little suspicious about the way Dumbledore runs things. After this, I definitely don't want him using my family votes any longer than he has to. We haven't spoken to Dad about it yet," he added, "but we were going to soon. I'll talk to Bill about what you've told me — if that's alright with you — and if he's got any ideas for how to help, he'll get in touch."

"Yeah, I was hoping you'd tell him," Harry agreed. "I wanted to, but I can't exactly trust it all in a letter." It was a weight off his shoulders knowing he had two more people on his side. "I'm going to tell the twins, too. Unless you think I shouldn't?"

"They'll be good allies, and they're definitely not on Dumbledore's side," Charlie assured him. He glanced back at the dragons, which were beginning to get rowdy again. "Look, Harry, I should get back to work. But you've given me a hell of a lot to think about. I'll talk to Bill, and we'll be in touch." He placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. "You sure you don't need any help with the task tomorrow?"

"No, I've got it, but thanks." Harry hesitated for a second, but it was long enough for Charlie to pick up on it, and the redhead pulled him into another hug.

"Good luck tomorrow, Harry. I'll be cheering you on." Charlie grinned, cheeks dimpling. Harry wondered if he'd been a bit hasty in telling George he didn't fancy any of his brothers.

Charlie dropped the privacy wards and strolled back out into the clearing as if he'd never been gone, and Harry watched the dragons for a few minutes more before hurrying back up to the castle.

Two more players on the board.

.

At dinner that night, a scrap of parchment found its way onto Harry's plate, and he grabbed it before anyone but Neville could see. *Transfiguration room. Curfew.* The handwriting was familiar. He glanced across at the Slytherin table, and nodded.

"Is it him?" Neville asked under his breath. Harry hummed quietly in confirmation, burning the note with the tip of his wand.

Since Neville was in the know and very few other people were actively talking to him, it was easy for Harry to disappear right before curfew, keeping the map in hand as he crept through the corridors under the invisibility cloak. Moody was in his office, and Harry hoped it stayed that way.

He arrived first, but didn't have to wait long for Draco. The blond hadn't bothered bringing cards this time. He looked anxious.

“Do you have any idea what you’re getting into tomorrow?” Draco asked. Harry grinned at him.

“I do, actually. It’s going to be great.” If he didn’t die. He was pretty sure he could do it and not die. Like, at least seventy percent sure.

Draco was not amused. “Will Prof— Remus be there?” Draco still struggled to call the werewolf by his first name. Harry shook his head.

“We don’t want Dumbledore to know that I’m still in contact with him,” he said. “And they don’t want him knowing they’re in touch with each other.” Dumbledore didn’t like it when any adult got too close to Harry — except Mrs Weasley. That there should’ve been Harry’s first sign that something wasn’t right. “I promised to call him and Sirius tomorrow night, if I can.”

“If you’re not dead, you mean,” Draco snapped.

“If I’m not too busy celebrating,” Harry corrected, smiling. “Relax, will you? I’ve got it handled. I’ve done worse, you know I have. I’ll be fine.”

“Promise me you won’t do anything stupid and Gryffindor.” Draco’s voice was quiet, raw in a way that made Harry’s chest clench. The dark-haired boy moved closer, offering a hesitantly apologetic smile.

“Everything I do is stupid and Gryffindor. I can’t promise that.” That drew a faint laugh from the Slytherin. Draco placed both hands on Harry’s shoulders, meeting his gaze square on.

“Then just promise me you’ll do your best to just get through this task alive.”

Harry stared into silver-grey eyes, losing his breath for a minute. “I promise,” he whispered, once he was capable of words. It would be so easy to just lean forward, to bridge the gap between them and press their lips together. But he couldn’t. His friendship with Draco was still so tentative in many ways, he didn’t want to risk screwing it up with his stupid feelings. He pulled away, grinning once more. “I’m gonna put on one hell of a show, though, you can count on that!”

Draco looked at him, blinking away a look Harry couldn’t place and gaining a resigned expression. “It’s going to give me a heart attack, isn’t it?” he asked flatly. Harry just laughed.

.-. .

It all went by so fast.

Walking down to the tent, picking their dragons out, avoiding Bagman when the man tried to speak to him privately; before Harry knew it, he was facing a dragon with just his wand in his hand. “*Accio Firebolt!*” He’d spelled open the dorm window to make sure nothing would be in his way, and to his great relief, the broom came zooming across the lawn towards him. Then he was off.

He didn't do much thinking until he was back on the ground, his brain hitting flight-mode and going entirely off of instinct. When he landed, he could see Charlie Weasley amongst the dragon tamers, punching the air in delight. Draco up in the stands, looking even paler than usual but with wonder in his eyes. Ron looking begrudgingly impressed, still scowling, while Neville and Hermione cheered beside him.

He could see McGonagall walking towards him, smiling. "Very well done, Potter! Excellent flying! Now off to the First Aid tent with you." It was then that Harry noticed he was bleeding from a gash in his shoulder, and he grimaced, heading off towards Madam Pomfrey. Cedric was sat there with burn paste slathered all over his face and chest, but Fleur and Krum looked alright, sitting drinking hot chocolate. Madam Pomfrey cast a quick spell on his shoulder, telling him to sit tight until it healed completely.

"That vas some very impressive flying," Krum said with a soft smile. Harry goggled at him. *Viktor Krum just complimented his flying skills.*

Before Harry could gather his brains up enough to ask the others what they had done, he was called out to receive his score. 40 out of 50. Not bad at all. "You're tied for first place!" It was Charlie, running up to barrel him in a hug so tight Harry's feet left the ground. Harry was glad Pomfrey had healed his shoulder already. "You and Krum. Bloody hell, Harry, that was *amazing!* I've got to go, we've got to move the dragons, but really well done! I'll see you soon, yeah? Oh, and they need you back in the champions' tent, Bagman said," he added belatedly, ruffling Harry's hair before running off again. Harry saw Neville waiting for him, but he shook his head, jerking a thumb towards the tent. He'd see his friend back up at the common room.

The other three champions were already there when Harry arrived, and so was Bagman. They listened while the man told them the egg was their clue, and Harry was relieved the next task wasn't until the end of February. Three whole months to figure it out, and get on with other things.

Everyone had left by the time Bagman let them go, so the four champions started walking back towards the castle together. "So what did the three of you end up doing?" Harry asked curiously.

They each regaled him with their own experiences with their dragons, stopping on the lawn near the lake. Neither Fleur nor Krum seemed to want to go back to their respective lodgings just yet. Harry didn't really blame them. He knew there would be a party up at Gryffindor Tower, and he was exhausted just thinking about it.

There was a beat of silence, and Harry laughed, shaking his head. "This is mad, isn't it? This competition. We just faced *dragons*."

Fleur laughed as well. "I knew eet would be difficult, but I did not expect zat!" she agreed. "I am vairy eempressed, 'Arry. I worried for you when I found out about ze dragons, but you did vairy well for someone so young."

"I, uh, had a bit of a heads up about them. I had time to prepare," Harry admitted, wondering if the others would confess the same. To his surprise, they did.

"Look, forgive me if this sounds crazy, but even when all four of us knew what was happening we still almost died a few times," Cedric said. "I know it's supposed to be a competition and all, but... I like you. I don't want to see any of you dead. So call me a Hufflepuff if you will, but I say we should stick together on this. The competition is supposed to be about international cooperation, right? I'm not saying we need to work on our solutions together, but we could at least keep each other updated about the clues, and offer help if needed. The people running this tournament are insane. They sent a fourteen year-old alone against a full-grown *nesting mother dragon*."

"You haff a point, Diggory," Krum said slowly. "ve all knew, and yet ve all came up with different solutions. Perhaps if ve vork together, ve can survive this and still put on a show."

"I'm Cedric," Cedric said, holding out a hand. "To my friends, at least."

Krum eyed him for a minute, then shook it firmly. "Then I am Viktor, to all of you."

"So we're doing this, then?" Harry confirmed. "Together? Fuck what the judges say about competition?"

"Zey broke ze rules by making you compete," Fleur agreed, determination in her eyes. "We can break ze rules by 'elping each uzzer survive eet."

"That's settled, then," Cedric said, looking relieved. "We should all get back, I'm sure there's lots of celebrating to be done. But... meet in a week or so to see how everyone's doing on the egg?"

They agreed and parted ways, Harry and Cedric walking up to the castle together.

"That could've gone poorly," Harry commented. Cedric shrugged.

"They're reasonable people, and I don't think any of us expected the tasks to be quite that serious. Not when they said they'd changed things to try and lower the death toll. Any one of us could've been fried to a crisp today. It's like Fleur said; they want us to play by the rules, but we haven't been since your name came out of the Goblet. If we're all helping each other, we're all on the same level; if I win, I'd much rather I did so fairly, and made friends out of the whole thing." He paused, realising how that sounded. "Merlin, I'm *such* a Hufflepuff."

Harry laughed. "Yeah, but it's alright. We can't all be reckless Gryffindors." He winked, starting up the stairs. "Have a good night, Cedric."

. . .

As expected, a party was raging in Gryffindor Tower. Harry made a good effort to get in the spirit of it, but after the adrenaline rush of flying against a dragon, he mostly just wanted to sleep.

"That was amazing!" the twins exclaimed, letting him down off their shoulders after a victory lap of the common room. "So wicked!"

"It really was brilliant, Harry," Neville agreed, beaming. Harry grinned.

“I was pretty good, wasn’t I?”

“No need to start bragging about it.” Ron’s venomous voice deflated Harry’s happy bubble, and the dark-haired boy glared.

“No one invited you to this party, Ron,” he bit out. Harry’s success just seemed to have affirmed the redhead’s views that he was a glory-hunter.

“Go away, Ronnikins,” Fred urged, smiling viciously at his brother. “Or you’ll see what some of our untested sweets can do.” Having already seen several people turn into canaries and other animals, Ron gulped, slinking away into the crowd. Harry caught sight of Hermione crossing the common room to talk to him, but ignored it. If she still wanted to be friends with Ron, that was her choice.

“So what’s in the egg, Harry?” George asked, taking the hefty golden egg from his hands.

“The clue for the second task, apparently.” Harry took the egg back, running his fingers over it.

“Open it!” several people in the crowd urged, including Neville. Harry grinned. Digging his nails into the groove, he wrenched it open.

...And immediately shut it again. As soon as the egg was open, an awful screeching wail pierced the room, making several people cover their ears. “What the fuck was that?” Fred muttered, wincing.

“No idea,” Harry replied, ears still ringing. “But it can’t be good.”

How the hell was that supposed to be a clue?

Chapter End Notes

Those of you who remember this from the first posting will maybe remember what happens in the next chapter ;) hope this kicks your week off to a great start!

Chapter 24

The morning after, Harry forgot for a minute that the task was already over. He woke up entirely convinced that the task was that morning, and he'd really just dreamed facing the dragon the first time.

Then reality set in, and he slumped against his pillows in a mixture of disbelief and overwhelming gratitude. He'd already done it. He didn't have to do it again. He never had to look at another dragon in his life if he didn't want to.

The castle was abuzz with chatter when he went down to breakfast, though for the first time since Halloween people were looking at him with amazement rather than annoyance. His little flying stunt had been the most visually impressive, according to just about everyone in Gryffindor Tower — Harry thought they were biased, but seeing a group of second year Slytherins staring at him and then break into hushed whispers and bright grins, maybe they weren't.

Either way, it was over. And now he was back to classes like nothing had happened.

Neville was checking on some sort of extra-credit Herbology project right after breakfast, so Harry walked up to Charms alone. At least, he tried; halfway there, he was yanked into a narrow passage behind a tapestry. “What—“ He relaxed when he saw pale blond hair. “Draco, what the hell? Anyone could have seen that!”

“You reckless, idiotic, foolhardy *disaster of a wizard*,“ Draco hissed, grey eyes burning, fist still clenched in the front of Harry's robe. “Do you have *any* idea how many years it took off my life watching you fly around with that bloody dragon like it was a game of tag? You could have died!”

“Well, yeah,” Harry said with a shrug. “But I didn't.”

Draco stared at him incredulously. “*Gryffindors!*” The word sounded like an insult, but it made Harry grin.

And then Draco's fingers tightened around his robe, and he pulled Harry forward, their lips slamming together.

Harry forgot to breathe.

He forgot to do a lot of things, actually. Luckily instinct kicked in and he was kissing back before he could even think about it, his hand settling on Draco's shoulder. They parted, but not far, foreheads pressed together. “Don't you *ever* scare me like that again, alright?” Draco breathed. Harry was amazed the blond could find words. His head was still spinning, stuck in the moment Draco's lips touched his. Did this mean... what did this mean?

“I, er, can't guarantee that,” he said eventually. “Triwizard champion. Harry Potter. Kinda comes with the territory.”

Draco snorted, reluctantly amused. “A little bit of warning would have been nice, at least. ‘I’ve got it handled, Draco’.”

“I did have it handled!” Harry protested. “Look, I got the egg, I didn’t die, I still have all my limbs. I’d say it was a resounding success.”

The Slytherin stared at him, looking like he regretted every last one of the life choices that had brought him to that moment. Harry wanted to kiss him again. He wasn’t sure if he was allowed. “I have to get to History of Magic,” Draco said eventually, leaning back. Harry didn’t let him go too far.

“Wait a minute, you can’t just *leave*, are we not going to talk about what just happened?” Had he imagined it? Judging by the blush on Draco’s cheeks, he definitely hadn’t.

“Meet me tonight. Usual time, third floor classroom.” Draco dropped his gaze for a moment, then met Harry’s eyes. Harry was glad he didn’t seem to be the only one whose entire worldview had been rocked in the last five minutes. He thought about pulling him closer, demanding they talk about it now, but they *really* didn’t have time. He stepped back, letting Draco smooth down the front of his robes.

“See you tonight, then,” he agreed, and with one last lingering look, he was gone.

.-. .

Harry was noticeably distracted through the rest of his classes. Luckily, people seemed pretty happy to put it down to the shock of having faced a dragon the day before.

Hermione seemed to know better, by the suspicious looks she kept shooting him. Things like that were just another day in the life of Harry Potter. “What’s the matter with you today?” she asked at lunch, and Harry shrugged, wishing his brain could think of anything except the feel of Draco Malfoy’s lips on his own. Someone could have walked up to him and given him the solution to the second task, and he probably wouldn’t have paid attention.

“Nothing,” he lied easily. “Just tired.”

The curly-haired girl levelled him with a long, slightly sad look. “I miss the days when you used to tell me things,” she said eventually. A tendril of guilt wormed its way around Harry’s heart. Should he be trusting her more than he was? What if he’d misjudged things?

He shook it off. If Hermione wanted to be told things, she should have stuck up for him when Ron was being a pillock.

“I don’t have to tell you everything about my life, Hermione,” he replied, slightly harsher than he’d intended. Hermione flinched, and Harry felt bad about it for a minute.

There was a moment, right there, that Harry would later look back on and wonder if he could have changed things. If he’d just opened up to Hermione, she might have come around. But he was tired, and he’d just faced a dragon, and kissed Draco Malfoy, and he really didn’t have

the brain capacity for anything more complicated. So he let it go, and Hermione pursed her lips, and walked away.

.-. .

Other things that Harry didn't have the brain capacity for included a meeting with the heirs right before dinner, but he didn't know when he'd next get the chance, and the clock was ticking. They deserved to know the truth.

They were all gathered when he arrived, slumping down into his usual empty chair.

"What's all this about, then?" Anthony asked, quill tucked behind his ear as he looked up from an essay he was writing. "Surely you don't want to study that desperately after yesterday."

No, if Harry had his way, he'd be in bed until dinnertime. "I was talking to Neville, and I think it's time I tell you all about the full reason Dumbledore can't know about this. About me. I'm trusting you with an awful lot, and it's unfair that you're not being told why. Also, you'll need to be in on it if we're going to achieve what I'm hoping for."

"And just what is it, exactly, that you're hoping to achieve?" The question came from Padma, her gaze shrewd. Harry winked at her.

"World domination." The answer made several people laugh. Harry sat up straighter, and took a long breath.

"When I was a baby, Dumbledore did a ritual to block my family magics from my core."

There was a beat of silence. Everyone was too horrified to speak. Then finally, Susan swore loudly. The sound of such a filthy curse coming from the mild-mannered Hufflepuff's lips was almost as shocking as Harry's announcement.

"How *dare* he!" she exclaimed. "If my aunt ever found out, he'd be dead before he could make it to Azkaban!"

"One day, maybe," Harry said with a shrug. "It's not worth getting the truth out just yet. I need too much information from him first."

"He's turning you into a weapon." Harry whipped around to look at Sullivan Fawley, whose dark eyes were frighteningly aware. "A block that extended from a man like him on a person as powerful as yourself, you'd explode as soon as you turned seventeen. Or the moment the block was released."

The realisation went around the room quickly. Harry nodded. "Whatever he's planning, he's aiming for a moment in my life, before I turn seventeen, where he can pull the pin and make me go boom. Along with the block was a Compulsion charm — to make me reckless, and to make me easily influenced. Dumbledore made himself my saviour, with just enough magic to stop me looking for other options. So that when I was surrounded by people who said that all Slytherins were dark wizards and I should hate them, I agreed. When someone told me all

Hufflepuffs were the Hogwarts rejects, I smiled and nodded. When I heard that Ravenclaws had their noses too far in books to be worth talking to, I didn't question it. Obviously, I know better now. I got the block and the charm removed before third year, and it's only a matter of time before he finds out. But I'll be ready when he does."

"So where do we come in?" Blaise asked quietly.

"When I expose Dumbledore, it's going to rock the foundations of the wizarding world. As far as they're all concerned, he can do no wrong, and I'm just an idiot teenager with a death-wish and a puffed up sense of self-importance. Skeeter isn't helping with these articles."

"Aunt Amelia's working on that," Susan assured. "You should get a letter from her at the end of the week."

Harry nodded; that was one angle covered. "Between us we have thirteen seats to inherit. I know of three more I can trust. And I'm betting there's a few more, if we can go about it the right way." He glanced pointedly at the Slytherins. There was no way they and Draco were the only Slytherins who didn't want the dark to rise. They just had to be wary of their parents.

"I'm not counting thirteen," Anthony cut in, looking around the room. Harry bit his lip; he had to tell them eventually.

"I'm the heir to the Potter, Black and Peverell seats," he declared. There was no point in telling them about Slytherin; from the sounds of things, that would sit passive his whole life.

"Well, fuck," Daphne muttered incredulously. "That'll take three of Dumbledore's proxy seats away." A catlike smirk flashed across her pale face. "You're going to cause all sorts of trouble, aren't you, Potter?"

"That is how it usually ends up, yeah," he admitted, because even though he didn't *try* and cause trouble, it always just sort of... happened. "So there's enough of us to have a good safety net when it all goes to shit. But there could be more. Even if they're not with us, if we can make them neutral at the very least — in an ideal world, every student who leaves this castle in the next five years would do so wanting to serve neither Voldemort nor Dumbledore. Because the way things are going, that's a very real choice they're going to have to make."

"Who would you rather we serve, you?" Cassius asked somewhat snidely. Harry winced.

"Merlin, no. I'm asking people to serve no one, but to fight *with* me. For themselves. For the good of the wizarding world."

A long silence followed his words. It was Daphne who broke it by snorting. "Bit dramatic." Harry flushed.

"You're proposing a third side to the war? Right under Dumbledore's nose?" Susan's sharp gaze met his. He nodded slowly.

"Yeah. Yeah, I suppose I am."

Harry looked around the room at the children gathered in front of him — because that's what they were. Children who had seen too much, who had been raised in a time that didn't give them a chance to be young, but children nonetheless. What was it the muggles were always saying? Children were the future?

If Harry didn't take a stand, he'd be dead before he was seventeen. And if the only people willing to help him were kids his own age, well. He was constantly surprising people — why couldn't they, as well?

.-.-.

Somewhat unintentionally inciting a minor revolution was the least of Harry's worries as he crept through the corridors beneath his invisibility cloak, heart pounding so loud he was surprised it didn't echo off the walls. He pushed open the door to the unused third floor classroom, breath catching in his throat at the sight of Draco perched on the edge of the teacher's desk. He looked up, smile more shy than Harry had ever seen from the young Malfoy. "Hi, Harry."

Harry lingered by the door. Seconds ticked by with neither of them moving. Abruptly Harry realised that Draco's little burst of courage that morning had been more motivated by panic than anything else, and if he wanted another kiss he was either going to have to buck up and do it himself, or wait until he got into another life-or-death situation. And while those were becoming increasingly common for him, Harry didn't want to wait.

He strode across the classroom until he was stood right in front of Draco, almost between his knees, the blond boy freezing at the sudden movement. Harry met his gaze. "I'm going to kiss you, now," he warned. Draco didn't move. Harry leaned in.

This time, both of them were expecting it, and it was *so much better*. Draco's lips were astonishingly soft against his own, the Slytherin's hand resting on Harry's hip, pulling him just that little bit closer until Harry was stood between Draco's thighs, the blond barely on the edge of the desk. Harry heard a faint moan that may have come from him, but also might've been Draco, and when a tongue peeked out and swiped across his bottom lip, he broke away, blushing.

They stared at each other.

"That was... nice," Harry said lamely. Draco kept staring.

"Nice. *Nice*? That's really all you've got to say?"

"Well I don't know, do I?" Harry retorted defensively. "I've never kissed anyone before!"

That made Draco blink in surprise. "What, really? So... I was your first?" Harry scowled at him; he had been a little busy thus far in his life! Suddenly, Draco smirked. "Maybe we should try it again. See if I can't do a little better than *nice*." His words were cocky, but he raised a pale eyebrow at Harry before leaning in again, as if to check it was okay with him. Harry did what he'd been wanting to do for *months* and slid a hand into the soft blond strands at the back of Draco's head, pulling him back in to a kiss.

Just because Harry didn't know what he was doing didn't mean he wasn't keen to learn.

From what all the boys in his dorm had said, kissing was something that just... came naturally. Harry had always been skeptical, sure that if it ever came to it he wouldn't know what to do and would make a fool of himself, but Draco didn't seem to be complaining. Harry was too busy enjoying himself to over-analyse every little movement, though having someone else's tongue in his mouth was a bit weird. Good weird, though.

Eventually they had to breathe, and Draco leaned back on one hand, looking up at Harry with hooded eyes. "So you like me, then." His tone was unbearably smug. Harry poked him in the thigh.

"You're not a total prat," he returned cheekily. "And... you like me?"

"Despite my best efforts not to," Draco sighed. He reached out with his free hand, capturing one of Harry's and threading his fingers together. "The Boy-Who-Lived and the son of a Death Eater. What *will* the *Prophet* say?"

"I don't care," Harry whispered fiercely, wanting to get one thing clear right from the start. "I know it's not safe to be open about... this, not for either of us. But I don't care what people will say when they find out. They don't matter."

Some of the tension seemed to fall from Draco's shoulders. "Good. That's— good." His lips quirked. "I suppose that means I can take the hit to my reputation that will come from being known to fraternise with a *Gryffindor*."

They stayed there for a minute, holding hands and grinning at each other like idiots.

"So are we, like, boyfriends now, then, or...?" Harry trailed off expectantly, unsure how that sort of thing went. Draco gave an ungainly snort.

"*Disaster*," he declared affectionately. He leaned forward, pressing his lips to Harry's once more. "Yeah, alright, Scarhead," he agreed, breath whispering across Harry's skin. "I'll be your boyfriend."

If nothing else came from the Triwizard Tournament — and he was still alive by the end of it — at least it had given him this, sort of.

....

Sirius ended the conversation and watched his godson's beaming face fade from the surface of the mirror, then let out a quiet cheer of success. He bounded out of bed, hurrying to the living room and hoping the lovebirds hadn't gone to bed yet. Severus didn't get many chances to get away from Hogwarts, and when he did they tended to lock themselves away in their room for half of it. "Oi, Snape!" he called, finding the pair on the sofa by the fire, both reading. Remus had his bare feet wedged under Severus' thigh. "Our family ties just got closer than ever!"

"I have no idea what you're blabbering about," Severus sighed, looking unimpressed. Sitting down on the coffee table to face them, Sirius grinned.

"Our godsons are snogging," he announced proudly. He'd had his doubts about the Malfoy kid at first, but he was far more Black than Malfoy, and Harry could probably do worse.

The slight uptick of Severus' eyebrow was all the sign he gave of acknowledgment. Remus actually put his book down.

"Don't you think that's information Draco would have liked to bring to me in his own time?" Severus drawled. Sirius shrugged unrepentantly.

"You're a spy, you can fake being surprised."

"As if any of us would be surprised by that turn of events," Remus said dryly, putting his book down. "It's been coming for months."

"Well, the moment has finally arrived. From the sounds of things, seeing Harry put himself in mortal danger made Draco feel all sorts of impulsive, Gryffindorish feelings. He cornered Harry behind that tapestry of Chief Bragge by the Charms room and planted one on him while telling him off at the same time."

Remus gave Severus a look that made Sirius want to vomit a little bit. "Ah, that sounds familiar," he sighed fondly.

"I don't recall you risking your neck nearly half as often as Potter does," Severus retorted evenly. Sirius snickered.

"Yeah, Draco will have to get a handle on that whole 'wanting to snog him every time he does something reckless' thing. He'll be found out in a week." Sirius loved his godson, but Harry's regard for his own personal safety was... not fantastic.

"They'll both have to be careful," Remus said, sobering up. The three of them shared an uneasy look. These were dangerous times for a Potter and a Malfoy to be dating.

"We'll protect them the best we can," Sirius vowed, before grinning again. "Oh, Cissa will be thrilled! Harry's got four houses to his name, you don't get much more pureblood than that." Regardless of the muggle side of his family, that was a sort of status boost that even Lucius Malfoy wouldn't turn his nose up at. If not for the whole 'being Harry Potter' part, of course.

"Don't you dare tell Narcissa before Draco can," Remus scolded. "That's his news to share."

Sirius pouted, but nodded, knowing it wouldn't be fair on Draco to spoil that moment for him. He'd just eagerly await his cousin's owl once she heard the news.

.-. .

It was the worst thing in the world, being on cloud nine and not being able to tell anyone about it. The secret was filling Harry's chest, desperate to burst through his lungs and declare to the world that Draco Malfoy was his boyfriend. But he couldn't.

He did tell George, though. Which had the unintended result of also telling Fred, and Harry used the time to tell them the truth about Dumbledore, too. Both because they needed to know, and to distract them from the news that he was dating a Malfoy.

It sort-of worked. They were too busy being angry at Dumbledore and confused by their mother's actions to really say anything about his choice of boyfriend, but they got round to congratulating him eventually. In between some mild insults to Draco's father, which Harry couldn't really complain about. Draco's father was the worst.

Having two people at school know his secret was enough, sort-of. It had to be, for now.

Harry almost thought about telling Neville, but the other Gryffindor didn't even know that Harry liked boys, and every time he tried to bring it up the words got stuck in his throat. It was ridiculous; he knew Neville wasn't going to judge him. But he still couldn't bring himself to say it. It didn't help that Hermione had decided she wanted to be friends again, and was at his side almost every free moment he had.

Tugging his cloak tighter around himself, Harry surveyed the few remaining blast-ended skrewts that they had just failed to encourage to hibernate, somewhat wishing one of them *would* set something on fire. Not anything important, mind. But it was freezing outside, and warming charms could only do so much.

"Well, this does look like fun!" The overly-cheerful voice made Harry even colder.

His letter from Amelia Bones had arrived the weekend after the first task, as Susan had promised it would, introducing Harry to the lawyer that would be helping him take legal action against Rita Skeeter. He'd been assured that it was most definitely not legal to quote a minor who had denied being interviewed, and a warning had been sent to Ms Skeeter forthwith. Clearly she was looking for other angles. Harry was amazed the woman was even allowed in the castle.

To Harry's surprise, she didn't immediately come up to him. Instead she started talking to Hagrid about the skrewts, smirking delightedly as the man got more and more flustered. Harry watched with a feeling of impending dread; she was doing this because of him. She knew she wasn't supposed to talk to him, so she was going to start going for the people he cared about instead. That *bitch*.

"Oh, *you're* here, Harry. Hello, there!" she greeted far too innocently, before turning back to Hagrid and asking him more about the skrewts, eventually making arrangements to meet for a proper interview at the Three Broomsticks. Class ended, and Skeeter stayed by the hut as the rest of them trudged up towards the castle.

"She's going to twist everything he says," Hermione breathed, horrified. Harry grimaced. "You should've just given her that interview, Harry. She wouldn't be going anywhere near Hagrid then."

Harry stared at the girl, unable to believe what she'd just said. "*Excuse me?*"

"Well it's obvious the real story is you, and you're not giving her anything! So she's got to get her dirt elsewhere," Hermione said diplomatically.

"The article she did about me was bad enough without me giving her more fuel for the fire!" Harry argued. "She writes nothing but rubbish, and I don't need her dragging my name into her ridiculous lies. My reputation is bad enough as it is."

"Since when have you cared about your reputation?" Hermione's voice was sharp. "Surely, knowing what people think of you already, you should just let her write whatever she wants about you, to stop her writing awful things about anybody else. Clearly she's not going to stop looking for a story from you, she's just going to drag everyone else into the crossfire."

"What, so I should just throw myself under the bus?" Harry spat back. "That's easy for you to say, Hermione; you're not the one whose face is in the paper every bloody five minutes. You're not the one who has to deal with the public's opinion every time you so much as breathe!" He forced himself to try and calm down; if their argument got much louder, Skeeter would hear him, and then she'd *really* have a story.

"But I was in the paper," Hermione argued. "People think I'm your girlfriend now, because she started making up her own rubbish when *you* didn't give her anything!"

"And I'm sorry about that, I really am," Harry said earnestly. "But it isn't my fault, and for all we know she would've written that crap anyway. Besides, no one really thinks you're my girlfriend."

Hermione went red at that. "*Some* people do," she spat. "If you had any sort of consideration for others, you'd stop throwing a tantrum and just agree to an interview."

Harry rather thought that only one of them was throwing a tantrum at the minute, and it certainly wasn't him. Still, he merely shook his head, turning back towards the castle. It wasn't worth the argument.

. . .

Every time Harry opened that bloody golden egg, it just screamed at him. It was getting incredibly frustrating, both for him and the other residents of Gryffindor Tower. The only good thing to come of it was the improvement of Harry's Silencing charm, once Seamus had threatened to throw both Harry and the egg out the dorm window if he didn't stop opening it indoors.

"Does yours just screech the whole time?" Harry asked wearily, sliding onto the bench of the Hufflepuff table next to Cedric. They had only sat together a handful of times since the day after the champions had been announced, but Harry was somewhat starting to get used to it. Cho offered him a wave from Cedric's other side.

"Yes," Cedric groaned, running a hand through his hair. "It's the worst, isn't it? We even tried throwing it in the fire to see if that would do anything, but I think it just made it worse."

“What he means is, Patrick got so pissed off at the noise it was making, he threw it in the fire in the hopes it would stop,” Cho supplied, grinning. Harry snickered.

“I tried ‘exing my egg,’ ” Fleur declared, gracefully stepping over the bench and dropping down opposite them. “Eet did not ‘elp.’ ” Alongside Fleur were two other Beauxbatons students, and a couple of Ravenclaws. Harry recognised one of them as Roger Davies, the quidditch captain.

“What spells did you use? Maybe we can compare lists,” Cedric said thoughtfully.

“It has got to be some sort of creature,” Viktor insisted, sitting much less gracefully on Fleur’s open side. He brought with him a Durmstrang boy, and Cassius Warrington. Cassius caught Harry’s eye, and winked.

“We already faced a creature in the first task, though,” Harry pointed out. “Surely they wouldn’t just make us face a different one? That’s not very imaginative.”

“What if the creature is part of the clue itself?” Cedric suggested. “Like, we don’t have to fight it, but knowing what it is will give us an idea of where it comes from, and that might have something to do with it.”

“Or ze ‘ole thing is just to waste our time, and eet will be anuzzer surprise.” Fleur scowled into her soup as she spoke, clearly fed up with the egg already. Harry could definitely relate.

He saw Neville walk into the hall and do a double-take at Harry’s position, and he beckoned him over, patting the bench beside him. Neville complied, though he looked a little confused at being invited into the odd group.

Neville wasn’t the only extra addition, though. Like a chain reaction, people began to join them; Roger invited a Slytherin girl over, and she brought her Ravenclaw friend. One of the Beauxbatons boys with Fleur managed to flirt enough with Katie Bell to bring her to the table, which of course brought Angelina and Alicia, which naturally brought the twins and Lee Jordan. Cassius swapped places with the Durmstrang boy to sit and talk to his fellow Slytherin, and the next thing Harry knew there were four more Slytherins at the table, striking up a conversation with the Durmstrang boy in what sounded like German. Before lunch was even halfway through, the entire end third of the Hufflepuff table was taken up by students from other houses and other schools. The Hufflepuffs had just spaced themselves between them, happily joining in whichever conversation was closest.

“What if we try making all four eggs scream at the same time? To see if there’s any differences?”

“*NO!*” was the immediate response to Cedric’s casual suggestion, from everyone in the vicinity who had heard the eggs.

“I’ll be so glad when you lot figure it all out,” Cho declared vehemently. “I swear, I can hear that thing in my sleep these days.” Neville nodded in agreement.

A hush fell over the table, and it took Harry a minute to realise it was because Dumbledore was approaching. He didn't look amused. "Mr Potter," he greeted, his voice cheerful enough. "You and several of your friends here seem to have lost your way to your house tables."

Harry wasn't sure how the headmaster could pin this one on him, or how he could declare forty-odd people, half of whom Harry had never spoken to, 'his friends'.

"There's no rules about having to sit at our tables every meal, sir," Cedric piped up innocently. "Only during formal feasts."

"We're just trying to make the other schools feel welcome," Angelina agreed. She was sat beside a Beauxbaton girl with hair down to her waist, and was fixing it in several tiny braids down her back.

Dumbledore stared at them all for a long minute, then smiled. Harry was sure he wasn't the only one who could see the angry fire hiding in those twinkling blue eyes. "Excellent, excellent." He said nothing more, continuing on his way to the head table, and slowly the chatter started back up. Harry looked up at Susan Bones, who was sat with Parvati and Lavender, discussing dress robes. Susan caught his eye and grinned.

It was beginning.

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

That one lunchtime seemed to have sparked a trend. Now it wasn't uncommon to go into the Great Hall and lose yourself in a group of mixed-colour robes. Of course, it didn't all change overnight — there were still large clusters of same-colour robes crowded together, looking quite disturbed by all the intermingling. But it was a start. Watching Dumbledore grit his teeth and pretend to be delighted about the development was becoming the highlight of Harry's week.

So of course, something had to bring him down.

"The Yule Ball is a tradition of the Triwizard Tournament," Professor McGonagall declared at the end of their Transfiguration lesson on Thursday, interrupting Harry's rather diligent clock-watching. The sooner she let them go, the sooner he could have a nap before dinner, because after dinner he'd be meeting with the heirs for study group. A study group that would no doubt turn into laughing about Dumbledore's anger and plotting the next step in their slow and careful uniting of the Hogwarts houses.

Well, that explained the dress robes, at any rate. The reactions of the class were a mixture from excited to downright horrified — Harry didn't think it would be so bad, really. It might actually be sort of fun. He'd never been to any sort of formal party before; or, really, any kind of party full stop. There had been one school dance in his last year of muggle primary school, but the Dursleys hadn't let him go. They ended up having to go pick up Dudley early after he pushed a boy into the snack table.

"Potter, a word, please," McGonagall called once she finally released the class, and Harry resisted the urge to swear. He was *so tired*. Between trying to figure out the egg, meeting with Draco, studying with the heirs *and* keeping up with his Arithmancy and Runes for Sirius and Remus, he wasn't getting nearly as much sleep as he probably should.

"If this is about the essay, I know I went off-topic, but I got a bit distracted," Harry started, sure that McGonagall was entirely unimpressed with the eight inch long tangent about the difference between transfigured material and conjured material — in an essay supposed to be about the practical uses of Switching spells. Harry hadn't meant to, but he'd found it fascinating, and the words just sort of spilled out. He couldn't even blame it on spending too much time with Remus in the summer; he'd been turning into a bookworm ever since the Compulsion charm had been removed.

"Potter, your grades are better than they've been in your entire school career, and that 'off-topic' section, as you put it, wouldn't have been out of place in one of my sixth year essays," McGonagall told him, the barest twitch at the corner of her lips letting him know she was pleased. Harry preened. "No, this is about the Yule Ball. The champions and their partners are expected to open the dance. I thought you'd appreciate the warning."

Harry's stomach sank as her words became clear. "I have to learn to dance?" he squeaked. "I have to find someone willing to dance? With me? In front of *everyone*?"

McGonagall's lips twitched further, her amusement barely showing. "Yes, Mr Potter, I'm afraid you do. I'm sure one of your friends will be able to help you; most purebloods take dancing lessons prior to Hogwarts."

For a second, Harry thought she was talking about the other heirs, and his heart stopped when he tried to figure out how she'd found out about it all. Then he realised she was probably just talking about Neville or Parvati or someone. There was no way she was talking about the Weasleys.

"Can't I just face another dragon instead?" he asked meekly. McGonagall's fingers clenched for a second around her wand, like she was resisting the urge to put her face in her hands. It was an expression Harry was pretty familiar with from his housemistress after three and a half years.

"Sadly not, Mr Potter. I'm sure you'll pick it up as quickly as you've been picking up spells lately. I must say, I'm impressed. You get more and more like your mother every year." That made Harry beam, chest fluttering with warmth.

"Thanks, Professor." He flashed her a quick grin, turning away once it was clear he'd been dismissed. He paused in the doorway, glancing back. "Professor?" She looked up. "Does my dance partner have to be from Gryffindor?"

"Of course not! The whole point of the ball is to socialise with our international guests and extend the hand of friendship; that includes the four houses as well. Your partner may be whomever you choose, as long as they are a student at one of the three attending schools."

"And here I was hoping Professor Snape would go with me," Harry mock-sighed, smirking when the Transfiguration professor almost lost her composure for a second. "See you, Professor!" He left the classroom, heading towards Gryffindor Tower and the siren call of his bed.

He had a little under three weeks to find a partner, and learn how to dance well enough to avoid embarrassing them both in front of everyone at the ball.

He would *definitely* prefer to face the dragon again.

.-. .

Apparently, finding a partner wasn't going to be a problem for Harry. Not if he cared whether he actually *knew* the girl or not. Within the first twelve hours of news about the ball filtering through the school, he was asked out by no less than five girls he had never spoken to in his life. He was even asked by a second year Hufflepuff, who stuttered so much she could barely get the words out.

Neville found the whole thing hilarious, because he was the worst friend ever. "Just pick someone and ask them," he said, as if it was that simple.

“Alright, who are you asking, then?” Neville went beet red.

“I haven’t decided yet.”

Harry stuck his tongue out, and Neville rolled his eyes. “It doesn’t matter whether I go with anyone or not. I’m not a school champion.” That deflated Harry’s smug balloon, and he scowled again, sitting down at the Gryffindor table for breakfast.

An owl dropped a rolled-up copy of the *Daily Prophet* in front of Neville, and the glimpse Harry got of the headline made him groan.

‘Explosive Classes at Hogwarts

With all eyes on Hogwarts during the Triwizard Tournament, I, Rita Skeeter, decided to investigate a little of the school’s day-to-day life, and you can imagine my surprise when I discovered the creatures our dear champion, Harry Potter, was forced to interact with as part of his Care of Magical Creatures lesson. No wonder the dragon was such a doddle, if this is what he’s facing in class! I ask you, reader, which creature is more dangerous; the fire-breathing, biting, bang-ended scoot, or the teacher himself, Mr Rubeus Hagrid?’

The whole article went on to talk about how Hagrid was constantly endangering his students with his reckless classes, including a quote from Pansy Parkinson about how Draco had been mauled by a hippogriff the year before, and another from Crabbe about being bitten by a flobberworm. Like with the last article, it was incredibly Harry-centric, though it didn’t have a single quote from him. Skeeter was clearly looking for loopholes.

“Flobberworms don’t even have teeth!” Harry exclaimed, tossing the paper angrily down on the table, almost knocking over a milk jug. “This is such bullshit, how can she possibly be allowed to publish this and call it journalism?”

“There aren’t many laws about what can and can’t go to print,” Neville told him. “The Wizengamot were meaning to get around to it back at the turn of the century, but then Grindelwald happened, and...” The wizarding world had essentially been on pause for the last century, with Albus Dumbledore sticking his fingers in everything and refusing to allow real progress. “It didn’t used to be that bad, but in the last couple of decades the standards have really slipped, once people realised they could get away with publishing fiction if there was a tiny scrap of fact behind it.”

“All the same, this can’t be legal.” Harry looked up at the head table; Hagrid hadn’t come to breakfast. Guilt squirmed in Harry’s stomach as he remembered his last argument with Hermione. Several seats down, she was glaring at him pointedly, *Prophet* in hand. This wasn’t really his fault, but he still felt responsible. There had to be something he could do about it.

He scanned the hall, catching sight of a curly red ponytail just on its way out the door. Muttering an excuse to Neville, he jumped up and hurried out, calling Susan’s name. She turned, both her and Ernie stopping with curious looks on their faces. “Harry? What’s the matter?”

"Would your aunt mind if I wrote to her again? About Rita Skeeter?" he asked. "I don't know if you saw the article about Hagrid, but it's ridiculous, and there's got to be something I can do about it legally. Or someone could do."

"Aunt Amelia would love to hear from you, Harry, but I don't know if she can be of any help. Trust me, if there was a way to get Skeeter arrested, she would've done it by now," Susan added with a sour look. "The worst the DMLE can do is slap her with a few fines, and the Prophet is happy to pay those; she brings in way too much money for them slinging her muck about." She paused thoughtfully. "What about that lawyer you got in touch with? Maybe she'll have an idea?"

"I can ask." Harry hadn't spoken much to his lawyer, but Evelyn Frobisher seemed to be one of the best. Harry expected as much, if she came on the recommendation of the head of the DMLE herself. "But I can't exactly have her banned from talking to everyone. Especially not the people who can consent for themselves." If only Hagrid had turned around and told her no comment. Then again, she probably would've written that crap regardless.

"Maybe we can get her banned from the grounds except on tournament days," Susan said slowly. "On the claim of disrupting our learning. If Skeeter's allowed to just wander around and interrupt classes for interviews, what's to stop other random adults coming in and doing it?"

Harry grinned; he could put up with Skeeter on tournament days if it meant being rid of her the rest of the time. "That could work! I'll write to Mrs Frobisher and ask. Thanks, Susan." He was about to turn away, when suddenly a thought occurred to him. "Hey, Susan? Are you going to the ball with anyone?"

She blinked at him, eyebrows rising. "Not yet. Why do you ask?"

"Would you want to maybe go with me? As friends," he clarified quickly, feeling his cheeks grow hot. "I have to have a partner to open the ball, and I thought it'd be good to go with someone from a different house. If you'd rather not, I completely understand," he added. "That sort of attention isn't for everyone. But... it could be fun." He wasn't quite bold enough to go with a boy — especially one that wasn't Draco. But going with a Hufflepuff, he could do.

Susan eyed him contemplatively. At her side, Ernie was grinning. "I'll warn you, I've never danced a step in my life," Harry added, wondering if that was a dealbreaker. "But I'm willing to learn."

"I don't have time to teach you, but if you promise to get good enough not to embarrass yourself, I'll go with you," she agreed, folding her arms over her chest. "Even if you're terrible, it'll still be good for my image to be seen with you. And for our little house unity side-project," she added with a grin.

"Your image?" Harry repeated, baffled. She nodded.

"If I want to be Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot by the time I'm thirty, I have to start somewhere, don't I? I'm a Hufflepuff; we don't make waves. Being Harry Potter's date to the

Yule Ball will make me memorable.” She spoke as if it was obvious, and Harry merely nodded, mildly terrified of the determination in her tone. “What colour are your dress robes?”

“Green, with gold detail,” Harry answered. Susan smiled.

“Good, I look great in gold.”

“Sooz, we’ve got to get to Defence,” Ernie nudged, gesturing at his watch. Harry realised he was probably going to be late for Potions. Oh well, Snape hadn’t had the chance to take points off him in a while. Maybe he could even wing his way into a detention; Remus was coming to visit in a couple of days.

“Let me know if you don’t find anyone to teach you to dance, Harry,” Susan said. “I’ll ask around.”

“Will do, but I think I have someone in mind,” he assured her. Draco would definitely know how to dance. He was probably great at it, too, the prat. “Thanks, Susan. I’ll try not to let you down.”

She patted him on the cheek gently, smiling in a way that was vaguely condescending, but somehow nice at the same time. “Just be a pretty bit of arm candy for me, you’ll do fine.” That had Ernie laughing. Harry was wondering if he should regret his choices. Maybe Parvati would have been safer.

“Who are you going with, Ernie?” he asked curiously.

“Hannah,” the Hufflepuff boy replied, looking incredibly pleased about it. “Not all of us want to break house boundaries for this one, y’know.”

“He’s fancied her since last year,” Susan whispered theatrically, making Ernie blush. “See you later, Harry!”

Harry turned away just as the hall began to fill with students heading to classes, immeasurably glad he’d managed to ask Susan before he had an audience. He went to find Neville, grinning to himself.

One problem down, just one more to go.

.-. .

Harry was wondering if he should try making friends with people other than Neville — publicly, that was. With Ron still pissed at him and Hermione mostly-pissed at him, he found himself at a bit of a loose end when Neville was off doing things in the greenhouses. With little else to do, he went to the library, planning on getting a head start on the Featherlight charm for the next class.

It was a Friday evening, so the library was fairly busy — as far as the school library went. People wanting to get their homework done before the weekend, or finish stuff they’d been given an extension on and had to hand in before Saturday morning. He glanced around for a

free table — Viktor was almost always in the library these days, maybe Harry could sit with him?

He followed the trail of starry-eyed teen girls until he saw the crowd of Viktor's most devoted stalkers lurking around the edge of a bookshelf. They looked furious, muttering to each other and glaring daggers at something on the other side of the shelf. Harry kept out of sight and edged closer, his eyebrows rising at what was making the girls so upset.

Viktor was indeed in the library, but he wasn't studying alone. Hermione was sat right next to him, leaning just a little bit into his space as she read a passage from the book they appeared to be sharing, then said something quietly. Viktor's lips twitched, and he replied, making Hermione giggle. The pair of them looked pretty cozy; no wonder Viktor's fans were upset.

Harry backed out of the scene, feeling conflicted. On the one hand, he liked Viktor a lot, and if he liked Hermione, more power to him. He even liked Hermione, most of the time, even if she didn't like Harry very much these days. He wasn't really sure where their friendship stood — and he wouldn't be until he had proof that she was just friends with him because Dumbledore told her to be — but he still wanted her to be happy.

But on the other hand, if Hermione *was* working for Dumbledore, he didn't want her getting anywhere near Viktor and messing with the tentative friendship Harry had with the champions. If she was up to something, using Viktor for something... or he was just being paranoid and she happened to be enjoying getting attention from a popular older boy. Harry wondered how Ron felt about the whole thing. If he even knew about it.

Shaking his head and deciding it was none of his business, he went in search of somewhere else to study. The evening was apparently full of surprises, as he rounded a corner to see Blaise, Millicent Bulstrode, Mandy Brocklehurst, the Patil twins and Lavender Brown all sat together, working on what looked like their Potions essay due Monday. He tried to back out of that one, too, but Blaise caught sight of him before he did. "Potter," he greeted neutrally, the barest of smirks on his lips. "Care to join us?"

"I wouldn't want to intrude," he insisted, giving curious glances to Bulstrode, Brocklehurst and Lavender. They didn't seem to be having any issue with the intermingled Gryffindor/Slytherin/Ravenclaw group.

"You wouldn't be," Parvati insisted. "Have you done Snape's essay yet? We've only just started."

"Being brutally honest, Potter; your Potions grade could use all the help it can get," Bulstrode remarked, but she sounded more teasing than cruel. Harry paused for a minute. If they were genuinely inviting him, it would be rude to say no, surely? Bulstrode was known to avoid most of the real Slytherin drama, and if Blaise was encouraging it then she couldn't be too bad. Perhaps the Bulstrode heir could be swayed away from her Death Eater father.

"Well, you're not wrong there," he admitted, dropping into a chair opposite Mandy. Even after his lessons with Snape over the summer, he couldn't be seen to suddenly do well in the Slytherin's class, so Harry was still averaging a Poor.

He pulled a quill and parchment from his bag, leaning in to share Blaise's textbook since he hadn't brought his own. As the girls started discussing the use of marigold stems in healing potions, Blaise's dark eyes flicked up to Harry. "You were busy fighting dragons, so we started the study group without you," he said under his breath, keeping his expression neutral, as if he was just explaining potions to him. "As you can see, it's going well so far. We'll explain more on Tuesday." That was their next scheduled get-together. Harry grinned; he *loved* when plans came together without his involvement. It was the best.

.-.-.

Practically sprinting up to the Transfiguration corridor as soon as all his dorm-mates were fast asleep, Harry grinned when he slipped inside the unused classroom. "We have got to figure out a regular meeting spot," he said by way of greeting. "I'm starting to lose track of the classroom rotation."

For safety's sake, they never met in the same place twice in a row, keeping up a schedule running through five different unused classrooms. Draco merely rolled his eyes at him. "Find somewhere you can be sure no one will catch on to, and I'll think about it." They'd been incredibly lucky so far — other than Remus catching them that one time last year, they hadn't been caught yet. But since their change in relationship, they'd started meeting up more and more, and it was just a matter of time.

Letting his schoolbag drop to the floor, Harry walked over to meet Draco at the desk he'd cleared off, leaning down to greet the Slytherin with a firm kiss. It still sent a thrill down his spine to know that he could do that; just go over to Draco and kiss him, whenever he liked. Well, as long as they were in private.

He sunk into the chair Draco had set out for him, their knees pressed together under the desk. Draco pulled his deck of cards from his pocket, shuffling. "Busy day?" Harry asked, and the blond shrugged.

"No more than usual. Uncle Severus had me help him top up the Hospital Wing stock after class." Harry was glad that wasn't his job anymore; being responsible for potions that he knew students would be taking had made Harry far too anxious. He was competent now, thanks to the extra lessons, but he was by no means excelling. Draco, on the other hand, was probably top of their year. "Dare I ask what you've been up to?"

"The usual chaos and mayhem," Harry replied, grinning. "Oh, you'll never guess what I saw in the library today." He told Draco about Viktor and Hermione, and the blond made a face.

"I thought Viktor had better taste than that," he complained. Harry nudged him scoldingly.

"Hermione's fine! What's wrong with her?" he argued, worried Draco was going to make a disparaging remark about her heritage. He was better about it in private, but every now and then some of Lucius Malfoy's childhood lessons slipped through. The older Draco got, the more he was learning to think for himself.

"Other than the fact that she could be selling you out to Dumbledore?" Draco pointed out, one pale eyebrow raised. "She doesn't know the first thing about quidditch, why is she

drooling over the Bulgarian seeker?"

"Maybe that's why Viktor likes her," Harry reasoned, ignoring the Dumbledore comment. "She doesn't care about his career."

Draco hummed, unconvinced, and played a card that won him the round. Harry cursed, and the Slytherin smirked, leaning in to steal a kiss. "You might be getting better, but you're still no match for me in strategy," he teased playfully.

"Why don't we play Coup le Chat instead?" Harry retorted, preferring the more luck-based game. Draco huffed, but obligingly dealt out six cards each.

Distracted by the talk of Viktor and Hermione, Harry almost forgot to tell Draco the real reason he'd asked for them to meet that night. Well, other than to kiss him. He'd never get enough of kissing his boyfriend. "Hey, Draco? Who are you going to the Yule Ball with?"

Draco stiffened, his fingers fumbling with the card he'd just drawn. "We can't go together," he said immediately. Harry scoffed.

"I'm not *that* much of an idiot," he agreed. "Though, for the record, I definitely would if I could. But that's why I asked; who are you going with?"

"I was planning to ask Pansy," Draco replied, shrugging. "Our parents will expect it, and she'll be fairly decent company."

"Just make sure she keeps her hands to herself," Harry said with a scowl, not liking the idea of Pansy Parkinson hanging off Draco's arm all night. Draco scoffed.

"Pansy's not interested in anything like that," he dismissed. He bumped his knee against Harry's. "Are you taking anyone, or just going to lurk in the corner with Longbottom all night?"

"I have to take someone," Harry informed him. "The champions are supposed to open the dancing with their partners. I asked Susan Bones this morning."

Draco's grey eyes were amused. "Bones? A Hufflepuff? Clever; showing support of Cedric and his house, branching out from Gryffindor, and allying with Amelia Bones' heir. No one will ever complain about a sweet little Hufflepuff like her." There was a faint twist to his lips, and it took Harry a minute to figure out what it was.

"Don't be jealous," he soothed, placing a hand over Draco's on the table. "She knows we're going as just friends. She's doing it for her image as much as I'm doing it for mine. I've been told I just need to be her arm candy," he added with a grin. That softened Draco a little.

"Malfoys don't share," he said eventually, turning his hand over to lace their fingers together. "Even if no one else knows it, you're mine. The thought of her getting to dance with you in front of all those people, when I can't even look at you without having to make sure I look like I hate you..." Harry pushed a lock of blond hair out of Draco's eyes, tilting his head forward to press their foreheads together for a brief second.

"One day, when this is all over, I'll dance with you in front of the whole bloody Ministry," he promised, kissing Draco slowly. The blond melted into the kiss, fingers threading into Harry's hair. "That's actually something I wanted to ask you about," he added breathlessly when they parted, refusing to get distracted.

"Can it wait?" Draco muttered, going in for another kiss. Harry let it go on for a minute or two, then pulled back.

"I promised Susan I'd find someone to teach me to dance before the ball, so I don't embarrass the both of us," he explained. "You know how to dance, right?"

"I'm a Malfoy," Draco retorted, as if it answered that question. Which, Harry supposed, it did.

"Would you teach me? I know we're both boys, so it'll be different, but... you won't laugh at me." How far they'd come, that Draco Malfoy was one of the few people he could say that to.

A thoughtful hum was Draco's response. "I suppose. If it's to save you looking a fool in front of our esteemed guests," he added wryly. Harry beamed, kissing him again.

"Thank you! I'll try my best, I swear." He made to give Draco another kiss, but the blond boy got to his feet abruptly, rolling up his sleeves.

"Let's see what we're working with, then," he prompted, eyeing Harry expectantly. Harry gulped.

"What? Now?" he asked, alarmed. He hadn't expected to start so soon! He'd thought maybe he could have a day or two to mentally prepare himself. Have Neville show him a step or two, so he didn't totally look like an idiot in front of his boyfriend.

"I need to see if it's going to take me every night from now til Christmas to get you in shape," Draco retorted.

"Oi!" Harry argued. "I'm in great shape!"

Draco's eyes trailed over him, heavy-lidded. Harry shivered. "Hmm, you're not bad." He stepped closer to Harry, resting a hand on the small of his back that dipped down to brush his backside for the briefest of seconds, just long enough to be intentional. "But let's see if you can dance."

"We don't have music," Harry protested.

"Doesn't matter for now, and you can bring your Wireless next time. Quit making excuses, Potter." Draco's smirk turned challenging. "Unless you're scared?"

"In your dreams," Harry returned. Draco winked at him.

"You frequently are," he said without missing a beat, catching Harry when he stumbled and pulling him up into dancing hold. "Now, you'll have to lead Bones, so I'll teach you that way.

It'll be easier for you anyway; following's harder, you've got to do it backwards. It'll feel a bit weird at first, since I'm taller than you, but so's she, especially in heels." Harry wanted to argue, but he couldn't deny it. Susan wouldn't be quite as tall as Draco, but there wasn't a chance of her being the same height as Harry, let alone shorter.

"We'll start off basic," Draco assured. "I'd imagine the opening dance will be a traditional wizarding waltz, and anything that follows probably a fairly simple box-step."

Harry wished he knew what any of those things meant.

"Okay, here we go. Just do as I tell you."

Without any music to follow, Draco instead counted beats quietly, directing Harry with soft words and pointed nudges of his hands. Harry still tripped over his feet for the first twenty minutes, but eventually he started to get the hang of it a little bit. "Look at me, not at your feet," Draco instructed. Harry snapped his head up, meeting Draco's silver gaze. The Slytherin had a soft, unguarded smile at the corners of his lips. It took Harry's breath away for a minute, and his feet stopped moving. Draco blinked at him. "What are you—" Harry cut him off with a kiss, moving his hand up to cup Draco's jaw. The blond hummed quietly. "That's not part of the dance," he said a beat after they parted, looking a little dazed.

"Couldn't help myself," Harry replied, grinning abashedly. "So how am I doing?"

"Not as terrible as I feared," Draco acquiesced. "Definite potential. We should still start meeting up at least every other night, though, just to make sure you get plenty of practice. Unless that'll be too much? My roommates don't much care what I do at night, but yours aren't good at minding their own business."

"I'll make it work." Harry didn't need sleep, right? Not when he could spend several hours a night in Draco's arms. And, sometimes, stepping on Draco's feet. "Every other night, or every night?"

"We'll go for every night this week, then go from there. Can you handle that?"

Harry smirked. "Oh, I don't know, having to spend that much time looking at your ugly mug," he teased, stroking Draco's cheek. "Not sure I can cope."

Draco sniffed haughtily. "One must suffer for one's art, Potter," he said in reply, sounding every inch the puffed up little pureblood lordling his father wanted him to be. Harry laughed, leaning up for another kiss. He liked kissing when they were like this. Having to stretch up on his toes, just a little bit, to get the perfect angle to slot their mouths together without his glasses digging into Draco's face. He didn't mind being shorter than Draco.

They kissed for a few minutes more, then Draco took Harry's hand in his own, nudging him back into hold. "If you can get this tonight, maybe tomorrow I'll introduce the lifts."

Harry's face paled. Maybe dancing wasn't such a good idea after all.

.-.-.-

Since eating meals together had become rather a larger affair than they'd intended, the four champions had to find other ways to get together and discuss progress on the eggs. One afternoon a week or so before term was due to end, they sat out by the lake on a large blanket Fleur had conjured, surrounded by Warming charms courtesy of Harry and Viktor. Harry had gotten pretty good at them over the summer — Sirius still couldn't stand being cold.

"I vote we put the eggs away until after Christmas," Cedric said, lying back on the blanket, his hair mussed and sticking out at funny angles. "All the screaming is doing my head in."

"I put a Silencing charm on mine," Fleur volunteered. Harry snorted.

"Pretty sure that defeats the purpose."

She shrugged. "Eet stops eet from screaming every time eet falls off my dresser."

"How often is that?" Cedric asked with raised eyebrows, which looked a little odd from Harry's perspective as the Hufflepuff was upside down.

"Often enough," Fleur said evasively.

"The rest of the Durmstrang students haff banned me from opening mine vhen they are around," Viktor sighed. "I agree, leaving them until after the Yule Ball is best."

"I'm fine with that," Harry said, nodding. He leaned back on his hands, glancing out across the lake. "Oh look, it's snowing." Just a little bit, fine flakes beginning to dust the surface of the lake. Viktor scoffed.

"That is barely even snow," he dismissed. "In Bulgaria, there is four feet already."

"And I bet it's bloody freezing." Cedric grimaced. "No wonder you're so good at Warming charms."

"It is necessary," Viktor agreed. "Especially for flying."

That reminded Harry of the conversation he and Viktor had had weeks ago, before the first task. "Hey, Fleur; do you play quidditch? Do you even have quidditch at Beauxbatons?"

"Of course we 'ave quidditch," Fleur said, mock-offended. "I am seeker for my 'ouse team."

Harry looked at Viktor, and they both burst out laughing. "I told you!" he crowed. "Must be something about seekers. Reckless idiots, the lot of us."

"You play seeker also, 'arry?" Fleur checked, wanting to make sure they weren't laughing at her. Harry nodded.

"Cedric, too. Viktor and I were talking about it the other day, I wondered if the Goblet was looking for seekers. Gotta be something a bit wrong in the head with all of us, flying around at top speeds looking for a tiny golden ball while the other team tries to knock us off our brooms." There was something a little bit mad about every quidditch player, but seekers were probably the most bizarre.

"I haff never met a sane seeker," Viktor declared wisely. "And I haff met a lot of seekers."

"Sounds about right," Cedric agreed, snickering. Even Fleur laughed.

"I do not think a sane person would enter zis tournament, non?" she agreed ruefully.

"Ve should all fly together sometime," Viktor said, looking out over the lake. The snow was making a vague attempt at coming down harder, settling on the railings of the Durmstrang ship. "A four-vay seeker match."

Harry imagined it, grinning. "That would be brilliant. Where, though?" The quidditch pitch was out of bounds for the year; something to do with the tournament. Harry was pretty sure he didn't want to know a thing about it until he absolutely had to.

"We do not need goals for seeking," Fleur pointed out. "Anywhere on ze grounds will do."

"First Wednesday of winter break?" Cedric suggested. "Just keep it between us, a little friendly game. Nothing crazy."

"You're on," Harry agreed, grinning. He was going to go against the seeker who caught the snitch in the World Cup final. It was going to be *epic*.

.-.-.-.

Worrying the edge of his cardigan between his fingers, Remus sat down opposite Sirius, whose expression was grave. "Severus has news, doesn't he?" the animagus presumed. He could read Remus easily, after all these years. Remus nodded.

"The Mark is dark enough to make out properly, now," he admitted, stomach churning. He hated looking at that stain on his love's skin — it felt like they were nineteen and terrified all over again. "He's had letters from most of the old crowd. They're confused, but hopeful. They're all just... waiting." Severus could feel it coming, he said they could all feel it coming. One day soon, their lord would call them, and they would answer. "He said Karkaroff's been even shiftier than usual," he added with a grimace. A growl came from Sirius before he could stop himself. They both hated the idea of that scumbag being around Harry, but there was nothing any of them could do.

"Any word from the Ministry yet?"

"Nothing official," Remus said with a shake of his head. "There are rumours, of course. Fudge is in complete denial, won't hear a whisper of it. No one has even seen Barty Crouch since the first task; he's sick, apparently. Still no word on Bertha."

"We all know she's dead," Sirius murmured, grimacing. "Especially if Harry's dream is anything to go by. Poor Bertha was probably just in the wrong place at the wrong time. She was always good at that."

Remus didn't remember much about Bertha Jorkins from school — she was three years older than them — but he remembered her always managing to stumble across things she

shouldn't. Once she'd almost walked in on him and Severus kissing, in their fourth year. Only Severus' quick thinking with a Dissillusionment charm had saved them.

"I suspect Voldemort could be resurrected right in front of Fudge's face and he'd still deny it," Remus mused. "Merlin help us if he ends up being our wartime Minister. We'd be doomed."

"He's exactly who Dumbledore wants in power at a time like this," Sirius pointed out. "A useless moron with all the courage of a flobberworm. No chance of him mobilising any useful defence force. Just sit back and wait for Albus Dumbledore to save the day." He made a faint noise of disgust. "How is the old coot, anyway?"

Remus grinned at that. Sirius was going to *love* this. "Harry and his new friends seem to be pushing his buttons in all the wrong ways," he said, perking up. "Severus said they've all started mixing houses at mealtimes. Apparently you can hardly tell which house table is which, these days."

Sirius barked out a laugh. "Brilliant! There's nothing he can do about that, not without looking like he's stunting progress. All of them are mixing? Even the Slytherins?"

"Even the Slytherins," Remus confirmed. "Mostly with Ravenclaws, but they're branching out to Hufflepuff and even Gryffindor in some cases. Severus said he once saw Cassius Warrington and Adrian Pucey discussing quidditch strategy with the Weasley twins and Angelina Johnson."

"Wow." Sirius looked duly impressed. "It'll be a whole different school by the time Harry leaves, if he's done this much in just a few months."

"I think that's what he's hoping for." Remus reached for his tea, taking a long gulp. "Our boy is definitely up to something. He says it's just study groups and friendships, but I know that look in his eye. That's a Lily Evans Vs The World kind of look." James always used to call it that, when Lily decided there was some injustice she absolutely couldn't stand for, and would plot ruthlessly until it was righted. If Harry was taking on that look in the face of Dumbledore... the headmaster had better watch out.

"Merlin, imagine if Prongsy and Lils could see him now," Sirius sighed, smiling faintly. Remus grinned back, the ache in his chest still present, but less raw. Every day it got easier to talk about them, now he had someone to remember them with. "They'd be so bloody proud."

"Severus said his grades are improving in spades," Remus couldn't help but brag. "Minerva was raving in the staff room about an essay of his that could've come from a sixth year, and Filius said he's picking things up even faster than Miss Granger. Moody's the only one who doesn't seem to be impressed by him."

Sirius scowled at the man's name. "Yeah, well he's in Dumbledore's pocket, isn't he? Never gonna be happy about Harry getting too strong. Pup needs to be more careful; if Dumbledore thinks he's broken the Compulsion charm, he might start looking into things."

"He knows what he's doing, Pads," Remus assured. "They all just think it's research for the tournament paying off in unexpected ways. Or the fact that he's hanging around with older kids more. He spends a lot of time with the Weasley twins, these days. And, of course, the other champions." Truthfully, Remus was a little worried about the rift between Harry, Ron and Hermione. It was going to get explosive; they were all too strong personalities for it not to. It was just a matter of when and how bad.

"He seems happy." Sirius was smiling softly as he spoke, and Remus nodded.

"Happier than last year," he agreed. Deep down, he liked to hope that at least a little bit of that was due to them; he and Sirius and Severus. Giving the boy a safe place to come home to, adults who loved him. Because Severus could deny it all he wanted; he was beginning to love Harry too, just a bit.

"Did you see him?" Sirius asked.

"Just for a little while, he came down to Severus' rooms to have tea. He didn't stay long, though; Draco's giving him dancing lessons to prepare for the Yule Ball."

Sirius snorted. "We should've done that over the summer, as soon as we saw dress robes on the school list."

"I'm sure he's having much more fun learning this way," Remus assured, remembering the blush on Harry's face and the smile in his eyes as he confessed to getting lessons from Draco.

"Oh, I bet he is," Sirius drawled, smirking. "I hope there's pictures. I bet Harry'll look great in those dress robes. He's going with Amelia's niece, you said?"

"Susan," Remus confirmed. "Nice girl. Definite snake in the badger den. She'll look after Harry."

"Hopefully he has a better time of it than we did at that graduation ball," Sirius remarked. A groan escaped Remus' lips; he'd almost forgotten about that.

"I try and block that night from my memory," he confessed, making Sirius laugh. Graduation ball had been an unmitigated disaster, for everyone except James and Lily.

Remus shook his head, setting his empty teacup down and slumping back in the armchair. Harry would probably have a great time at the Yule Ball — no one was likely to hex the dance floor, after all.

It was everything else that came after it, Remus was worried about.

Chapter End Notes

This is officially the last chapter of stuff that was posted the first time around;
everything from here on out is uncharted waters! I can't wait for y'all to see this story
unfold <3

Chapter 26

The last week of term was dragging. Everyone was even more eager for the Christmas holidays than usual; hardly anyone fourth year or over would be going home, and the few younger students that had managed to snag invites to the ball. Harry watched the clock tick down on the last few minutes of Divination, completely ignoring Trelawney's lecture about... whatever it was she was talking about. Harry would happily admit he'd given up completely on Divination. As long as he checked which bit of the textbook they were at and filled his homework with lots of unfortunate mishaps and ominous predictions, he was making straight Os.

At last, the bell rang, and the entire class scrambled to their feet, making a mad dash for the trapdoor. Harry headed back to the tower with Parvati and Lavender, who were both discussing their dress robes. "Padma and I are wearing saris," Parvati told them, beaming. "Grandma sent them all the way from India. They're *gorgeous*." Parvati was going with Anthony Goldstein, and Harry was pretty sure Lavender was going with Seamus. Or maybe that fifth year Slytherin boy he'd seen her snogging in the library the other week. It was hard to keep track, sometimes.

"Do you have much family back in India, then?" Harry asked before he could help himself.

"Almost all of Papa's side of the family," Parvati confirmed. "We spend a month every summer out there, and sometimes Yule. We were supposed to go this year, but they understood when we wrote to say we were staying here."

"I wonder if I have any family in India," he mused, speaking more to himself than the girls. "Y'know, extended." He knew the Potters had been in and out of Britain since the 1600s, but Sirius said James' mother was born in India, so maybe he had family there.

"Have you ever been?" Lavender asked curiously. Harry snorted.

"Nope. I've never even left Britain. My relatives don't like me, remember?" The Dursleys would sooner cut their own limbs off than take him anywhere. "They like to pretend I'm just a bit tan."

Parvati grimaced, squeezing his shoulder sympathetically. "If you ever want to go, you can come stay with our family. The House of Patil would be honoured to host you."

That hit Harry with more emotion than he expected, and he faltered on the stairs for the briefest moment. "Thanks, Parvati." He imagined what it would be like, going to the place his family originated. He didn't speak the language, or know any of the culture or his own family history; it would probably be more embarrassing than insightful. Maybe he'd wait until he'd had the chance to raid the Potter vaults a bit, learn more about his heritage.

"I heard a rumour," Lavender drawled, bringing the conversation back to safer topics as they neared Gryffindor Tower, "that you, Harry, are going to the ball with Susan Bones. Care to comment?"

“It’s true,” he confirmed, and Parvati squealed halfway through giving the password, making the Fat Lady scowl at her.

“I knew Anthony wouldn’t lie to me about that! That’s really great, Harry; you two will look good together.”

“We’re just friends,” Harry insisted. Both girls giggled.

“We know,” Lavender chirped. “But that doesn’t mean you can’t make a great pair. And Sally-Anne is *fuming*, which is always a plus.”

Harry frowned at that. “She doesn’t— Sally-Anne doesn’t fancy me or something, does she?” he asked in mild alarm. He didn’t think the Hufflepuff girl even *liked* him — she was always glaring!

Both girls giggled, exchanging a look. “No,” Parvati assured. “But, well— she’s always been mean to Susan. As soon as the ball was announced she started saying that no one would ask Susan because she was too fat to get a date.” That made both of them scowl, and Harry’s eyes widened.

“That’s awful!” He was now even more glad he’d asked Susan to go with him. Who the hell did Sally-Anne Perks think she was, saying such things?

“She’s just jealous,” Lavender huffed. “She thinks all the boys should fancy her because she’s skinny. But Susan’s way prettier *and* nicer. So now Sally-Anne’s going with Wayne Hopkins, even though she really wanted to go with Roger Malone but he turned her down.”

Parvati let out a quiet, wistful sigh at Roger’s name — Harry knew the Ravenclaw boy was, according to many of the girls, the most attractive boy in their year.

“Well I’m just glad Susan agreed to go with me,” he said, not sure he wanted to get deeper into the gossip spiral. “I kept getting asked by girls I don’t even know, it was weird!”

“You’re a Triwizard champion,” Parvati reminded him, grinning. “And unlike Cedric, you’re actually single. Can you blame them for taking a chance?”

Harry managed a smile, even as something in his chest twisted painfully. He *wasn’t* single, but he couldn’t tell the girls that. Couldn’t tell anyone.

The common room was fairly busy, and the two girls bid Harry goodbye to head up to their dorm and... he was pretty sure they said something about trying out hairstyles. Either way he left them to it, intending on heading up to put his books away and then go find the twins for a little light hexing of random floor tiles in the Entrance Hall. Instead, he paused when a voice called his name.

“Harry, can we talk for a minute?” Hermione and Ron were sat on the sofa in the corner, Hermione’s brown eyes imploring. Ron didn’t look thrilled to be there, but he wasn’t actively glaring at Harry. Harry shrugged, changing course.

“What do you need?” he asked, sinking into the chair opposite. Hermione bit her lip.

"This has gone on long enough," she started. For a second, Harry thought she was going to confess to being a spy for Dumbledore. "I know the two of you have had... issues, this year, but really, you've been friends for far too long to let this silly tournament get in the way of that." Harry bit back a snort; if only it was just the tournament. "It's awful having the two of you fighting, and Harry I know I've been a bit short with you lately, and I apologise for that, but it's been hard, alright? I hate it, and I wish you two would just get over this and be friends again. Ronald, Harry very clearly did not put his name in the Goblet, and he needs your support, not your derision. Harry, you can't blame Ron for being a bit jealous sometimes; these things happen, and you shouldn't begrudge him his feelings."

Harry absolutely would begrudge him his feelings when those feelings made him be an arsehole, but he kept his mouth shut. He had never been able to stand up to Hermione when she brought out her sad voice, and maybe he had been a little hard on both of them lately. He was so worried about Dumbledore, he was seeing enemies everywhere, even in the two people who had been his best friends since he was eleven.

He wasn't saying they could go back to that again. His friendship group had expanded far too much for him to ever be happy with that insular little trio again. But maybe he could stop actively avoiding them, at least. That was probably a dick move on his part.

"Ron's being very silent in all this," he commented. Hermione shot the redhead a pointed glare. Ron looked like he was being forced to drink vinegar.

"I'm sorry I said what I said, about you putting your name in and everything," he muttered. He didn't sound particularly sorry. It was like watching a toddler being made to apologise by their mother. "I just... you get all this great stuff — you're school champion, you might win a thousand galleons, and that's on top of being Harry bloody Potter. And you don't even *care*."

"I don't want to be school champion," Harry retorted, trying not to get too angry with Ron while Hermione was sat there staring at him pleadingly. "I didn't ask for any of this. I don't know what I'd do with a thousand galleons. And mate, if you want a scar on your forehead, dead parents, and a target on your back, then by all means, go right ahead."

Ron blanched. Hermione winced. "Harry," she scolded. He shrugged, not remotely sorry.

"If he's willing to stop being a dick then I'm willing to speak to him again. But it'll take more than a half-hearted apology for me to actually forgive him."

"Hear, hear!" It was the twins, perching on the arms of Harry's chair with identical grins on their faces.

"You tell our prat brother, Harry. Look, can we borrow Hedwig for a bit?" George asked, ruffling Harry's hair absently.

"Yeah, no problem. She's been bored lately." With all his friends at Hogwarts, and the mirror to talk to Sirius and Remus, he didn't have much use for her save for the occasional letter to Mrs Frobisher, who was busy trying to get Skeeter banned from school grounds except for the tournament.

“Cheers, mate!” Fred beamed.

“What do you need Hedwig for?” Ron asked suspiciously. Both twins rolled their eyes.

“George wants to take her to the Yule Ball,” Fred deadpanned. “We’re sending a letter, you thick git. And no, we’re not telling you who. It’s none of your business.”

Harry wondered if it was anything he might know about. He’d have to ask later.

“Speaking of the Yule Ball, Harry, are you really going with Susan Bones?” Hermione asked curiously.

“Yeah,” Harry said, shrugging. “Why is it such a big deal?”

“You’re a champion,” Fred reminded him. “You breathing is a big deal.”

“You got a date yet, ickle Ronnikins?” George cooed. Ron’s ears went red.

“No,” he admitted begrudgingly.

“Better hurry up,” Fred advised. “All the good ones will be gone soon.”

“Who are you going with?” Ron tried to turn the tables on his brother. Harry rolled his eyes. Had he missed Fred disappearing off with Angelina every other day?

“Angelina,” Fred replied, grinning.

“You actually got round to asking her, then?” Harry asked with raised eyebrows. Fred kept promising to do it, and then forgetting — too busy snogging, George insisted.

“Oh yeah,” Fred realised. He glanced across the common room, where the three chasers were sat by the fire. “Oi, Angelina!” She looked up. “Wanna go to the ball with me?”

“Well that’s romantic,” Alicia muttered with a roll of her eyes. Katie giggled.

“Yeah, alright then,” Angelina agreed, a smile tugging at her lips when she turned back to the other girls. Fred looked back at his brother, smug.

“See? Easy. Hop to it, Ronnie, or you’ll have to go solo.”

The twins left, no doubt headed to the Owlery, and Ron groaned, leaning back against the arm of the sofa. “I’m doomed,” he declared. Harry snorted, sharing a look with Hermione.

“You’ll figure it out,” was his best attempt at being a supportive friend.

“So is Susan the reason you’ve been disappearing so much lately?” Hermione asked impishly. Harry looked at her curiously. “Ron said you’ve been out late a lot.” Harry wondered what Ron was doing, to be noticing that. “Is she your secret girlfriend?”

“I don’t have a secret girlfriend,” Harry groused. “I don’t have any sort of girlfriend.” He desperately tried to keep the grin off his face. Draco was certainly not a girl, even if Harry

did tease him for caring too much about his hair sometimes.

“We won’t tell anyone,” Hermione insisted.

“There’s nothing to tell,” Harry returned. “I don’t have a girlfriend. It’s none of your business where I go at night.”

Hermione drew back, glancing into her lap. Harry wondered if he’d overstepped. “No,” she said eventually. “No, I don’t suppose we’re back to there, yet.”

Harry sighed, unsure what to say to her. There were so many landmines in their friendship these days, it was hard to say if it was worth trying to fix.

.-.-.

With only two days left of the term, Harry thought he’d be done having to avoid Professor Moody. The man was constantly trying to get him alone, to talk to him about the tournament, or classwork. There was something about him that made Harry’s skin crawl, but he was running out of reasons to leave his presence without coming off as outright rude. He didn’t want to get a detention over it; then he definitely wouldn’t be able to avoid being alone with Moody. He was honestly surprised the man hadn’t resorted to that yet.

If it got any worse, Harry was going to have to start keeping the map out at all times just to avoid the man. The only reason he didn’t already was because he didn’t want that magical eye catching sight of it. Dumbledore didn’t know about the Marauder’s Map, and Harry definitely wanted to keep it that way. At least the castle seemed to be on his side; staircases changing right when he needed them to, passageways that he was pretty sure hadn’t existed five minutes before he needed them. Hogwarts was definitely trying to look after the Slytherin heir.

Hearing the familiar thunk-thunk of the man’s wooden leg on the tile, Harry ducked into a passageway behind a false wall, cursing under his breath. The man was determined, he’d give him that!

.-.-.

At last, classes were over. Annoyingly, Snape was one of the only teachers who hadn’t given up trying to actually teach the distracted students, setting a quiz on antidotes for the very last lesson. Harry had spent his whole detention after the Wand Weighing catching up on antidotes privately with Snape, though, so it was easy enough. He hurried out of the dungeons as soon as Snape dismissed them, wanting to get an order out to Flourish and Blotts before they closed for the weekend, having had the perfect idea for Remus’ Christmas present. He hoped Hedwig was back from wherever the twins had sent her.

When he eventually got to the common room, after a detour to the kitchens for food — where apparently both Dobby and Winky had been hired? Who knew — he entered only to find Ron sat in a chair looking like he was about to be sick, Ginny hovering over him. The youngest Weasley seemed to be trying really hard not to laugh.

“What’s the matter with him?” he asked. Ginny glanced up at him and smirked.

“He asked Fleur Delacour to the Yule Ball.”

Harry gaped. “He *what*?”

“I don’t know why,” Ron moaned. “What was I thinking? She was just stood there, talking to her friends — there were *so many people watching* — but I’d heard she didn’t have a date and I just— it just happened!”

Ginny pat his arm sympathetically, biting her lip so hard Harry thought it might bleed. He sucked in his cheeks to stop from grinning.

“You’ll find someone,” he encouraged.

“What if I don’t?” Ron’s voice was full of despair. “I’ll be the only one in our year without a date!” Was that really true? Harry was impressed at everyone’s ability to pair up. “Except Neville, of course.”

“Neville’s got a date,” Harry piped up, glancing at Ginny curiously. Hadn’t she told him?

“What?” Ron groaned loudly. “Great! Just great. Even bloody Neville’s going with someone, and I’m not. Who’d go with him, anyway?”

“Me.” Ginny’s ears were red, but it was with fury more than embarrassment. Harry was glad he wasn’t the only one wanting to smack Ron for talking about Neville like that. “I’m going with Neville.”

“What? But— what?” Ron didn’t seem to know how to react to that.

“He asked me, I said yes. Neville’s nice.” Her voice dared him to argue.

The portrait hole opened, and Hermione walked in, eyeing the scene with confusion. “Why weren’t you two at dinner?”

“Things to do,” Harry replied vaguely.

“Ron got turned down for the Yule Ball,” Ginny piped up, a little more viciously than she would have before Ron said something about Neville.

“Oh? Eloise Midgeon starting to look a little more attractive, now?” Hermione asked icily. “All the good-looking ones taken? I’m sure you’ll find someone, somewhere who’ll have you.”

Ron scowled. Then his face did a bizarre 180 of emotions, staring up at Hermione in hopeful realisation. “Hermione. You’re a girl.”

“Really? I hadn’t noticed.”

"Well, you can just come with me, problem solved." Ron continued as if she hadn't spoken to him. Hermione huffed.

"Just because you didn't realise I'm a girl, doesn't mean no one else did. I already have a date." She was smiling the tiniest amount through her anger, and Harry eyed her in consideration. He had a sneaking suspicion who that might be; a suspicion that was all but confirmed when Hermione refused to tell Ron who it was.

"I need to find *someone*," Ron moaned desperately. Harry thought about it for a moment. Just about everyone he knew already had someone; Ron had left it a bit last-minute. If everyone in their year truly did have a date, that didn't leave many options.

"Hey, Ginny," he said eventually. "Did Luna stay for Christmas?" The blonde third year wasn't able to go unless one of the older students asked her. Harry hadn't spent much time with the Ravenclaw girl, but she seemed nice, if a little odd. Ginny liked her, which was enough for Harry.

Ginny pursed her lips. "She did, yeah. Said her dad's off in Hungary looking for... some sort of creature." She glanced down at her brother, then back up at Harry, starting to catch on. "Really?" She made a face. Harry shrugged.

"It'll get her to the ball." She didn't have to actually stay by Ron's side the whole time. Ron would get a date, Luna would get to come to the ball and hang out with Ginny, it was a win for everybody. Especially Harry, who wouldn't have to listen to Ron's griping about not being able to find anyone to go with for the rest of the holidays.

"I'll ask her," Ginny agreed with a sigh. "Only so that Luna gets to come too." Ginny looked like she'd be perfectly happy to see her brother go alone to the Yule Ball. Harry was honestly right there with her — especially with Ron's awful dress robes. But it would be nice for Luna to have fun.

"There you go, Ron," Hermione said, tone still a little cold. "Problem solved."

Ron didn't look thrilled about potentially taking Luna Lovegood to the Yule Ball, but he kept his mouth shut. It was the smartest decision he'd made all day.

.-.-.-.

Luckily, Luna was happy to go with Ron to the ball, promising to owl her father to send her some dress robes before he left on his creature hunt. Ron was still sulking about it — Harry couldn't figure out if his problem was going with a third year, going with Luna specifically, or having had to be set up by his little sister just to get a date — but despite their tentative truce, Harry still didn't spend much time with the redheaded boy, so he didn't care.

The weekend before the ball was a Hogsmeade weekend, and Harry took the opportunity to go down and finish off his Christmas shopping. That was his hope, at least; he'd owl-ordered for most of his presents, but there were still a few people he hadn't found the perfect gift for yet. Draco being one of them.

The dilemma of what to get his boyfriend for Christmas was one that had been plaguing Harry for longer than they'd actually been dating. Even when they'd just been friends — and Harry had had a crush the size of Scotland — what did you get the boy whose parents could and would buy him anything he wanted?

He'd already thought of and then promptly discarded a dozen ideas. He wanted the present to *mean* something. He wanted it to be special. But what would be special to Draco Malfoy?

Harry was alone in the village, not wanting any of his friends to question who he was buying for, but there were crowds of Hogwarts students filling the streets. By the looks of it, Harry wasn't the only one who had left his shopping until the last second. Teenagers in various states of panic rushed past him, and Harry ducked into the nearest shop to avoid the press of people.

Draco wasn't the only person he had to buy for still. He still needed to get something for Susan to thank her for going to the ball with him, and... he wanted to buy something for Snape, too. He never thought he'd say that, but there he was. Snape was part of the family now, and Harry wanted to get him a Christmas present.

The shop he'd taken refuge in seemed to be a jewellery shop of some kind, and Harry looked around curiously. Draco might appreciate something shiny? Maybe? He shrugged helplessly to himself; it was worth a shot. Browsing the glass-fronted cases, Harry let his eyes trail over the pieces. Suddenly, his eyes landed on something. A small silver pendant of a curled up dragon, its body wrapped securely around a pale blue gemstone. His thoughts didn't turn to Draco; no, he was thinking of the boy's mother.

Perhaps it was cliché. Perhaps everyone gave Narcissa Malfoy dragon-related jewellery because of her son's name. But there was something about the necklace that just felt... right.

Harry glanced up at the middle-aged witch behind the register, offering a polite smile.
“Excuse me? Could I take a closer look at this, please?”

If he was going to start ingratiating himself to the Malfoy matriarch, he'd better start early.

.-

By lunchtime, Harry had secured presents for everyone except Draco. The necklace for Narcissa, a pair of pretty earrings for Susan shaped like shooting stars, and a journal for Snape that would automatically record the status and changes in a potion, for experimental purposes. His purchases were wrapped and stowed securely in his bag, and he decided to take a break and head to the Three Broomsticks.

That turned out to be a mistake, as the pub was packed so tight Harry could barely make it to the bar, so he ordered a sandwich to go and squeezed back out into the street, eating as he walked. He was pretty sure he'd been in every shop in the village, and he was still no closer to finding the perfect Christmas present for Draco.

Looking through the window of a shop selling antiques, Harry was surprised to catch the reflection of a pair of tall redheaded figures. He turned, seeing the twins walking nearby, their

heads ducked together and their faces serious. “Fred, George!” he called out to them, watching them both look up in alarm. They relaxed a little at the sight of Harry.

“Harrikins!” they greeted, changing course towards him.

“Fancy seeing you here. All alone, are we?”

“Getting up to *mischief*?” Fred smirked at him, wiggling his eyebrows, and Harry flushed.

“Christmas shopping,” he replied evasively; there were too many people around for him to risk mentioning who he was shopping for. “What are you two doing out here?” They looked a bit shifty — well, shiftier than usual for the twins.

The pair shared a glance. “Bit of a long story, dear Harry,” George said. Harry got the picture pretty quickly.

“I won’t ask you any questions, you don’t ask me any?” he suggested, watching the twins brighten up.

“See, this is why you’re our favourite!” Fred declared, ruffling his hair. “Be safe, little brother! Watch out for any rogue reporters!” He winked, and the pair disappeared, leaving Harry alone once more.

Harry sighed to himself, eyes scanning the shops once more. This was his last chance to shop before Christmas — unless he got a *very* speedy owl order in — and he couldn’t go back empty handed.

He grit his teeth, determined. It was his first Christmas with his boyfriend, and his present was going to be *perfect*. It had to be.

....

The Yule Ball was five days away, and Fleur Delacour had a problem.

“None of these boys are worth my time!” she declared at lunch, looking distinctly unimpressed. “‘Ow am I supposed to look fantastique when all the available ‘Ogwarts boys are... average at best?”

“I’ll try not to be offended by that,” Harry said lightly, and she jabbed him in the side.

“Two champions cannot attend togezzer, or I would ‘ave asked you,” she insisted. “But all the boys I ‘ave considered are taken. I cannot believe Roger abandoned me so last-minute!”

Harry knew she wanted to go with a Hogwarts boy, to continue the theme of international magical cooperation. She had been going with Roger Davies, but then he’d realised that the Gryffindor seventh year girl he had a crush on actually liked him back and was willing to go with him, and he’d very apologetically told Fleur he had to change his mind. Harry couldn’t believe Roger had turned down *Fleur Delacour*, but he supposed even Ravenclaws could be idiots sometimes.

“What kind of boy are you looking for?” he asked, knowing Fleur’s standards were incredibly high. Perhaps there was a boy who could be persuaded to ditch their date last minute to go with a Triwizard champion.

“‘E must be ‘andsome,’ Fleur said, and Harry gave her a look that said ‘obviously’. “I want ‘im to be taller zan me. A good dancer. It would be nice if ‘e spoke French, but not necessary.”

Harry racked his brain, looking around the hall as if Fleur’s perfect man might just appear out of thin air. As he glanced past the doors of the Great Hall, Cassius walked in, talking to Cedric. Harry froze, a slow smile creeping across his face. “Fleur, I’ll be right back.”

Harry sprinted across the hall, skidding to a halt in front of the two sixth years. “Cassius!” he greeted, and the Slytherin stared at him in confusion. “Do you have a date to the ball?”

“Aren’t you going with Susan?” Cassius asked. Harry rolled his eyes.

“I’m not asking for me, you git,” he muttered, though he did wonder what would happen if he turned up to the ball with Cassius Warrington on his arm. Draco would slaughter them both. “Do you have a date?”

“No,” Cassius said. “I never really got around to asking anyone.”

“Are you good at dancing?”

“Harry, I’m a Warrington.” It was much the same tone Draco had replied with when Harry had asked a similar question, and Harry snickered. He eyed the older boy carefully; he was taller than Cedric. That would make him taller than Fleur, if only by a little.

“Are you entirely opposed to the idea of having a date?” If Cassius wanted to go alone, Harry wouldn’t force him, but it would be doing him a *huge* favour.

Cassius frowned doubtfully. “I mean, it would depend on the date? And I’d have to check with my, uh, someone.”

“Since when did you have a *someone*?” Cedric cut in, looking amused. Cassius blushed.

“None of your business, Diggory,” he muttered. Cedric laughed.

“Would that someone be okay with you being a shameless piece of entirely platonic arm candy for a very pretty girl who needs to look good for some pictures?” Harry hoped whoever Cassius was dating wasn’t the possessive type. “I’ll owe you one.”

“I mean, probably?” Cassius shrugged. “I really don’t understand where you’re going with all this, Potter.”

Harry reached out, grabbing Cassius by the wrist and tugging him towards the Gryffindor table. He dragged him right up to where Fleur was sat. “Fleur, this is Cassius Warrington,” he introduced, though he was almost certain they’d met before. “Attractive, over six foot, an

excellent dancer, and I'm pretty sure he speaks at least a little bit of French." It was the type of thing purebloods did, teach their kids foreign languages. Draco spoke three.

"You think I'm attractive?" Cassius' voice was quietly smug, and Harry ignored him.

He shoved Cassius down onto the bench, dropping down beside him. "Cassius, I believe you know Fleur Delacour. She's in need of a date to the Yule Ball."

Cassius blinked at him. "A very pretty girl who needs to look good for some pictures? Harry, you said nothing about it being a *champion*!"

"Oh, did I forget to mention that bit?" Harry replied innocently. Cassius kicked him beneath the table.

The Slytherin turned to Fleur, only looking a little bit like he thought she might eat him alive. "I'm not single," he warned her, and she laughed.

"I am not looking for a boyfriend," she assured. "Just a dance partner. May I?" She got to her feet, and Cassius did the same. Fleur manhandled him into dance hold, looking contemplative. She had to tilt her head up a little bit to look him in the eye, and after a beat, she gave a decisive nod. "You will do quite nicely." Fleur released him, stepping back with a disarming smile. "Would you go to the ball wiz me?"

"I— absolutely, yeah," Cassius agreed, nodding. "I... what colour are you wearing? Do I need to change my dress robes?"

"I will meet you tomorrow after breakfast and we shall compare," Fleur said. "If that is acceptable?"

"Works for me. I've got to go — I was trying to persuade Cedric to help me with a... thing. I'll see you both later?"

They bid him goodbye and Cassius left, still looking vaguely bewildered by the turn of events. Fleur threw an arm around Harry's neck, kissing him on the cheek.

"You are a lifesaver, 'Arry!" she declared in delight. "I 'ad assumed a boy wiz a face like zat would already 'ave a date."

"Cassius is full of surprises," Harry agreed, making a mental note to interrogate the boy about his mysterious paramour at the earliest opportunity. "Glad I could help, Fleur."

All four champions now had dates to the ball. At least, he assumed so — Viktor had yet to tell them who he was going with, but he insisted he had it covered. Harry had a pretty good idea what that meant.

It was certainly going to be an interesting night.

Chapter 27

When the four Triwizard champions had agreed to a friendly little seeker's match before Christmas, they had decided to keep it low-key, just between them.

So, naturally, the entire castle found out.

Harry walked with his Firebolt over his shoulder, wearing his Gryffindor quidditch team robes, down a gap that had parted in the huge crowd of people on the Hogwarts lawn. He met with Cedric, Fleur and Viktor in the middle, as well as another Durmstrang student called Boris. Boris had a whistle around his neck, and was holding a small metal box. "So much for keeping this quiet, eh?" Harry remarked, and the other three grinned sheepishly.

"I may haff mentioned it a couple of times," Viktor admitted.

"I told Cho, and a few friends."

"Ze Beauxbatons students asked, and I could not lie to zem."

Harry laughed. "That's alright. That lot over there are my fault," he confessed, pointing to a cluster of Hogwarts students with the rest of the Gryffindor quidditch team and Neville at the very front. "It's more fun with an audience, anyway." He hadn't expected an audience of quite this caliber, but he could handle it. It was just... practically half the population of Hogwarts, plus all the Durmstrang and Beauxbatons students. Watching him face off against an internationally acclaimed seeker.

No big deal.

Across the crowd, stood in a group of Slytherins and Durmstrang students, Harry saw Draco. The blond was sneering, but when he caught Harry's eye, his expression softened for the barest of seconds. It was enough to give Harry the boost of confidence he needed. He could do this.

"Okay," Boris declared firmly, his voice magically louder to be heard over the crowd. "Here are the rules. All four seekers will begin on their brooms with both feet on the ground and eyes closed. I will release the snitch, count fifteen seconds, and then blow my whistle. Only then can the seekers take off." His Russian-accented English filled the air as the spectators went hushed, practically vibrating with excitement. "There will be fifteen rounds, and whoever has the most points at the end wins. If it is a tie, we will have a tiebreaker round between those seekers. Usual match rules apply. Seekers, are we clear?"

All four of them nodded. Boris grinned. "May I have a volunteer each from Hogwarts and Beauxbatons?"

One of Fleur's friends, a girl called Adrienne, stepped forward with Angelina Johnson beside her. Boris held out the box, flicking it open to reveal a shining golden snitch. "Ladies, please inspect the snitch and assure our audience that Durmstrang is playing fairly."

Both girls checked the snitch over with keen eyes and wands, and eventually stepped back, handing it to Boris. “It’s clean,” Angelina confirmed. “Professional standard, not tampered with that I can see.”

“C’est bon. We are good to play,” Adrienne agreed, grinning. They stepped back to join their friends in the crowd.

“Seekers, take your places.”

Harry stood between Cedric and Fleur, with Viktor on Cedric’s other side. He grinned at them, adrenaline coursing through his body. This was going to be *epic*.

“Eyes closed please!” Harry squeezed his eyes shut, feeling his pulse in his ears, keeping his breathing steady as Boris announced he was releasing the snitch. The crowd was near-silent, listening to him count down. It was nothing like the seeker’s match Harry had against Charlie in the summer. He thought their audience might be more invested in this than in the Triwizard tasks themselves.

“Three...two...one...” The whistle blew and Harry took off, shooting high up into the sky and immediately looking around for any glimpse of gold. The other three seekers did the same, swooping in fast loops around their makeshift pitch. Harry didn’t bother trying to tail any of them; when there were three potential opponents, it wasn’t worth putting all his eggs in one basket. He’d never played seeker against more than one person before, and he was intrigued to see how it would end up.

He ducked beneath Fleur, who was flying in the opposite direction as him. All thought of the audience had gone right out of his mind, his only focus the snitch.

All of a sudden, he saw Cedric change course abruptly. Harry automatically went after him, not willing to take the chance that it was a fake-out — he’d made the right choice, seeing a tiny flash of gold up ahead. He leaned in flat on his broom, willing it to go faster, corkscrewing under Cedric to get the upper hand. Above him, Viktor appeared, and Fleur wasn’t far behind him. The snitch veered sharply to the left, and there was almost a four-seeker pile-up as they all changed course to follow it. Harry inched forward, feeling other people close in around him, but he was *almost* there... his hand closed around cool metal.

“First point goes to Harry Potter of Hogwarts!”

He’d caught the snitch. He grinned to himself, seeing Cedric scowl playfully as he slowed down, the chase over. Harry turned to fly back to the starting point, handing the snitch over to Boris.

Fourteen more rounds to go.

.-. .

By round thirteen, the competition was getting intense, but none of the seekers were showing signs of tiring. Viktor was in the lead with four points, while Harry and Fleur both had three,

and Cedric was on two. Harry was sweating even in the December cold, but he couldn't stop smiling. He was having the time of his life.

"Round thirteen!" Boris announced. "Seekers, take your places!"

They'd been out there for almost two hours already, and the crowd had thinned a little. Obviously some people hadn't realised just how long it was going to take four seekers to go for the snitch fifteen times. There were still plenty of people out watching them, though — they'd even gained a couple of teachers, in the form of Flitwick, McGonagall and Sprout.

Round thirteen didn't last long — Viktor caught the snitch within the first few minutes, taking him up to five points. Harry grit his teeth, refusing to let the Bulgarian wizard get too much of a lead. If he was going to lose, he wanted to do so by only a point or two.

Round fourteen ended up with Harry hanging practically upside-down off his broom to catch the snitch above the heads of a group of sixth year girls, having to be very careful not to crash right into them. He brought the snitch back to Boris and settled in for the final round. He was only one point behind Viktor. Maybe, just maybe, he could catch it and send them into a tiebreaker.

As they reset, Viktor smirked at Harry. "Coming for my lead, are you?"

"Gonna try," Harry returned with a grin, mounting his broom and squeezing his eyes shut on Boris' command. He took off at the whistle, settling into his usual loop and seeing the other three do the same. All of them were desperate to score one last point — Viktor to secure his victory, Harry to go for the tiebreaker, and Cedric and Fleur to just stop Viktor beating the rest of them by too many points.

Suddenly Fleur was dropping into a dive, determination on her face. Harry automatically moved to follow, eventually seeing what the French witch was seeing; the snitch was practically right next to Boris, back where it had started. Cheeky little thing.

Boris seemed to realise the issue and dropped to his belly on the grass, rolling away before the two seekers could come crashing into him. Fleur was just edging in front of Harry, but he pushed on, leaning as far forward on his broom as he would dare without tipping too far and going arse over teakettle. Fleur clearly wasn't as comfortable pushing the boundaries as Harry, keeping her centre of gravity squarely over the middle of the broom, and it was that hesitation that allowed Harry to edge out and grab the snitch just ahead of her. He had to lurch back as soon as his fingers closed around metal, sliding to a halt.

The crowd was roaring. Cedric was laughing. Even Fleur looked grudgingly impressed. Viktor, on the other hand, pulled up next to Harry, staring at him for a long minute. "I vas not expecting you to be this good," he said eventually, looking quite put out about that. Harry beamed.

They returned to Boris, who looked utterly gobsmacked by the turn of events. "Friends, we have a tiebreaker situation! Harry Potter and Viktor Krum have both finished on five points! Cedric Diggory and Fleur Delacour will bow out for this final round, if I can please have a round of applause for their efforts."

Harry and Viktor both joined in with the applause, and the other two champions were smiling as they shouldered their brooms and walked to join their friends in the crowd. With just the two of them left, a hush fell over the audience. Boris flashed a smirk. “And then there were two,” he remarked, playing with the string of his whistle. “The rules are much the same. Eyes closed, fifteen seconds, start on the whistle. This will be the round that decides it — one snitch, two seekers, winner takes it all. Are you ready?”

The two seekers shared a glance, then nodded. They got into position, either side of Boris. Harry shut his eyes, taking several steady breaths to focus himself while Boris counted down, and then on the whistle he was off.

It was different, playing with two instead of four. Easier, honestly; fewer people to keep an eye on in case they saw the snitch. It felt more like a real quidditch match, except he wasn’t having to dodge bludgers — and he’d never played a real match against such a good seeker before.

The pair of them were circling up high, Harry’s eyes darting back and forth as he tried to find the snitch. Minutes passed. Of course the last round wasn’t going to go quickly; it was like the snitch *knew*.

All of a sudden, Viktor dropped into a sharp dive. Harry didn’t hesitate to follow — even though he’d seen Viktor use that tactic before, if there was even the *chance* he was going for the snitch, Harry had to tail him.

He couldn’t see anything as they sped towards the ground, but that didn’t mean Viktor didn’t have it. The grass grew closer and closer, and Harry grinned to himself *He’s going for the Wronski Feint*. He remembered seeing Lynch smash into the ground at the World Cup — Harry wouldn’t do that. He could handle this.

Knowing Krum was just faking him out, Harry used the dive to keep looking for the snitch, unruffled by the ever-nearing ground. He was barely fifteen feet from the grass when he saw it; a glimmer of gold. He’d have to do almost a total 180 when he pulled out of the dive, but he didn’t think Viktor had seen it.

Viktor was holding out until the last second to pull from his dive. Harry didn’t scare that easily. He was neck and neck with the Bulgarian now, Viktor flat on his broom as if he was chasing the snitch, even though Harry knew he couldn’t be. He had to wait — the snitch was closer to Viktor than him. If he pulled out too early, Viktor would see why, and he’d be able to get there first. Harry had to leave it until the very last second.

The grass was even closer. Viktor spared a split second to glance Harry’s way incredulously, then pulled up, shooting back up towards his previous position, convinced Harry was going to hit the dirt. *There*. Harry wrenched his broom level and twisted at the same time, his toes brushing the ground as he narrowly escaped ploughing head-first into it, the G-force dragging against him as he spun around, doing a little roll to take out some of the momentum and then speeding forwards until the snitch was in his hand.

He had done it.

He had beaten *Viktor Krum* at *quidditch*.

Blood was rushing in his ears as he slowed to a halt and stumbled off his broom, almost falling as his knees buckled slightly. Sixteen rounds of hard seeking was finally starting to get to him, and he couldn't *wait* to go sit down somewhere. He grinned, holding the snitch up triumphantly, barely hearing the cheers of the crowd as his racing pulse echoed in his skull.

"We have a winner, folks!" Boris was saying, striding over to Harry's side. He grabbed the hand holding the snitch, thrusting it into the air. "Harry Potter of Hogwarts takes it all! Are you all as surprised as I am?"

The official confirmation seemed to be all it took for the dam to break, and the next thing Harry knew he was being hoisted onto the shoulders of the Weasley twins, the crowd swarming around him excitedly.

"He's only bloody done it!" one of the twins crowed, their arms wrapped around his legs to keep him steady. He could see Cedric beaming in the crowd, Cho by his side applauding wildly. Over by the crestfallen Durmstrang crowd was Draco, pretending to be annoyed, but Harry could see the awe in his eyes.

Eventually the twins set him down, slapping him on the back and beaming at him. "Come up to the common room when you're done here," Fred told him. "We're *definitely* celebrating this. Mate, you just beat Viktor bloody Krum!"

It sounded bizarre when it was said aloud like that. Harry nodded, grateful when the twins herded the crowd back towards the castle, and turned to find Boris and give him the snitch back. The Durmstrang boy was stood beside Viktor, patting him on the shoulder. "That was a tough match," Harry said when he approached, smiling hesitantly at Viktor. He hoped the older boy wasn't too mad about it — he had a reputation to uphold, after all. "You almost had me with that feint there."

"Almost, but not enough," Viktor replied, and he was smiling. "I knew it when I saw you fly against the dragon, but I will say again — you fly very well." He reached out, clapping Harry on the shoulder. "If you are not on your country's team by the time you are my age, it will be a travesty. But when you are, I look forward to flying against you once more."

Harry gaped at him. Was Viktor seriously saying Harry could go pro? Not just pro, but *international*? "I... yeah," he said breathlessly, unsure what else to say to that. "Anytime you want a rematch, I'm there."

Boris plucked the snitch from Harry's fingers, grinning. "That was fun," he declared, tucking it away safely in its box. "And now the team will get off your back about training, Viktor."

"I don't know," Viktor said ruefully, "perhaps now they will be even more on my back, if I can be beaten by a fourteen year-old." He smiled at Harry to show he was teasing. Then he looked down at himself. "I need a shower."

Harry looked at the state of his own robes, and grimaced. Yeah, a shower and new clothes sounded good. How could he get so sweaty in *December*?

“See you at dinner?” The two Durmstrang boys nodded. Viktor paused, holding out a hand for Harry to shake.

“I am serious,” he said, dark eyes fixed on Harry. “You haft talent. If playing professionally is something that interests you, I know people. You should not waste that talent, if it is something you love.” He softened slightly. “I know you may haft other priorities. But we will keep in touch, and if you ever need help, I will be happy to assist.” There was something significant about his words and the look on his face — like he wasn’t just offering Harry help with quidditch. Harry shook his hand, equally serious.

“Thanks, Viktor. I’ll keep that in mind.”

The two boys parted, and Viktor let Boris sling an arm over his shoulder as the two of them made their way back to their ship. Harry shouldered his broom, heading up to the castle alone. At least, he thought he was alone. “Oi, Potter!” The quiet hiss made a grin tug at his lips. Draco was leaning up against the back wall of one of the greenhouses, his cheeks rosy from the cold and his hair slightly windswept. Harry’s heart skipped a beat. *Merlin*, he was gorgeous. “You just had to show off, didn’t you?”

Harry changed course, throwing up a privacy ward as he hurried towards Draco. Giddy from his win and unable to help himself, he grabbed the blond by the hips and spun him around, kissing him firmly. Draco’s arms automatically came up around his neck, chest pressing against Harry’s as he leaned into the kiss. When he pulled back, he made a face. “You’re disgusting right now,” he said, poking at Harry’s sweaty robes. Leaning back against the glass of the greenhouse, he smirked at Harry. “I can’t believe you just beat Viktor Krum.”

“He said I should go professional,” Harry breathed, gobsmacked.

“You certainly could,” Draco agreed. He clearly didn’t care that much about Harry’s sweaty state, as he tugged him closer, sliding a hand down to grab his arse cheekily. “I could do worse than a professional quidditch player for a boyfriend,” he teased. “At least it’ll keep you fit.”

Harry wasn’t sure what hit him harder; the thought of being a pro quidditch player, or the thought of still being Draco’s boyfriend by that time. That Draco didn’t even hesitate to assume they would still be together by then. Unable to find the words, he placed a hand either side of Draco’s head and leaned in for another kiss, moaning softly. “We’re gonna get caught,” Draco muttered between kisses, not slowing down in the slightest. Harry smirked against the blond’s lips.

“Worth it.” Even so, he eventually pulled himself away, still boxing Draco in against the greenhouse glass.

“I suppose you’ve got to go up and celebrate with all your Gryffindor friends,” Draco drawled.

“I’d much rather celebrate with you,” Harry returned. “But also I really want to put on clothes that aren’t sweaty.”

Draco snorted, shaking his head. “Such a romantic,” he teased. “Go on, sod off. If you keep kissing me wearing those, I’m going to find it *very* difficult to concentrate next time Slytherin play Gryffindor.” His grey eyes were dark and his pupils blown, and Harry smirked. So his quidditch robes did it for Draco, hmm? That was a good thing to know.

Feeling daring, still riding high on victory, Harry leaned in until he was pressed against Draco from knee to shoulder — until he could feel Draco’s hardness pressing against his thigh, and there was no way Draco couldn’t feel Harry’s. He let his lips trail over the blond’s jaw, feeling him tense and arch up into the touch ever so slightly. It was tempting to get carried away. They’d never gone past kissing before, except for a few adventuring hands underneath shirts. Certainly nothing like this. Harry was so turned on he could barely *think*, but he had enough blood left in his brain to know that getting too hot and heavy out behind the greenhouses was just asking for trouble.

“Think of this next time we play against each other,” he breathed, sucking a kiss on Draco’s neck that the Slytherin would have to cover with a glamour. Then he pulled away, green eyes glinting playfully. “I’ll see you later, Draco. I’ve got to go take a shower.” A cold, cold shower.

Stepping away as if nothing had happened, he grinned to himself at the frustrated groan Draco let out. “I hate you, Potter!” he called as Harry walked away. The Gryffindor laughed, dropping the privacy ward.

He was having an *excellent* day.

. . .

Luckily, when he got back to Gryffindor Tower, his mussed state could be explained away as quidditch — to everyone except the Weasley twins who were eyeing him knowingly. “Go on, loverboy,” George whispered in his ear, herding him towards the dormitory stairs with a wiggle of his eyebrows. “Go clean yourself up. We’ll stall down here.”

The common room was packed with people; not just Gryffindors, but people of all houses, wanting to celebrate Harry’s victory over the Bulgarian seeker. Even Cassius was there with a couple of his Slytherin friends, only looking a little bit disturbed at being surrounded by so much red and gold.

As tempting as it was to spend more time in the shower thinking about what might have happened if he and Draco had been a little bolder, Harry refused to let his thoughts wander far — the twins could only keep people occupied for so long. He changed into his Holyhead Harpies t-shirt and comfortable jeans, heading back down to the party. Now that he was actually paying attention, he was impressed at how quickly the twins had prepared for the gathering; there was a long table of snacks, no doubt stolen from the kitchens, and a huge stack of butterbeer crates. Music played beneath the chatter of the crowd, and they’d even managed to string some more Christmas decorations up — all in Gryffindor colours, of course.

Harry found the pair sat with an assortment of other sixth years, as well as Neville, Ginny, Ron and Hermione. There was a gap on the sofa between the twins, and Harry squeezed

himself into it. “Cheers,” he said, both for the saved seat and for distracting everyone from wondering what was taking Harry so long. Fred merely winked at him, grinning.

“Where’d you get that t-shirt, Harry?” Ron asked, eyeing the green Harpies shirt over. Harry shrugged.

“Birthday present.” Let them think it was from Sirius.

“I’m glad *someone* here has taste,” Ginny teased, offering Harry a fist-bump. “The Harpies are way better than the Cannons.”

That set Ron off on a long rant about how the Cannons were trying their best with poor management, and Harry rolled his eyes, turning instead to the older students. “Welcome to Gryffindor,” he said to the assorted non-Gryffindors, grinning up at Cho as she returned with several bottles of butterbeer in hand, clambering over the back of the sofa to perch in Cedric’s lap. She handed a bottle to Harry, smiling.

“Oh, I’ve been up here before,” Cassius said offhandedly. “The Christmas decorations are a nice touch, though. Very festive.”

“When have you been up here?” Harry asked with raised eyebrows. The Slytherin’s olive cheeks flushed.

“None of your business, Potter,” he retorted. Harry smirked at him, wondering if it had to do with his mysterious someone. Was Cassius dating a Gryffindor?

“That was some brilliant flying, Harry!” Cho enthused, tapping the neck of her bottle against Harry’s own. “Really impressive!”

“Yeah, I didn’t know you had it in you, Potter!” Patrick, one of Cedric’s roommates, added with a grin. “Bet Krum’ll think twice about challenging people in future.”

Despite definitely being more Cedric’s friends than Harry’s, none of them seemed upset that Harry had so firmly beaten Cedric. Even Cedric himself was grinning, insisting he was proud of himself for even catching the snitch twice. “I was playing well out of my league,” he said, running a hand through his hair. “Both in brooms and in skill. But it was loads of fun!”

“I’ll let you try out my Firebolt sometime,” Harry promised. “You too, Cho, if you want.” The Ravenclaw seeker lit up at that.

While Harry was still getting random people coming up to congratulate him, the party seemed to have changed from a celebration of his victory to an informal Christmas gathering, everyone just enjoying being able to hang out. It made Harry wonder why the school didn’t have some sort of inter-house common room — again, nobody encouraged the houses to mix. It was ridiculous!

The happy atmosphere was abruptly broken when the portrait hole swung open, and McGonagall stepped into the room. She blinked, doing a double-take at the crowd inside. With a wave of her wand, the music cut off, and everyone turned to her with wide eyes. “I

was told of a disruption in the Gryffindor common room,” she declared, tone firm. “What, may I ask, is the meaning of this?”

“Harry beat Viktor Krum at quidditch!” Seamus piped up from the back of the room. McGonagall pursed her lips.

“I am aware. I was present,” she said. “That does not explain why the common room is overrun. This is supposed to be a space for Gryffindors!”

“The school rules say we’re allowed to bring guests, Professor,” Katie Bell pointed out. McGonagall didn’t look impressed.

“One guest, Miss Bell,” she retorted sternly. “One guest per person.”

All of a sudden, the crowd shifted. George reached out to sling an arm around Cassius’ shoulders. Fred put a hand on Cedric’s arm. Harry reached over to grab Cho’s hand. All over the common room, Gryffindors were claiming their non-Gryffindor companions, until everyone was in pairs. Every single guest was accounted for.

McGonagall’s face was tight, her lips a thin line that most people assumed was her trying to stifle her anger. Harry knew better — his housemistress was trying really hard not to smile. “Very well,” she said eventually. “Just keep the noise down. And make sure the password is changed by this evening, Miss Dunn.” The seventh year prefect nodded, smiling with her arm linked with Beatrice Haywood from Hufflepuff.

“Yes, Professor,” she chirped, cheeks dimpled. McGonagall nodded curtly.

“Carry on, then.” She let the music resume and turned on her heel, leaving them to their party. Harry let go of Cho’s hand with a grin.

Perhaps the Gryffindor housemistress wasn’t quite as much under Dumbledore’s thumb as he thought.

.

The day after the now-legendary seeker’s match was Christmas Eve, and Harry was up in the dorm alone, reading quietly before lunch. He was sore after all that flying, and not really in the mood for being down in the crowds after the day before. Peace and quiet was becoming a rare thing, and he’d take what he could get.

Leaning back against his headboard, Harry blinked when a piece of parchment suddenly appeared between the open pages of his book. It was a small note, with only two words in a very familiar handwriting. *Come down.*

What did Snape need him for on Christmas Eve? Harry had assumed the man would be back at Seren Du with Remus. Maybe Remus had come to Hogwarts instead!

Perking up, Harry marked his page and set the book aside, burning the note with a quick spell. Grabbing his presents for the three adults — at the very least he could send Snape off

with the presents for Remus and Sirius — he stowed them in his bag and tugged on his shoes, swinging his invisibility cloak over his shoulders.

The hallways were full of people on the way down to the dungeons, but Harry was a pro at avoiding everyone by now, bobbing and weaving through the students without any of them noticing him. He made it to the empty corridor that held the portrait entrance to Snape's quarters, and knocked. The door opened just wide enough to admit Harry, and once he was inside he took off the invisibility cloak, turning to face the room at large. His jaw dropped, before a huge grin overtook his features. “Sirius!”

His godfather was sat on Snape's sofa, and he got to his feet when Harry appeared, beaming. “Hey, pup! Merry Christmas!” Harry raced across the room and threw himself into the man's arms, a little embarrassed by how happy he was to see Sirius. Summer had been *so long ago*. Sirius kissed his hair, holding him tight. Suddenly, Harry pulled back.

“Is it safe?” he asked, brow furrowing in worry. “What if Dumbledore finds out?”

“Relax, cub,” Remus said from the small kitchen area, where he was pouring a glass of wine. “Dumbledore still doesn't even know that I've been visiting all term; he isn't going to know Sirius is here. It's safe.” Wine in hand, he walked over to wind an arm around Harry's shoulders, squeezing him affectionately. “Merry Christmas. I heard you had quite the quidditch match yesterday.”

“Who told you?”

“I was decorating the steps of the Entrance Hall under Dumbledore's orders,” Snape supplied. “There was a surprisingly good view of the grounds.”

It made Harry smile all the wider to think that Snape had been watching him fly, and then told Remus about it.

“I can't believe you beat Viktor Krum!” Sirius enthused, ruffling Harry's hair. “Amazing, pup!”

Harry blushed, almost saying something about Viktor's insistence he go pro after graduation. It was too early to start making career choices — especially with the way his future was looking. Once there was no longer a Dark Lord out for his blood, or a headmaster trying to manipulate him, then maybe he could think about playing professional quidditch.

“So how have you been, Padfoot? What are you doing here?”

“I'm here to see you, you twit,” Sirius replied with a roll of his eyes. “It's Christmas! Moony managed to persuade Severus to allow a minor Gryffindor invasion for the occasion.” He wiggled his eyebrows, winking at the pair. “He has to stay and chaperone the ball tomorrow, and we figured you'd be busy, so we thought we'd celebrate a day early. Is that alright?”

There was a quiet pop, and Snape's small dining table was suddenly loaded down with food, Ceri stood beside it with a bright grin on her wrinkled face. “Master Harry, sir!” she greeted. “It is good to be seeings you well. You is gettings skinny again,” she added, eyeing him over.

Harry supposed it was probably the stress of the tournament; he'd only forgotten to eat a few times in the last couple of months. "It's good to see you too, Ceri. Did you cook all this?" There was turkey and stuffing and vegetables, fluffy roast potatoes and a huge boat of gravy, even a plate stacked with pigs in blankets. The elf nodded happily.

"Christmas dinner for masters and family," she announced. "Can I be getting anything else?"

"This all looks fantastic, Ceri," Sirius told her. "Thank you."

Ceri beamed once more, then disappeared, and Sirius nudged Harry towards the table. "Go on, pup. Tuck in! You can tell me all about your game yesterday."

The four of them sat at the table, and there was a minor amount of chaos as they all served themselves, passing dishes around and trying not to spill gravy on anyone. When they all had full plates, Sirius cleared his throat. "I won't get too sappy, or Snape might come out in a rash," he said teasingly, "but for a long time, I never thought I'd have this again. Christmas. Love. Family. Yes, even you, you greasy bat," he added, making Snape scowl. "There should be more people at this table, but the world can be cold at times. So I just wanted to thank all of you, for being the warmth in my life." Sirius swallowed a little thickly. Harry wondered how many glasses of wine he'd had already. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas," they all murmured in response, even Snape, lifting their glasses to tap together in the centre of the table. Harry had been allowed a small glass of wine, and the taste was foreign; he must have made a face, as Remus chuckled opposite him.

"It takes some getting used to," he said, drinking from his own, much larger glass.

Harry was gently bullied into recounting the seekers' match as they ate, before conversation turned to other things, always managing to come back around to the Yule Ball. Every time Harry tried to ask about what the adults had been up to — any time he tried to get information about Voldemort and Pettigrew — he was gently brushed off and the subject was quickly changed. He appreciated that they didn't want to talk about such serious things at Christmas, but Harry was desperate for information. He hadn't had any more dreams that he could remember, but every now and then he woke up with his scar aching.

"Time for presents!" Sirius declared once they had thoroughly demolished the chocolate yule log cake Ceri brought in. He urged Harry over to the sofa, bounding after him. Remus and Snape followed at a more sedate pace, Remus looking thoroughly amused by Sirius' enthusiasm. Snape just looked resigned to it all, his shoulder gently pressing against Remus' once they sat down. With a wave of Remus' wand, a pile of wrapped gifts came floating over from a corner of the room, settling on the coffee table. Harry reached into his bag, adding the presents for the adults to the stack.

"Right, Harry first!" Sirius said, tossing a present Harry's way.

"No, let's all open them together," Harry insisted, not wanting all of them staring at him while he opened presents. His birthday had been bad enough! "Here, I got these for you guys." He distributed his presents, smiling shyly at Snape's look of surprise.

“You got me a Christmas present?” the Slytherin asked quietly, eyebrows rising. Harry nodded, keeping his eyes fixed on his hands in his lap as he shredded a scrap of wrapping paper. “I... thank you.”

There was a painfully awkward silence, until Remus cleared his throat. “These books are brilliant, Harry, thank you! Have you read them?” He started talking to Harry about the stack of Defence books in his lap, allowing Snape to open his present without all the attention on him — something that both Harry and the Potions Master appreciated.

By the end of it all, Harry had a small mountain of presents to take back to Gryffindor Tower, and Sirius was just tipsy enough to be singing Christmas carols at the top of his lungs. None of them were willing to tell him to stop — not even Snape. Sirius had been through a lot in the last decade; he deserved a bit of joy at Christmas. Harry merely joined in with the carols he knew, laughing when Sirius drew closer and closer to Remus, shaking him by the shoulders until he was singing with them as well. Even drunk, Sirius knew to leave Snape well alone, and the Slytherin looked like he was regretting many life choices.

“I think I’d best get this lush back home,” Remus said eventually, laughing. “Let you get on with the rest of your Christmas surprise, Harry.”

“There’s more?” Harry asked, eyebrows raised. Remus winked at him.

“I suggest when you’re done here, you head to the Potions classroom,” Snape told him, his face impassive. Harry’s curiosity began to burn; what could possibly be waiting for him in the classroom? Another present?

Sirius threw himself at Harry, making the boy stumble a little as he was wrapped in a tight hug. “Have fun at the Yule Ball,” the dog animagus instructed. “Dance lots, don’t give a damn about Skeeter or any of the reporters, and snog your boyfriend if you get a quiet minute.” He cackled when Harry blushed. “Seriously, kiddo. You’ve been under a lot of stress lately. Just forget it all and enjoy yourself, alright? You deserve it.” He dropped a kiss on Harry’s forehead, ruffling his hair.

“I’ll try,” Harry promised. He turned to hug Remus. “Thanks for coming. And bringing Sirius with you.”

“We couldn’t miss out on family Christmas,” Remus insisted. A lump grew in Harry’s throat. His first ever family Christmas, of a sort. “I’ll see you in the new year, cub. Behave yourself.” That was said with a lopsided smile; Remus knew better than to genuinely expect that of him. Harry grinned.

“I’ll try,” he said again.

“Not very hard, I’m sure,” Snape drawled lightly. Harry turned to the man, even more wrong-footed about him than he had been during the summer. At least there they were away from school and lessons and all the things reminding Harry of his evil Potions professor. Having Snape like this — like *family* — in the middle of the school year was weird to say the least. Just a week before, the man had been yelling at him about his stirring technique.

"I'll see you at the ball tomorrow, Professor," he said eventually, assuming the man would be going back to Seren Du as well. He and Remus hadn't exchanged gifts; they were probably going to do their own private Christmas. Harry didn't want to think about it too much.
"Thanks for hosting this."

"I don't believe I was given a choice," Snape replied, though he didn't look too upset by it.
"Enjoy the rest of your day, Potter."

"You could at least *try* and call me Harry, y'know," Harry replied cheekily, shouldering his bag. "It might not kill you."

"Get out of here, brat." Harry laughed, swinging the invisibility cloak over his shoulders and leaving the man's private quarters.

Harry moved as quickly as he dared under the cloak, heading straight for the Potions room. The door was locked, but a quick *Alohomora* made easy work of it. When Harry slipped in, he let out a quiet gasp.

The room had been utterly transformed. All the desks and chairs had been pushed to the sides of the room, and in the space in the centre was a dark green blanket laid out on the floor, a tiny little Christmas tree in the centre. Floating all around the room were multicoloured little fairy lights, twinkling softly. In the midst of it all, smiling as Harry removed his cloak, was Draco. "I was wondering when you would show up," the Slytherin greeted, sat on the blanket.

"Draco," Harry breathed, looking around in wonder. "This is amazing!"

"Uncle Severus said as long as it's all back to normal by morning, we can stay in here as long as we like," Draco relayed. He wrinkled his nose. "He also said several other things that I wish I could Obliviate from my mind, but I won't traumatiser you by repeating them."

Harry snorted, even as his stomach turned a little bit at the thought of Snape contemplating any part of his potential sex life. He hadn't had a talk from Sirius or Remus yet — he'd managed to avoid that for now by telling Sirius about the book George had given him. With any luck, it would stay that way.

He left his cloak in a pile by the door and joined Draco on the blanket, leaning in for a kiss.
"What's all this for?"

"There's no way the two of us are going to get any time alone in all of tomorrow's chaos," Draco said. "I just wanted to see you. When Severus told me what Remus was planning for today, I thought I'd jump in off the back of it, since you'd already be down in the dungeons." He smiled shyly, running a thumb over Harry's cheekbone. "I have to take my opportunities where I can. Once school starts back up, you'll be in a dozen places at once again."

"I'll still have time for you," Harry insisted.

"But will you have time for this?" Draco retorted, gesturing to the room at large. "We don't have to be anywhere or do anything until curfew. No one but Severus knows we're in here."

Harry's eyes darkened as his brain ran through several ways the evening could play out — all of which were probably things Snape had told Draco not to do. Well, what the Potions Master didn't know couldn't hurt him.

"If I'd known, I would've brought your Christmas present with me," he said sadly, thinking of the wrapped gift hidden in his trunk. Draco smirked.

"I actually had Ceri help me with that one." He gestured to the small tree on the blanket, making Harry realise there were two wrapped gifts beneath it; one of which was his gift for Draco.

"Sneaky snake," Harry murmured, pressing his lips to Draco's with a soft sigh. "Should we open them now?" He was suddenly nervous about his gift, and he didn't want to spend the whole evening worrying about Draco's response to it.

They exchanged gifts and opened them simultaneously, neither wanting the pressure of being stared at while they unwrapped their present. Harry eyed his curiously; it was a palm-sized disc of shiny black stone, engraved with runes all over. He glanced up at Draco, who smiled tentatively. "It's a Meditation Wardstone," the blond explained. "Put it under your pillow, and it'll make it easier for you to meditate before bed — and strengthen your Occlumency shields while you're asleep. I know you've been having those dreams, and I... I thought it would help."

Harry's breath caught in his throat, his gaze turning back to the stone with awe. "That sounds amazing, Draco... this is brilliant." Harry had never heard of such a thing before; they probably weren't common. What lengths had Draco gone to just to get one for him?

Suddenly, his gift to Draco seemed meagre in comparison. "I, uh— Fleur recommended it," he explained, gesturing to the book of French-language spells in Draco's lap. "Apparently there's some more obscure and older spells in there. I know it's not much, but—"

"I love it," Draco insisted, leaning over for a quick kiss. "I can't wait to find something to hex Weasley with — even Granger will never think of a French counter-spell." Harry snickered; the way the pair had been treating him all year, he'd like to see that, too.

Still beaming from his gift, Harry shuffled closer to Draco. "So what's the plan now?" he asked playfully, watching Draco's eyes widen.

"We could play cards," Draco suggested casually, even as his fingers began to creep up towards the hem of Harry's t-shirt.

"Hmm," Harry agreed, running his fingers through Draco's pale hair.

"We could have another dance lesson."

Harry made a face at that, and Draco chuckled. Suddenly, he stretched his leg out and pushed, toppling Harry gently until he was on his back on the blanket, Draco's knees either side of his hips. The blond leaned in close. "We could talk about how hot you looked on your broom

yesterday, and how much of an arse you were to just leave me in that state.” His words came out as a growl, and Harry smirked.

“I thought you liked my arse,” he teased, fingers still twined in the short blond strands at the back of Draco’s head, bringing him in for a kiss. Draco groaned.

“Missing the point, Potter,” he muttered. He lowered himself slowly until he was propped up on his elbows, chest-to-chest with Harry, and both boys gasped as something else connected much lower. Harry wiggled until only one of his legs was between Draco’s, the other bent slightly to keep the taller boy in place as he leaned up into the kiss, sneaking one hand up the back of Draco’s shirt. Draco’s hips rocked down against his, and Harry let out a muffled groan.

“Draco,” he breathed, his pulse pounding wildly. They’d never done much past a little snogging and above-belt groping, and he was near dizzy with how good it all felt. He tugged at the hem of Draco’s shirt. “Can I? Off.”

“You too,” Draco urged, sitting up and pulling off his t-shirt. Harry forgot to breathe for a second. The blond’s skin was pale and flawless, two dusky pink nipples perked on his chest, the ridges of his abs holding a faint dusting of silvery hair that trailed down to the waistband of his trousers. Fuck, he was hot.

Draco’s blush turned out to go all the way down his neck and chest, and he hurriedly pulled at Harry’s t-shirt until the Gryffindor sat up the best he could, trying not to get his glasses tangled in the shirt as it came over his head. It was Draco’s turn to stare.

Harry squirmed, forcing himself not to cover his chest with his arms; the summer at Seren Du had helped, but he was still a little scrawny, with the barest attempt at chest hair just beginning. He was glad for the low light of the classroom, hoping it would be enough that Draco wouldn’t see the scars from his time at the Dursleys. Most of them were on his back, anyway.

“Beautiful,” Draco declared in a whisper, leaning down to kiss Harry, gasping into it as their bare skin pressed together. “Harry, Merlin,” Draco’s hips began to rock more frantically, and Harry matched him, desperate for more friction. It felt amazing, like fireworks against his skin and in his belly, Draco’s lips moving down to suck bruises on his neck, fingers skating up his abs and then down, lower, brushing over the front of Harry’s jeans. Harry moaned, his vision going white as he was overloaded with sensation, coming in his jeans and pressing up against Draco’s fingers. He heard Draco swear softly, bucking his hips a couple more times, and then the blond bit down on his neck to stifle a cry, slumping against him after few moments.

They lay there for several long seconds, breathing heavily, Harry’s fingertips absently tracing the ridges of Draco’s spine. “Wow,” he murmured. Draco shifted a little, tilting his head to look him in the eye.

“If you say that was ‘nice’, I’m going to hit you.”

Harry barked out a laugh. “That was a lot better than nice,” he assured, smirking. “That was... wow.” He’d never done anything like that before. Barely even let himself imagine it. Even without Draco touching him down there, it was still *so much better* than being by himself in the dorm. “Pretty sure that was on Snape’s list of things not to do in here.”

“Ugh, don’t bring my godfather into this,” Draco said with a grimace. He rolled off Harry, but didn’t go far, their shoulders pressed together. “Now I’m all sticky.”

Harry reached for his wand, casting a Cleaning charm over them both. It felt odd on his oversensitive skin, but it was better than the uncomfortable mess cooling in his boxers. He turned his head to the side, looking at Draco, unable to keep the soft smile off his face. The Slytherin looked at him suspiciously.

“Why are you grinning like a loon? Did I break you already?” Harry laughed again, rolling over so he was the one on top this time, pinning Draco’s hands beneath his own and leaning down to kiss the tip of his nose.

“I’m just really happy,” he admitted, uncaring that it made him sound like the sappiest Gryffindor around. He’d had a great day with his family, and now he got to be alone with his boyfriend. It was the best Christmas he’d ever had.

“Gross,” Draco declared, but he was smiling too, tangling his fingers with Harry’s. “You’re going to destroy my reputation one of these days, Potter.”

“Too late, you chose this,” Harry retorted smugly. He shuffled down until he was lying half on top of Draco, head pillowled on the blond’s shoulder. “That’s the thing about Gryffindors; we’re stubborn. You’re stuck with me now.”

Draco sighed, even as his hand curled possessively around Harry’s hip. “So many regrets,” he murmured, making Harry grin.

“Liar.”

.-.-.-.

It took a lot of effort for the pair to pry themselves apart once curfew drew nearer, but eventually they managed it, Harry giving Draco one last long kiss before leaving the blond to set the classroom back to rights, heading up to Gryffindor Tower. He took his cloak off a few corridors away, falling in with all the other students cutting it very close to curfew. He tried to get the stupid smile off his face before he went into the common room, but it was a lost cause. He kept his head down and made a beeline for the stairs up to the boys’ dorms, praying he could get into bed without anyone asking where he’d been.

Luckily, Neville was the only one in the dorm when Harry entered, and the Longbottom heir gave him a once-over, eyebrows raising in suspicion. “I’m not going to interrogate you,” he said eventually. “I’m pretty sure I don’t want to know.”

“You’re the best, Neville,” Harry said sincerely. Neville grinned at him.

"I'm just glad to see you happy." His hazel eyes turned mischievous. "You, uh, might want to learn some glamour charms, though."

Harry's cheeks burned as he slapped a hand to his neck, where he was sure there were several love bites. Damn it, Draco! Neville snickered.

The dormitory door slammed open, and Ron came stomping in with a dark look on his face. "Where have you been?" he asked Harry rudely. Harry resisted the urge to glare.

"None of your business," he replied automatically, his good mood deflating instantly. "I'm going to bed."

He didn't blame Dean and Seamus for hardly ever being in the dorm these days, if this was what Ron was like all the time. Hopefully things would get better after Christmas.

Chapter 28

After the little Christmas celebration with his family (and his boyfriend) the day before, Christmas Day itself was somewhat underwhelming for Harry, though he did appreciate the visit from Dobby, managing to find a pair of Uncle Vernon's socks to gift the elf. Ron was in a foul mood, but Harry was happy to leave him to it, heading down to breakfast with the other three boys from his dorm. They chatted excitedly about the evening's plans. The rumour going around the school was that the Weird Sisters had been booked for it, and Harry — who had gotten into the habit of putting his Wireless on in the background while he read in the dorm — was hoping it was true.

"Still can't believe you're going with Susan Bones, Harry," Seamus said with a shake of his head. "Now there's a girl with some serious curves." He made a lewd gesture at chest-height to emphasise his point, wiggling his eyebrows.

Harry hadn't really noticed, and he shrugged awkwardly. "She's nice," he said. "And she doesn't mind having to dance in front of everybody." He had assured her that he'd had lessons, and wasn't going to make a fool of either of them. Susan was being very trusting in taking his word for it. "Besides, Lavender's pretty too."

"Don't know how I managed that one," Seamus agreed. "Thought for sure she'd go with that Slytherin bloke in the year above, but I figured I might as well chance it." He smirked wickedly. "She's been all secretive about her dress robes, won't tell me what they look like. I'm just wondering if I'll get to see what she's got underneath them!" He chuckled, and Dean punched him in the arm.

"Not if she hears you talking about her like that, you won't," he scolded. Seamus shrugged.

"You can't say you're not hoping for a little private goodnight with Lisa," he teased, speaking of Dean's Ravenclaw date, Lisa Turpin. The dark-skinned boy ducked his head sheepishly.

"I mean, I won't say *no*," he drawled, earning a laugh and a punch from Seamus.

"Exactly! What about you two, eh? Gonna sneak your dates off into the courtyard to hide in the bushes?" Seamus wiggled his eyebrows, and Harry made a face.

"Susan and I are just friends," he said for what felt like the hundredth time.

"Ginny has way too many older brothers around for me to even *think* about anything like that," Neville piped up fearfully. Dean winced.

"Yeah, mate, you don't wanna get on the wrong side of the twins. Not with all that stuff they've been inventing lately." The twins were loving having everyone at school for the holidays; plenty of unsuspecting people around to test their inventions on. Everyone in Gryffindor had learnt to be very wary of accepting food from others.

The conversation turned less crude as they strode in to breakfast, Harry smirking when he saw Snape was conspicuously absent from the head table. Dean and Seamus broke off to go sit with Parvati and Lavender, while Harry and Neville wandered towards the twins.

“Morning, boys!” the redheads greeted, shuffling down to make room. “Merry Christmas!”

“Merry Christmas,” Harry replied. “Thanks for the present!” They’d given him a selection box of some of their latest inventions, with a note encouraging him to use them on their youngest brother when he was being a prat.

“You too, mate!” George said, grinning. Harry’s present for the twins was a voucher for Slug and Jigger’s apothecary, as he knew how many potion ingredients they went through making their products and pranks.

“All set for the ball, are we?” Fred asked, passing the orange juice Harry’s way. “Ready to dance your little socks off in front of everyone, champion?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” Harry said, shrugging. “I figured once the first dance is out of the way, it won’t be so bad.” Professor McGonagall had promised him that the champions only had to open the dance by themselves; one song, and then everyone else would be dancing and he didn’t have to step foot on the dance floor again if he hated it. He didn’t think Susan would let him get away with that, but it was a nice hope.

A thought occurred to Harry, and he turned to George. “Who are you going to the ball with?” he asked, realising he had no idea. He’d seen Fred ask Angelina, but George had been surprisingly quiet on the matter.

George’s face turned almost as red as his hair, and Fred’s lit up in a grin. “Our dear brother is crossing enemy lines,” he teased. “Going with that bloke from Durmstrang, the one who reffed your quidditch match.”

“Boris?” Harry checked, humming thoughtfully. The Durmstrang boy was very handsome, and he seemed to have enough of a sense of humour to keep up with George for a night. “Nice one, well done.” George grinned, though he was still pink.

“Figured I’d do my bit for international cooperation.”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll be *cooperating* with him plenty,” Fred ribbed, nudging his brother in the side.

“Is it true you got asked by Adrian Pucey?” Neville cut in, not batting an eyelash at the news that George was going with another boy. George snorted.

“Yeah. Probably would’ve said yes if I hadn’t asked Boris already,” he admitted. “Felt a bit bad about turning him down, actually.”

Harry opened his mouth to argue instinctively, then shut it again; Pucey had never actually attempted to foul anyone on the Gryffindor team when they played one another, unlike most of the rest of his team. Even Draco. Harry certainly had no room to judge there. He remembered what George said about Slytherins being attractive, and wondered if the Weasley

had a type. “I thought you said you didn’t like pretty,” he said thoughtlessly, and George smirked.

“I said I don’t like the same kind of pretty *you* do. Adrian’s not pretty, he’s just got cheekbones.”

Neville gave Harry a bit of an odd look at that, and Harry’s stomach squirmed. He *really* had to tell Neville soon.

After breakfast they went back up to Gryffindor Tower, where the twins attempted to cheer Ron up a bit with several games of exploding snap. That didn’t really work, but the youngest Weasley brother did perk up when they went down for Christmas lunch. The tables were groaning with the weight of all the food, Christmas crackers exploding all over the hall, everyone talking and laughing and excited for the evening to come. They were all kicked out of the hall as soon as lunch was over, so the house elves could re-decorate for the ball, and Fred and George managed to gather a crowd for a snowball fight out in the grounds.

What started out as Hogwarts VS the other schools soon turned into a chaotic free-for-all as alliances were formed and broken, and sacrifices were made. Hermione had intended to just watch, but that went out of the window when one of Viktor’s snowballs ‘accidentally’ went wide and hit her in the shoulder. Harry laughed as a flick of Hermione’s wand had a whole host of snowballs chasing after the Bulgarian.

“Harry, duck!” He followed the instruction instinctively, looking up just in time to see Blaise Zabini get hit square in the face with a snowball. Harry hadn’t even realised Blaise was out there with them. The Slytherin boy scowled, looking for his attacker — Cassius, hiding behind a snow bank Cedric and Cho had built and then been promptly run out of.

“You’re dead, Warrington,” Blaise declared, sprinting away from Daphne’s side and reaching down into the snow.

As the evening drew on and the ball grew ever closer, people slowly began to abandon the snowball fight in favour of getting ready. Ron seemed utterly baffled when Hermione declared she was heading up to her room at five, and even more bewildered when several other girls followed. “How can it take them three hours to get dressed?” he asked, and Harry sighed, sharing an amused look with Ginny.

“You don’t understand girls at all, do you?” the redhead girl said sadly. She hopped to her feet, sending one last snowball careening towards George. “I’m off, I’ll see you boys later. Ron, don’t lose track of time; you’re supposed to meet Luna in the Entrance Hall at quarter-to.” She still didn’t seem thrilled at letting her best friend go to the ball with her brother, but Luna was so excited to get the chance to go at all Ginny wisely kept her mouth shut. Harry suspected she was just waiting for Ron to do something to give her the excuse to hex him.

By six, it was getting too dark to properly see where snowballs were coming from, so the remaining fighters called it even and went back into the castle after a few Drying charms, disappearing off to their respective common rooms. The closer he got to Gryffindor Tower, the more Harry started to feel his nerves. “What if I freeze up?” he fretted. “What if I trip and

fall over in front of everyone and Susan hates me and never speaks to me again and I've ruined everything?"

Neville snorted. "Susan wouldn't let you fall over," he assured. "She'd hex you into dancing properly before it got to that." Harry didn't think that sounded like too bad a deal, and he said as much, making Seamus laugh.

"You'll be fine, mate," the Irish boy insisted. "Just don't stare at her tits and you'll be grand." Dean thwacked him over the back of the head.

Harry doubted that was going to be a problem for him, but kept that to himself.

His dress robes were folded neatly in his trunk, and Harry got them out, finding the shirt and trousers that went under them. The shirt was a tunic-style shirt in a muted gold colour, with a high collar and shiny gold buttons down the front. The trousers were so dark green they were almost black, close-fitting without feeling uncomfortably tight. They were surprisingly comfortable, and Harry looked himself in the mirror before he put the robes on over them. He'd chosen that particular shirt because it was vaguely Indian-inspired, and it took his breath away to see himself in it. He'd never worn anything remotely like it before — he'd worried he'd look silly, but it actually looked good!

Shrugging into the robes and buttoning up the front, he turned back to the mirror for the full effect. The robes were a dark emerald green, with gold embroidery around the cuffs and hem that was also Indian-inspired, to go with the shirt.

"Wow, Harry!" Seamus' appreciative whistle cut into his daze, and Harry blushed. The other Gryffindor wore light blue dress robes with a bright purple shirt beneath them.

"It's not too much?" Harry asked, unused to wizarding clothing at all, let alone formal wear.

"You look great," Neville insisted quietly from where he was buttoning up his own robes. They were much more traditional in style, a dark red colour that made his hazel eyes glow. It made him look older, and surprisingly handsome. Ginny was a lucky girl.

Harry told him as much, watching the boy's ears turn almost as red as his robes. Across the room, there was a low curse.

Ron was stood in the middle of the dorm, staring at himself in the mirror with a look of utter disgust on his face. Harry tried not to laugh. His dress robes did look awful. Harry wondered how much he was regretting not taking Bill's old set. "I can't go out like this," Ron groaned. "I'll be the laughing stock of the school!"

"It's not that bad," Dean attempted, keeping a remarkably straight face. Ron glared at him.

"It's hideous! Look at this lace!" The robes didn't look much better on than they did on the hanger, like Ginny had laughingly assured her brother they would. They weren't terrible by themselves — old fashioned, sure, but not the worst — but the fraying lace... it wasn't a good look.

“Come here a second,” Harry said, taking pity on the redhead. Luna would have a terrible time if her date was scowling and sulking all night.

A few Cutting charms later, and there was a... marginal improvement. Harry managed to get rid of the lace, but there were a few frayed edges, and he could do nothing about the old-fashioned style of the robes themselves. For Ron, it wasn’t enough. “I look ridiculous,” he muttered, scowling at his reflection. Harry shrugged.

“Well, I tried,” he said, heading back towards his own bed. Sirius had given him some hair potion that he insisted would tame the wild Potter hair — James swore by it, apparently. Harry was determined to at least *try*.

Twenty minutes later, Harry hardly recognised his own reflection. With a comb, the potion, and a little help from Dean, Harry’s hair was more ‘tastefully mussed’ than ‘dragged through a hedge backwards’. It was by no means neat — Harry thought that was asking far too much — but it was better.

“I think we’re ready,” Neville declared, appearing at Harry’s shoulder. “Even if we’re not, we have to go. McGonagall will kill you if you’re late.”

He had a point, so Harry bid the rest of his roommates goodbye and followed Neville down to the common room. Ginny was waiting, and the sight of her made Neville almost trip down the stairs. Harry steadied him, grinning.

The Weasley girl was in pastel blue dress robes with a sweetheart neckline, the cap sleeves made out of floaty sheer blue material. There was a gold pendant in the hollow of her throat, and her fiery hair was half-up in an elaborate braid, the rest hanging straight down her back. She had make-up on for the first time Harry had ever seen, her brown eyes sparkling as she turned to look at Neville. “Hi,” she greeted shyly, hands behind her back.

“Hi.” Neville’s voice was a little breathless, and he coughed. “You look really pretty, Ginny.” She grinned, giving a little twirl.

“Thanks! You look great. You too, Harry — I like the hair!”

Harry resisted the urge to run a hand through his hair, undoing all of his and Dean’s hard work. “Thanks, Gin. I’d better go meet Susan, but I’ll see you two at the ball?” He nudged Neville closer to Ginny, clapping him on the shoulder. “Look after her.” He leaned in, kissing Ginny’s cheek. “Look after him.” Then, with a wink, he was hurrying out of the common room.

He’d agreed to meet Susan on the stairs by the Entrance Hall, and he sped past several people in dress robes on their way to meet their own dates. When he caught sight of her, he grinned. Her dress robes were a deep burnished gold colour, tight below her bust and flaring out over the curve of her stomach and the width of her hips. They shimmered in the candlelight, the full skirt trailing all the way down to the floor, and glittering beads embroidered on like constellations. Her hair was pinned up like a bright copper waterfall, and the earrings Harry had given her for Christmas sparkled at her ears. “Not bad, Potter,” she said by way of greeting, eyeing him up and down. “I think I can handle being seen with you tonight.”

"So glad to hear it," Harry replied dryly. "You look beautiful, by the way." If he was remotely interested in girls, he'd probably be having some very confusing feelings right about now. "Shall we?" He offered an arm, and she looped hers through it, falling into step beside him to go find McGonagall and the rest of the champions.

They found them outside the main doors to the Great Hall, gathered in a small cluster, and Cho let out a playful wolf-whistle when Harry approached. "Don't you two clean up nicely!"

She had Cedric's hand in hers, and was wearing gorgeous blue and silver dress robes that were definitely East Asian in style, her hair pinned up with a pair of silver hair sticks. Cedrics's dark blue dress robes were simple but impeccably tailored, and looking at him made Harry's pulse tick up a little.

Beside them were Fleur and Cassius — Fleur looked every inch of her veela heritage in silver satin dress robes with a bodice that hugged her curves and flared out at the waist, her hair hanging loose and needle-straight like a curtain of silk. Cassius' slate grey robes had a slight sheen to the material that complimented Fleur's robes nicely, and beneath that he had a dark green shirt that was open a little at the collar. His dark hair was combed perfectly, and Harry's heart fluttered when the Slytherin smiled at him. How had he ended up surrounded by so many damned attractive people??

"You all look amazing!" he enthused. "Where's Viktor?"

"Over zere, waiting for 'is date," Fleur supplied, pointing across the hall. Viktor stood at the base of the stairs, wearing red dress robes with fur trim. He looked a little uncomfortable in such formal attire, but he was still distractingly handsome. He caught sight of something — or rather someone — that made him stand a little straighter, offering his arm out with a smile. Harry gaped at the girl who took it.

Hermione didn't look like herself *at all*. She wore dress robes of a floaty periwinkle blue material that shimmered with every movement, standing out against her dark brown skin, and her hair was sleek and straight, done in a very complex-looking up-do that made her look far older than fifteen. She was beaming, showing off her newly-corrected teeth, her lips painted a rosy pink and her pale blue eyeshadow glittering in the low light of the hall. Viktor bowed over her hand and kissed it, then tucked her arm through his own and walked her towards the group, looking *very* pleased with himself. Harry had to admit, Hermione looked stunning.

"Hi Harry, Susan," she greeted, smiling widely. "You look great!"

All Susan seemed to be able to do was stare. Harry grinned back at his friend. "You look beautiful, Hermione. Viktor, you behave yourself, alright?" he added mock-threateningly, making the Bulgarian laugh.

"I haff no doubt Hermy-own will hex me if I put a foot wrong," he pointed out. He still struggled to say Hermione's name, but she certainly didn't seem to mind.

McGonagall arrived in robes of red tartan, surveying them all with a look of mild pride. "Excellent, you're all here. Are you ready?"

They got in line, Harry at the back with Susan's arm in his, and followed the deputy headmistress into the hall.

The house elves had outdone themselves with the decorations; it was hardly recognisable as the same hall they'd had lunch in, looking like a veritable winter wonderland. Harry was glad the house tables had been exchanged for smaller, round tables, with a main table up at the head of the room where the judges sat, empty seats available for the champions. Harry's eyebrows rose when he saw Percy Weasley sat where Mr Crouch should be, wearing navy blue dress robes that looked brand new. What was he doing there?

As they positioned themselves on the dance floor, Harry let his eyes sweep the crowd for a minute. Ron was staring at Hermione like he'd never seen her before, and even Ginny — who *definitely* knew who Hermione's date was before tonight — looked stunned. Far away from them, with Pansy Parkinson on his arm in a set of frilly pale pink dress robes, was Draco. Wearing black velvet dress robes that hugged his chest and shoulders, and made Harry immediately want to rip them off the blond boy. How *dare* he look that good when they were in public and Harry had to pretend to hate him?

Susan cleared her throat to get his attention, setting his hand on her waist. "You promised me you'd be good at this, Potter," she reminded him, her gaze sharp. Harry smiled at her.

"Don't worry, I've got this."

The music started, and they were off.

Draco had been right that Susan would be much taller than him in her heels, but it didn't bother Harry in the slightest as they stepped and spun. He saw the faint look of surprise on her face as he turned out to be fairly capable, before it was replaced by an exhilarated grin; Susan clearly *loved* dancing. Harry definitely wasn't going to get away with just dancing once. He didn't mind that so much — he was having fun, too.

The first song ended, and after a short round of applause the second one began, the dance floor filling with people. "Who taught you?" Susan asked suspiciously, settling into an easier waltz. "You're better than I thought you'd be."

Harry thought of late nights in empty classrooms with Draco's hand in his, going over the steps again and again, rewarding him with kisses every time he managed to get it right. He grinned to himself.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

.-. .

There were only a handful of dances before it was widely suggested that everybody sit down and eat, and Harry found himself gently herded off the dance floor and up to the top table with the rest of the champions and their partners. He ended up sat next to Percy Weasley, who was oozing with pride. "I got promoted," he declared as soon as Harry sat down. "I'm now Mr Crouch's personal assistant, and I'm here representing him."

"Congratulations," Harry replied agreeably, glad Percy seemed to be doing well at work. He was a bit of a smug git, but he wasn't all bad. Certainly not Harry's least favourite Weasley sibling at the current moment in time.

Speaking of, Harry could see Ron sat with Luna, Ginny and Neville a few tables away. He was entirely ignoring them, too busy glaring at Viktor Krum. It made Harry sigh to himself; that was an explosion he'd *love* to avoid.

Dinner was surprisingly enjoyable, despite the judges' presence at their table. Harry spent most of it talking to Susan, Fleur and Cassius, as they were sat on Susan's other side. "We've really managed to do well for school representation here," Susan remarked at one point. "One from each of the foreign schools, and at least one from every Hogwarts house. Was that on purpose?"

Harry refused to admit that getting Cassius to go with Fleur had been partly because he was a Slytherin, insisting that it just happened to work out that way. He just hadn't wanted the snake house to get left out.

Susan barely let him sit and digest his food before they were back out on the dance floor, but she didn't stay in his arms for long. "Mind if we trade?" It was Cedric and Cho, waltzing effortlessly towards them, and before Harry knew it he had Cho in his arms, and Susan was off into the crowd with Cedric. Cho giggled, adjusting Harry's hold and nudging him into action.

That started a series of mid-dance partner changes, until Harry had danced with every single one of the champions and their dates, as well as Ginny, Neville, both the Weasley twins, Anthony Goldstein, both Patil twins, Luna, Daphne Greengrass, and at one point Professor McGonagall, who looked equally confused as to how she ended up there. "I hope you're not considering asking Professor Snape to dance," she said with a dubious look towards the dark-haired Slytherin, who was lurking in the back corner of the room, looking surprisingly handsome in jet black dress robes. Harry hoped Remus got to see him in the robes before the night was through, if he hadn't already.

"Don't worry, Professor," Harry assured with a grin as they twirled through the crowd. "Contrary to popular belief, I don't *actually* have a death wish." That drew a reluctant chuckle from the professor, and when the music ended Harry released her with an over-the-top bow. She shook her head exasperatedly.

"Just like your father," she muttered, fondness creeping into her tone. "Stay out of trouble, Potter."

Harry saluted with a laugh, then turned away to head to the table, his legs starting to ache from all the dancing. He reached for his glass of water and drained it thirstily. Within a few moments, Luna appeared beside him, stealing Susan's seat. "Hello, Harry," she said airily, smiling. Her dress robes were a pretty lavender colour, with strange creatures embroidered on them. Her earrings looked to be made of tiny purple feathers. "Lovely night, isn't it?"

"Brilliant," he agreed, surprised at how much fun he was having. "Where's Ron?"

“Oh, he wasn’t much for dancing, so I left him over there,” Luna replied, gesturing to the other side of the dance floor. Harry could just make out Ron sat alone at a table, scowling into his glass of pumpkin juice. Served him right.

“Probably for the best,” Harry said, gaze scanning the crowded dance floor. Susan was with Ernie, laughing as they waltzed together. Harry’s chest gave a little twinge at the sight of Draco and Millicent dancing together, the shy girl looking pretty in black and silver dress robes. Draco was smirking, the collar of his robe undone a couple of buttons. He was so handsome it physically hurt Harry to look at him. He tore his gaze away, smiling to see the twins messing with Boris, switching partners with him and Angelina so quickly it was hard for him to figure out which twin he was dancing with. Angelina was laughing so hard she could barely stand up straight, which was just making the whole affair even more entertaining.

“I think they’re about to change bands soon,” Luna commented absently, her eyes on the string quartet currently playing. Harry raised an eyebrow.

“Bands?”

“Oh, yes. It won’t be formal dancing for the whole night. I rather think everyone’s had about enough of that. The Weird Sisters will be playing soon.” It was said with a strange sort of confidence that Harry noticed Luna had only sometimes, but she was never wrong when she did. Ginny had wondered if Luna was some sort of Seer, and Harry was starting to think she might not be too far off the mark.

“Really? Brilliant!” Harry was even less prepared for informal dancing than he had been for the formal stuff, but it couldn’t be too hard to figure out.

Sure enough, the quartet announced their final song, and Susan retrieved Harry from the table to drag him back out there. “You holding up alright?” she asked in concern, and he grinned.

“Better than I thought I would be,” he admitted. “But looking forward to something a little less stuffy.” Susan nodded in agreement, and when the song ended, she offered him a low curtsey.

“It’s been a pleasure, Heir Potter,” she said quietly, grinning. He bowed in return.

“The pleasure has been all mine, Heir Bones.” He paused, side-eyeing her. “But you’ll still dance with me to the Weird Sisters, right?”

Susan laughed, linking her arm through his as they headed back to their table. “Yes, I’ll still dance with you,” she promised, patting his hand.

All the champions returned to the tables, and Viktor and Cassius volunteered to go retrieve drinks from the bar, which was serving things more interesting than water or pumpkin juice. Nothing alcoholic of course, but brightly coloured fruity drinks that fizzed and smoked.

“Having fun?” Harry asked Hermione, who had been beaming so wide all night her face had to be hurting.

“The *best* time,” she said with a giggle. “Harry, this is ridiculous! I’m here in this castle wearing this amazing dress and dancing with an *international quidditch star*. It’s like something out of a movie!”

Harry laughed, glad she was enjoying herself. Maybe it would ease some of the tension between them. As long as she didn’t think too hard about Ron.

Accepting something bright green and bubbling from Cassius, Harry took a hesitant sip to find it was sweet and tasted of apples. “Not bad!”

The Slytherin stole the drink from Harry’s hand, taking a sip with a contemplative look. “Not as good as mine, you can keep it,” he declared eventually, holding up his neon blue drink. Harry snorted.

“Gee, thanks.”

Susan stole Harry’s drink next, offering her own violently pink concoction in return. Harry shrugged, sipping and getting hit with a blast of cherry. “That’s really good, actually,” he said as he offered it back to Susan, who shook her head.

“I’m keeping yours,” she told him. “You can have that one.”

Harry shrugged, and kept drinking.

As Luna had promised, after a fifteen minute interlude in which people got drinks, chatted and rested their feet, the Weird Sisters arrived on stage, and the students went wild. Harry was amused to see most of the adults had retreated to the back of the room; far enough away to still be chaperoning, but well out of the throng of screaming teenagers.

Harry looked around to see the others had all finished their drinks, and met Fleur’s eye. She was smirking, surveying the group. “Let’s dance.”

They headed onto the dance floor, easily finding a group of familiar faces; Neville and Ginny, the twins and their dates, and Luna. Ron was still nowhere near the dance floor. Harry didn’t even know if he was still in the room. “There you are, mate!” George cheered, his hand in Boris’ and his lips already kiss-swollen. That explained where those two had disappeared off to during the interlude.

The first song started up to a riot of screaming, and Harry soon discovered that informal dancing was mostly a lot of jumping around and shaking your hips, with the occasional ridiculous overdramatic dance move thrown in — usually courtesy of the Weasley twins. It wasn’t a partner type of dance, so Harry was in the middle of a crowd of people, grinning as Susan shimmied up beside him.

He was having the time of his life!

At one point, Susan was stolen for a while by her fellow Hufflepuffs, but she returned quickly with them and their dates in tow. Harry happily shuffled back to make room for the new additions, and was surprised when Blaise and Daphne joined them, dragging Millicent

Bulstrode and Theodore Nott along with them. For a brief moment, Harry was hopeful Draco might join them, but he pushed the thought away; whatever strides they'd been making towards house unity, there was no way Draco could be seen fraternising with Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs. His father would kill him. Harry was even surprised Nott was there — from what he knew, the boy's father was pretty strict about blood purity, and had been one of Voldemort's most devoted followers.

Sure enough, Draco and Pansy were across the room with a group of older Slytherins and Durmstrang students. Harry spotted Adrian Pucey getting rather cosy with a boy from Beauxbatons; clearly not *too* upset about George turning him down.

A hand tugged on his arm, and Cho nudged him into a dance hold that was *very* different from the waltz, laughing at the look on his face. "Loosen up, Harry!" she teased, placing her hands on his hips and forcing them to move to the beat. Harry's cheeks were burning, especially when Cedric wolf-whistled.

"Your girlfriend is manhandling me, Diggory!" Harry called. "Aren't you going to do something about it?"

"I could always manhandle you instead?" Cedric offered, laughing when Harry's face went even redder.

After a couple of minutes Cho seemed satisfied with his dancing and retreated back to Cedric's side, holding him in a much more comfortable — and more inappropriate — way than she'd been holding Harry.

Fred sidled up to Harry, dancing all the while, and opened his robes to reveal a plain silver flask in the inside pocket. "Firewhisky?" he offered with a smirk. Harry glanced around, then shrugged; fuck it, he was fourteen and probably going to die by the end of the year if this bloody tournament had its way. He reached into Fred's robes, flipping the lid on the flask and taking a swig, coughing as it burned his throat on the way down. Fred pat him on the back, chuckling. "That's my boy! Let me know if you want more, I've got plenty."

Fred moved off to go dance between Angelina and Lee, and Harry wondered how many other people had been drinking from the flask that night. Then he decided he didn't care, and kept on dancing.

.-. .

Harry's limbs were aching and his head was pounding along with the bass of the music, but he didn't care one bit as he danced, spinning Hermione around with a grin. She was an entirely different person tonight, and it made Harry's heart ache at the cracks in his friendship — cracks he was starting to think were irreparable. Dancing with her, laughing with her and Viktor, it felt... disjointed. Like they were once friends, and they were slipping back into what they used to be, but it didn't quite match up with the people they were now. He suspected Hermione could feel it too; every now and then he caught her looking at him with something sad and knowing in her gaze.

It was nearing eleven, but the band was showing no signs of stopping. Many of the students had gone to bed — or gone off to find a secluded corner of the castle — but there was still a good number of them out dancing. Harry was wedged between Ginny and Luna doing a move that looked like something he'd seen in 70s music videos when he was yanked back towards the Weasley twins, the two girls shrugging and merely grabbing Neville in Harry's place. Harry's brow furrowed when Fred and George started to slowly move him away from the dancing crowd. "What's the matter?"

"Courtyard, west corner, behind the rose bush," George whispered in his ear, shoving him towards the doors. "You can thank us later!"

Utterly perplexed, Harry stepped out into the courtyard, shivering a little at the evening air after being in the huddle of dancers for so long. There were couples dotted around the places, some poorly-hidden in rose bushes while others were making no attempt to hide at all. He raised an eyebrow at Seamus and Lavender, sat on a bench with hands in some very inappropriate places for being in public. Edging around them, he hurried to the west corner, hesitantly approaching the rose bush. A hand whipped out, grabbing him by the lapel and tugging.

A familiar voice muttered a Privacy charm, and Harry relaxed instantly, barely having a second to register the company before lips were pressed frantically against his own. "You're going to kill me, Potter," Draco breathed, hands sliding into Harry's robes and around to the small of his back. "You in those *bloody* dress robes."

"Like you can talk," Harry muttered, trying to figure out how to get hands on skin as quickly as possible. Draco's robes had so many *fucking* buttons. "I've been wanting to do this all night."

Harry lost track of the amount of time they stood there kissing passionately, but they never let it get further than that, despite Harry's hand on Draco's velvet-covered arse and Draco's up the back of Harry's shirt. Neither of them wanted to risk doing anything more in such a public place; it was dangerous enough just being near each other. "We're dead if we get caught," Harry said eventually, resting his forehead on Draco's collarbone, sliding his hand up to the blond's hip.

"Worth it," Draco declared, making Harry smile. "Have a little faith in my wandwork, Potter. We won't get caught."

"Oh, I'm sure your *wandwork* is exemplary," Harry drawled quietly, green eyes bright. "But I don't think that's something you want to show me right now."

Draco's pale cheeks went pink, and he cleared his throat, trying to put a little bit of distance between them so they could calm down. He didn't get very far. "I see all your dance lessons paid off," he said eventually, breathing a little steadier. "You seemed to be a hit."

"All thanks to you," Harry said, playing with Draco's hair. "I still wish I could have danced with you, though."

“Why can’t you?” Draco returned, shifting his grip on Harry until they were in dance hold.
“May I?”

Harry’s laugh was breathless as he took Draco’s hand in his own, meeting amused silver-grey eyes. “I suppose.”

They didn’t need music, swaying with each other to a rhythm Draco hummed softly. It was by no means proper waltzing, more just the sort of side-to-side shuffle people did when slow songs came on, but it was perfect. Draco tilted his head down and pulled Harry closer, until his lips pressed against Harry’s forehead.

Harry could’ve stayed there for hours, in Draco’s arms in the tiny bit of space behind the rose bush, the rest of the world falling away as they swayed gently. Eventually, Draco stopped humming and stepped back a little, bringing Harry’s hand to his lips and kissing the knuckles. “Thank you.”

“Thank you,” Harry returned, smiling shyly. “How did you get the twins to get me out here?”

“Easy,” Draco replied with a shrug. “I told them I wanted to snog you, and I’d be waiting out here until I did. They were remarkably obliging. I think they actually don’t hate me.”

“They don’t.” Harry hadn’t properly introduced the twins and Draco yet, but they were the only two people at school who knew the truth about the relationship; and therefore the only people he could gush about Draco to. There were just some things he wasn’t comfortable talking about with Sirius. “They know you make me happy, and that’s all they care about.” The twins were some of the few people who trusted Harry’s judgement without question. If he said Draco was a good guy, then they were on board with it. It was refreshing not to be second-guessed.

“Oh.” Draco’s lips curled at the corners in a reluctant smile. Harry was pretty sure Draco would like the twins, too, given the chance.

The pair stayed behind the rose bush for a little longer, just holding each other and occasionally exchanging kisses, before Harry sighed. “I should go before someone notices I’m missing.”

“Yes, I suppose I should go say goodnight to Pansy,” Draco sighed. Harry, remembering Seamus’ talk of ‘private goodnights’, scowled. “Oh, don’t look at me like that,” Draco chided. “I mean literally say goodnight, walk her back to Slytherin and make sure she gets to bed okay. I told you, she’s not interested in any of that. And I’m certainly not interested in her.”

Harry offered a sheepish smile in apology. “I just hate that *I* can’t be the one you say goodnight to.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s what I’m doing right now,” Draco replied amusedly. Harry huffed; the Slytherin had a point.

With one last kiss, they agreed to part ways, Harry going first to avoid suspicion. He glanced around the rose bush, then stepped out from behind it, intending to get back on the path and head inside. Instead, he walked straight into Professor Snape. “Potter,” Snape drawled, his eyes flicking from Harry to the rose bush and back again. His face turned exasperated, and he pinched the bridge of his nose. “For Merlin’s sake, learn some discretion.”

Harry grinned, turning to walk away. “And ten points from Gryffindor!” Snape called after him. He heard the man muttering as he walked in the opposite direction, blasting a rose bush with a spell to reveal a pair of Ravenclaw sixth years in a passionate embrace. “Twenty points from Ravenclaw!”

Harry chuckled quietly; at least Snape was having fun.

He heard raised voices when he reached the Entrance Hall, and grimaced when he got close enough to recognise them.

“You’re fraternising with the enemy!”

“The *enemy*? You’re the one who’s got a bloody figurine of him in your bedroom!”

“He’s just using you to get closer to Harry!”

“He’s better friends with Harry than he is with me!”

Ron and Hermione were stood at the bottom of the stairs, Hermione’s eyes red with tears. Ron was glaring at her. “You can’t trust him, Hermione. He’s from Durmstrang.”

“Ugh!” Hermione’s noise of frustration echoed through the hall. “If you don’t like it, you know what the solution is!”

“Oh yeah, what’s that?”

“Next time there’s a ball, ask me before someone else does, and not as a last resort!”
Hermione whipped around, startling at the sight of Harry. “Harry. Where have you been?”

“Needed some air. You coming back in?” He jerked his head back towards the Great Hall, and Hermione glanced at Ron for a moment, then nodded decisively.

“Let’s go.” She ignored Ron as she looped an arm through Harry’s, heading back into the hall.

“Ignore him,” Harry murmured. “He’s a jealous git who doesn’t deserve you. Go back to Viktor.” The Durmstrang champion was dancing with Fleur and Cho, and looked delighted to see Hermione had returned, then immediately concerned when he noticed her crying. Hermione sniffed, carefully wiping at her eyes without smearing her make-up.

“Thanks, Harry.” She strode over to Viktor, waving his concerns off and dragging him back to dance.

Harry slipped back into the group, the music still blasting. “Where’ve you been?” Susan demanded, eyeing him over critically. “Nope, nope, changed my mind, don’t want to know. You’re a disgrace, Potter.” Her eyes were teasing, and she took him by the hand to pull him into a dance.

Some time after, there was a loud groan when the band announced the next one would be the final song, but as much as Harry didn’t want the night to end, he was also desperate to go to bed. He was going to ache *so much* in the morning.

At last the music came to an end, and Harry’s ears rang in the silence that followed. “Alright, you lot,” Cedric declared, his arm around Cho’s waist. “Get to bed. Prefect’s orders.” He winked.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. Are you in Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff tonight?” Susan asked. Cedric’s cheeks reddened, but after a glance at Cho, he looked back at the fourth year.

“Hufflepuff. Come on, we’ll walk you back. Goodnight, everyone.”

At Cedric’s lead, everyone started saying their goodnights, Susan pecking Harry on the cheek and thanking him for a great evening before hurrying off after the Hufflepuff champion. Harry belatedly realised that neither of the twins, nor their dates, could be found — they must have disappeared after sending Harry to Draco.

Harry, Neville and Ginny waited by the doors for Hermione to say goodbye to Viktor in private; when she finally joined them, her lipstick was smudged and she looked a lot happier than she had been when Harry had dragged her back in the hall. He was glad; she didn’t deserve to have her night end on a low point like that because of Ron.

The four of them dragged their weary bodies up to Gryffindor Tower, Ginny’s high heels in Neville’s hand and his too-big shoes on her feet, while he walked in just his socks. It made Harry smile; ever the gentleman. “That was fun,” Ginny said with a smile, shoulder brushing Neville’s as she walked. “Thanks for inviting me.”

“Thanks for saying yes,” Neville returned, blushing. “I—I had a really good time.”

“I’d say tonight was a resounding success,” Harry remarked. The only thing that could’ve made it better was more time with Draco.

“It’ll only be a success if you tell me who you disappeared off to snog,” Ginny teased, dropping back to shoot him a grin, laughing when he blushed.

“That is none of your business,” he said haughtily.

“So *that’s* what you were doing outside,” Hermione realised, eyebrows raised. “Who is she?”

“I told you, none of your business. I don’t kiss and tell.”

“You’re no fun, Potter,” Ginny declared. They reached the portrait hole, and the boys bid the girls goodnight, starting up the stairs. Before they reached the dorm, Neville put a hand on Harry’s arm, biting his lip hesitantly.

"Harry, that person you were snogging," he started, and Harry reflexively put up a privacy ward. "Was it Malfoy?"

Harry felt the blood drain from his face. "What?" He forced out a laugh. "What makes you say that?"

"Well, you said you were friends with him. And in all of Hermione's interrogating, you've never said you were seeing a girl."

"Yeah, but *Malfoy!*"

"I thought it was Cassius at first," Neville continued. "Especially when he said he was seeing someone. But he was still in the hall dancing with Fleur when you were gone, so it couldn't be. And, well, there's always been something between you and Malfoy. I figured if it was anyone else, you would've told me by now." Neville paused, then grinned a little. "Also you did look a bit like you wanted to eat him alive when you saw him in his dress robes. But I don't think anyone else noticed," he added quickly. "I just... I know you, Harry. And if it is Malfoy, it's okay. I reckon you're right that he's not as bad as people think he is."

Harry sighed, running a hand through his hair. "You can't tell *anyone* Neville," he said seriously. "He could be in serious danger if it gets out. His dad..." He trailed off, and Neville nodded, eyes knowing.

"Your secret's safe with me." Then Neville smirked. "You just might want to look at his arse a bit less when you're in public."

Harry laughed, dropping his privacy ward and continuing up the stairs. "That's just asking far too much of me, Nev," he insisted, yawning. Neville snorted, pushing open the door to the dorm and tiptoeing inside. All the lights were out, and the curtains were drawn on the three other beds.

"Night, Harry," Neville whispered with a smile.

"Night, Nev." Harry barely managed to change into pyjamas and brush his teeth before he was falling into bed, a quiet sigh of relief escaping him. He was so glad he didn't have anywhere to be in the morning; he was going to sleep until at least noon.

.-.-.-.-

Severus let out a long sigh as he stepped out of the floo at Seren Du. It was nearly one in the morning, but the blasted ball was *finally* over. "Mister Severus, sir," Ceri greeted quietly. "Is you be needing anything?"

"Water, please." Two quiet pops later, and the elf was passing him a large glass of water. Severus drank thirstily, head pounding. "Thank you, Ceri. That will be all." The elf nodded and disappeared, and Severus toed out of his boots and started up the staircase, thinking longingly of bed. He'd seen far more of his students' skin that night than he *ever* wanted to see again, Igor had started panicking about the Dark Mark in a place where the children could

hear, *and* his bloody dress robes were uncomfortable after several hours wearing them. Yes, he was definitely ready for the day to be over.

He walked silently down the hall, easing the bedroom door open as quietly as he could, not wanting to wake Remus. That turned out to be a moot point; the bedside light was on, and the werewolf was sat up in bed, bare-chested and reading a book. He smiled when he saw Severus, and then his eyes widened, his book falling into his lap. “Well *hello* gorgeous,” he greeted, voice a little husky. Severus’ pulse quickened instinctively. “I’ve not seen those robes before. Are they new?”

“Relatively,” Severus replied, reaching for the small buttons at the collar. Remus rolled out of bed, stalking over to him in nothing but a pair of low-slung plaid pyjama bottoms. He stilled Severus’ hands with his own, honey eyes dark in the low light.

“Leave them for a second,” he requested. Severus sighed.

“Remus, it’s been a long day and I just want to go to bed.”

“Well I want to rip those robes off you with my teeth,” Remus replied in a conversational tone. Severus choked. His outfit abruptly became much tighter in a whole different area.

“*Remus!*”

The Gryffindor leaned in, nuzzling at Severus’ jaw, fingers sliding up to undo the top few buttons. Severus couldn’t help but tilt his head back and sigh as Remus’ tongue traced his Adams’ apple, a few more buttons coming loose. “The things I would do to you in these robes if it wasn’t one in the morning,” Remus sighed, running a hand down Severus’ chest. “Gods, you’re sexy.”

Severus wondered if anyone would ever believe him if he told them that mild-mannered, bookish, old-before-his-time Remus Lupin was an absolute *minx* in private. Then he realised that he never wanted anyone but himself to know that about the Gryffindor; his wolf behind closed doors was an entirely different creature, and belonged to him alone.

“They’re not that different from my usual robes,” Severus pointed out, letting Remus slowly undo a button at a time, revealing the pale skin below. That style of robe didn’t allow for a shirt underneath.

“Oh, but they are,” Remus insisted breathily, finally reaching the end of the row of buttons. He pulled back, giving Severus an admiring glance, robes open over his bare chest. Severus would never be used to being looked at in such a way. Like he was *desirable*. “Merlin.”

Remus wheeled him around, shoving him gently until he was on his back on their bed, robes still over his shoulders but otherwise open, his black trousers straining at the fly. The Gryffindor’s gaze trailed over him hungrily. “I know you’re tired,” he rasped. “I just... Merlin, Severus. I can’t help myself.”

There was a little of the wolf in his eyes as he spoke — the moon was only two nights away. No wonder he was so damn excitable, Severus thought with a mental roll of his eyes. He

hooked his ankles around Remus' hips, drawing him in quickly. "I'm awake *now*, you fiend," he muttered, as if it was such a hardship for him to have a gorgeous man staring at him like he wanted Severus to be breakfast, lunch and dinner. "Just don't expect anything dramatic."

Remus smirked at him, sliding onto the bed and straddling Severus' thighs, working the buttons of his trousers frustratingly slowly. Severus let out a sound he refused to classify as a whine. "Get on with it," he pleaded, sucking in a sharp breath when Remus' hand finally slipped beneath his trousers, fingers closing around rigid flesh.

The werewolf didn't even bother pulling Severus' trousers off, merely lowering himself down and opening the fly enough to get his mouth around him. Severus arched into the contact, moaning quietly. "Remus," he breathed, fingers clutching at bedsheets. "Remus, please."

Remus hummed around his length, tongue working expertly to send waves of pleasure shooting through Severus' body. He was going for fast and dirty, and Severus was thankful; Remus knew exactly how to play his body, and if the werewolf had wanted to drag things out Severus would have been powerless to resist. After all these years, even with over a decade apart, they still knew each other as well as they knew themselves.

A minute more, and Severus was coming into Remus' mouth with a bitten-off cry, slumping back against the mattress. When he could breathe again, he looked up at his lover with hooded eyes. "What do you need?" he asked softly. Remus shifted, pulling his own pyjama bottoms down just enough to free his cock from the confines, his pupils blown as he looked down at Severus.

"I need you to keep lying there, looking exactly like that," Remus told him, his voice hoarse as he wrapped his hand around himself, jerking quickly. Severus didn't blink, watching the man bring himself closer to the edge, shifting one hand to wrap possessively around Remus' thigh. Tiny little gasps were escaping from Remus' lips, and it was one of the best sounds Severus had ever heard.

Remus came with a growl on Severus' stomach, his eyes glowing gold as he looked at the man beneath him on the bed. Years ago, Severus would have been scared to see his lover with the wolf so close to the surface while they were in bed. Now, Severus just found himself wishing he had the stamina of his youth — and that it wasn't one in the bloody morning.

The tension leaked out of Remus' shoulders, and he slumped down onto Severus, ignoring the mess between them. "Sorry," he murmured into Severus' neck. "Got a bit... carried away."

"You don't need to apologise for *that*, Merlin," Severus assured, carding a hand through greying hair. "It's been a long day, but if I ever see you with that look in your eye and it doesn't end in this, take me out back and shoot me; I'm officially done for." Remus snickered, pressing a kiss to Severus' collarbone.

"And they say you're not a romantic," he teased. "How was the ball?"

"I caught far too many couples in the bushes," Severus said with a scowl. "Your brat godson being one of them."

"If my brat godson was there, that means your brat godson was right with him," Remus retorted. "Unless Harry has a *lot* of explaining to do."

"He was there, he just had the good sense not to get caught." Severus had seen him, two minutes after Harry had left, creeping away into the shadows with his hair mussed and his buttons uneven. A disgrace.

"Or you were nice enough to let him slide by," Remus corrected. He muttered a wandless Cleaning charm to get rid of the mess between them, sitting up and pulling Severus with him. "I really do love these robes on you," he mused, pushing them from Severus' shoulders so they pooled on the bed. "Even if they're much better off you." He winked, and Severus rolled his eyes.

"Incorrigible wolf," he muttered, pressing their lips together before climbing off the bed, stepping out of his trousers and striding naked across the room to his dresser for pyjamas. Remus whistled quietly, eyes dancing.

"Sexy snake," he returned, pulling up his pyjama bottoms and laying back in bed with a grin. "Hurry up."

Severus went through his evening bathroom routine quickly, and when he returned to the bedroom Remus had his eyes barely open, the lamp still on. He slid beneath the sheets, welcoming the other man as he sprawled on top of Severus. It was becoming hard to sleep these days, without Remus' weight on his chest. "Nox," he murmured, plunging them into darkness. Remus' stubbled cheek tucked into his neck.

"Love you," he murmured, already half asleep. Severus placed a hand on the man's lower back, getting comfortable.

"And I, you," he said, so softly he would've thought Remus had missed it, if not for the curve of the man's lips against his throat.

Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

Probably gonna update the tags on this soon for some future events. Not sure how far ahead I want to tag for, toeing the line between spoilers and necessary tagging. How do y'all feel about some future pairing tags?

The morning after the Yule Ball started at approximately 11:45 for Harry, which was when Neville shoved his drapes aside and poked him hard in the shoulder. “Before the news gets up to you, I promise that I wasn’t the one who said anything.”

Harry groaned, blinking bleary-eyed at the boy sat on the edge of his mattress. “What?”

Neville handed him his glasses, and the other Gryffindor’s apologetic face came into sharper view. “The whole school is talking about how you snogged someone at the ball last night. No one knows who, but everyone knows it happened. I mean, you did come back looking a bit... ravished.” Neville’s cheeks were pink, and Harry let out another groan, burying his face in his pillow.

“Fuck,” he muttered. Snape was going to have a *field day*. ‘Discretion, Potter’. Ugh, he was the worst. Maybe Harry could persuade Remus to hex him. “How bad is it?”

“On a scale of one to thinking you’re trying to kill all the muggleborns in the school, it’s pretty minor,” Neville told him. Harry hated that *that* was a legitimate scale of measuring the school’s general opinion of him. “Everyone’s just curious about who it was. A few girls are insisting it was them, but no one believes them. I think the top three are Hermione, Ginny, or Fleur.”

“...There are people in this castle who think I could pull *Fleur Delacour*? Are they blind?”

Neville snorted, shaking his head. “They’re just hoping for a scandal, I think. Other names floating around are of course Susan — but not many think it’s her because she laughed pretty hard when someone asked her, and she was on the dance floor all night — and I’ve heard Padma Patil, Daphne Greengrass, Cho Chang, and George Weasley.”

Harry rolled the list of names over in his head. “Well. That’s... varied.” He reluctantly sat up, reaching for the water on his bedside table. He hadn’t had more than a mouthful of alcohol, but he still felt hungover just from all the noise and dancing. “Just the one bloke on the list?”

“So far. I did hear someone suggest Blaise Zabini, but I’m pretty sure that was a joke.” Neville shrugged. “If it helps, I think it’ll all fade out in a few days. There’s bound to be other

drama from last night — you’re just an easy target for gossip.” He looked sorry as soon as he said it, but Harry shook his head; Neville was right.

“No one’s suggesting... y’know?” He didn’t dare say Draco’s name, not without a ward up. Neville shook his head, and Harry’s shoulders relaxed a little.

“No, I’ve not heard that anywhere,” Neville assured.

With a sigh, Harry dragged his aching legs over the edge of the bed. “Well, nothing to be done about it, I suppose. Anything else to report?”

“Nothing major. I guess Lavender got caught giving Seamus a blowjob. By *Snape*.” Neville shuddered, wide-eyed, and Harry burst out laughing.

“How many points did we lose for that?”

“Eighty, I think. But everyone’s practically in the negative after last night, Snape was on a roll.”

“That’s not so bad, then.” Harry yawned, rolling his shoulders back. “I’m gonna take a shower, then I’ll meet you for lunch?” He was *starving*.

“Sounds good,” Neville agreed, getting to his feet. “Oh, also Ron’s in a bit of a mood, so you might want to avoid him a bit. Especially if he thinks you’ve been kissing Hermione.”

Harry grimaced as he stood. “Fantastic.” Well, Ron had been in a mood all term, it wasn’t like that changed much.

.-. .

He felt much more human after a shower, and with his stomach rumbling Harry jogged down the stairs to the common room, where Neville was stood talking to Ginny and Hermione. “Hiya, Harry,” Ginny greeted cheerfully. “Loads of people think we snogged, so I’ve been telling people you’re crap at it.”

“Thanks, Ginny. I appreciate it,” he replied flatly, and she giggled.

“Always happy to help!”

“I haven’t said anything about the rumours,” Hermione said primly. “Hopefully they’ll go away soon once people realise it’s all a load of rubbish.”

“It’s not though, is it,” Harry said, stretching up with a yawn. Hermione gawked at him.

“You *were* snogging someone? I thought you were joking!”

“Yeah. I mean, it obviously wasn’t you, or Ginny, or Fleur,” he said with a roll of his eyes.

“But the way I looked I don’t think I can even bother denying what I was doing.” Before he’d passed out, he’d forced himself to go brush his teeth, and one glance in the mirror made it pretty evident what he’d been up to. There was also a pretty large lovebite on his throat that

he hadn't glamoured away, though the collar of his shirt had mostly hidden it. Draco was a possessive little bastard sometimes.

"So who was it, then?" Hermione asked. Harry snorted.

"Like I said last night, none of your business. Can we go get food now or what?"

Hermione's lips pursed. "I don't like this, Harry. First you're off dancing with all those people last night, now you're kissing some mystery girl. It's not like you to keep so many secrets."

"How is dancing with people keeping secrets? They're my friends."

"Exactly! Since when were you friends with Daphne Greengrass? Or Cassius Warrington? For that matter, how long have you been friends with Susan Bones?"

"I'm sorry I've been branching out, Hermione, but with you and Ron ignoring me for half the year I've had to look elsewhere for social interaction. Or are you just pissed because they're not Gryffindors?" Harry glared at her, shaking his head. "I thought you were better than that."

"It's got nothing to do with what house they're in!" Hermione insisted, but the slightly screechy tone of her voice betrayed that she was lying. "It just seems awfully sudden that you're so chummy with all these people."

"I've been friends with most of them since last year," Harry told her. "You just haven't been paying attention. And I'm sorry you're jealous that I've got more friends than just you and Ron, but I like them, so you'll just have to suck it up and deal with it." He'd thought they were possibly fixing things, last night. With her on Viktor's arm and dancing with Harry and the others and having a great time, he'd thought there were scraps of their friendship he could salvage. Now he was starting to think he was wrong.

He looked up at Neville and Ginny, who were watching the whole argument uneasily. "Lunch?" he suggested, turning away from Hermione and heading for the portrait hole. They followed after him, leaving Hermione fuming in the common room, and when they were out of earshot Ginny let out a low whistle.

"Well, that was awkward," she muttered, sounding remarkably like her twin brothers. Harry snorted.

"She's been off with me all year, going hot and cold depending on whether Ron thinks he can stomach me or not. I'm sick of it." Hermione was, at her heart, an introvert. She nagged Ron and Harry to study, but always preferred to study alone. She kept her intelligence around her like a shield, warding people off even if they were actually smart enough to hold a conversation with her. She hated being in crowds — last night had been highly unusual for her. She was happy extending the olive branch to Ron and Harry, and then to the rest of the Weasley family, but she had her limits. Evidently Harry's casual friendship with half their year and several people in other years was too much for her to handle.

"Everyone's sort of noticed that the golden trio hasn't been very, well, trio-y lately," Ginny breached. "I s'pose we all thought you'd figure it out."

"I don't know if we will this time, Gin," Harry admitted aloud for the first time. There was so much more going on; so much Ginny wasn't aware of. Harry wasn't sure whether he was being too paranoid when he thought Ron and Hermione were spying on him for Dumbledore, but either way he was a different person with different priorities and they didn't seem able to handle that.

The three of them walked in silence for a while, Harry still glowering a little, when Ginny cleared her throat. "Hey, Harry. On the subject of friendships... I wanted to say sorry, actually." Harry looked at her in confusion, and she ducked her head. "The last couple of years I've been a bit... well, stalker-y is probably one word for it," she said with a grimace. "Only I'd heard so much about you when I was a kid from Mum, and then you were *there* and you were my brother's friend and you were so *nice*, and I developed a bit of a crush." She managed not to blush as she said this. Harry didn't bother pointing out that 'bit of a crush' was somewhat of an understatement; he didn't want to be mean.

"Anyway, this year since we've hung out more and everything, and you're so close with the twins, you're basically one of my brothers now and it would be pretty strange to keep fancying you," she said, her words coming out rushed and her ears as red as her hair. "So I'm just gonna nip that in the bud and say I'm sorry for being weird about it before. But if it's alright, I'd really like to be your friend." She looked hopeful, embarrassed by her own actions in the past.

Harry was silent for a moment. "On one condition." Ginny eyed him warily. "*Please* stop telling everyone I'm crap at kissing."

The redhead burst out laughing, having to stop walking to catch her breath for a minute. "I can do that," she agreed. Harry grinned, slinging an arm over her shoulders.

"Then I guess you've got a seventh big brother." He looked over his shoulder, where Neville was watching them both in utter bemusement. "As your big brother, do I need to have a word with Neville over there?" Ginny turned bright red, and Neville began spluttering.

"Don't you dare," she told him, elbowing him in the side and darting away before he could retaliate. "Or I'll hex you the same as I do my other brothers."

"Noted," Harry said with a grin, holding his hands up in surrender. "I wouldn't really, anyway. Not unless you asked me to. You seem like you can look out for yourself." Growing up with six older brothers, two of whom were Fred and George, Harry didn't doubt that Ginny was probably better at looking out for herself than he was.

Ginny smiled at him, and the three walked side by side for a little longer. Ginny glanced up at him again, before they made it to the Entrance Hall. "Harry," she began. "Since we're family and all... do you think I could have a go on your Firebolt sometime? When the others aren't around? They always make fun of me when I say I want to fly."

Harry thought back to the summer; not once had Ginny played quidditch with them. Harry had assumed it was because she didn't want to. Then he realised none of her brothers had ever asked her. "Yeah, sure," Harry agreed with a shrug. "We can go out before school starts back up."

Ginny beamed, leaning up to kiss him on the cheek — right as they entered the Great Hall. Immediately, a fresh wave of whispers started up. Harry smiled ruefully. "Well, that's gonna be *great* for the rumour mill," he muttered sarcastically. Ginny winced.

"Sorry."

"Nah, it's alright. People will think what they want. Hell, if it leads them off the trail of who it really is, I'm all for it." If they thought he was dating Ginny Weasley, no one would be looking towards Draco Malfoy.

.-. .

With Christmas over and the spring term rapidly approaching, the students suddenly remembered all the homework they'd been ignoring in favour of the Yule Ball — Harry included. It also meant that the four champions were back to trying to figure out their eggs. Harry had pretty much stopped opening his; he'd heard it scream plenty of times now, and nothing was going to change about it. All he could do was research things that screamed and hope he came across the right one.

That all changed on the 30th of December, when Viktor rushed into the Great Hall, saw Harry and Fleur sat at the Gryffindor table, and hurried over to them. "Vhere is Cedric?" he asked quietly. Harry shrugged.

"No idea. With Cho maybe? Why?"

Viktor glanced around shiftily, then leaned in. "I haff made progress."

Harry and Fleur shared a wide-eyed glance. "I'll find him," Harry said, getting to his feet.

"Meet by the Durmstrang ship vhen you do," Viktor replied, taking Fleur with him when he left. Harry ducked into a side passage, rifling through his school bag.

"*I solemnly swear that I am up to no good,*" he muttered, scanning the map for Cedric's name. He eventually found him down near the entrance to the Hufflepuff common room, Cho by his side.

Harry sprinted through the halls to find the Hufflepuff, skidding to a halt when he almost crashed into him. "Come with me," he urged, grabbing both Cedric and Cho by the wrists.

"Harry, what's wrong?" Cedric asked, following in bewilderment.

"I think Viktor's figured out the egg." That had both of them picking up the pace, and they went outside to see Viktor and Fleur sat on the bank of the lake, right at the edge of the water. Viktor had his egg in his hands.

"Good, you're here," the Bulgarian said, beckoning them closer. The trio sat down, making themselves comfortable.

"Harry said you've figured it out?" Cedric said, and Viktor shrugged.

"I haff made progress. Listen." Viktor picked up his egg and set it in the shallows of the lake until it was entirely covered, then twisted it open. Harry flinched, bracing himself for screaming, but none came. Instead it sounded like... music? "It is easier to hear when you are under the water also," Viktor supplied. "But it is a song. Here."

He held out a piece of parchment, and the other three champions crowded around it to read.

Come seek us where our voices sound,

We cannot sing above the ground,

And while you're searching, ponder this;

We've taken what you'll sorely miss.

An hour long you'll have to look,

And to recover what we took.

But past an hour, the prospect's black,

Too late, it's gone, it won't come back.

Harry read the words over several times. "I assume your eggs will say the same," Viktor said, closing the egg, "but you may want to test them."

"So we must go underwater?" Fleur presumed, brow furrowed in thought. "To wherever ze creatures 'ave taken... whatever eet ees zey will take."

"An hour to look somewhere underwater. Presumably the lake," Cedric said, glancing out over the expanse of water. "Merlin, there could be anything in there."

Harry thought about the aquatic creatures he knew of; surprisingly, his brain went to his muggle upbringing rather than what he'd learned since joining the magical world. "Are there merpeople in the lake, do you think?"

The others stared at him. "I think so," Cho piped up. "I've heard some of the Slytherins talking about it before. They have that window to the lake in their common room."

Harry remembered it; he'd thought it was a bit creepy.

"So merpeople will take something we care about?" Viktor surmised. "That seems... simple enough."

"How did you figure the egg out, anyway?" Cedric asked curiously. The Durmstrang boy blushed.

"I, ah, accidentally dropped it off the edge of the ship," he admitted sheepishly. "It opened ven I vas diving to get it back."

The rest of them laughed, and Viktor merely smiled.

"So we know what we're up against, then," Harry said. "We should all work alone from here on out. Don't want any of our solutions looking too similar."

The others agreed, and Viktor pocketed his egg once more. "No more talk of tasks until February 24th, then," he declared.

Harry wondered if Fleur and Cedric had as much of an urge as he did to check their eggs sang the same song. "Well, if we're calling it there, I've got a Transfiguration essay to write," he said with a grimace. "Unless any of you would like to help me with that?" Unsurprisingly, they all suddenly had places to be, and Harry snorted. "Some help you lot are."

"Why don't you go ask your *girlfriend*," Fleur teased, nudging his shoulder. She was getting far too much joy over the rumours of Harry's Yule Ball escapades, especially the ones that involved her.

"I thought I just did, dear," Harry replied sweetly, making Viktor and Cedric laugh.

"Away wiz you," Fleur said playfully, making a shooing motion. "I must study also."

The five of them parted ways, Cedric and Cho wandering off towards a different part of the lake, possibly to go test Cedric's egg. Harry continued back up to the castle, lost in thought. He really did have a Transfiguration essay — but now he also had some research to do.

.-.-.-.

The new term began on a bit of a sour note, in the form of another Rita Skeeter article. This one cutting far, far too deep. *Dumbledore's Giant Mistake* was the headline they woke up to on the first day of classes, and the more Harry read, the deeper his frown grew. "I mean, didn't everyone know that already about Hagrid?" he asked. "Just look at him. Bit obvious, isn't it?"

"There are other ways to get that big, with magic," Neville pointed out. "I think most of us assumed he got hit with a dodgy Engorgement charm as a kid or something. Giants... they've got a bit of a bad reputation."

"Well so have werewolves, and Remus is alright," Harry retorted. "How the hell did Skeeter get this information, though? If he's never told me, I can't see him telling her!" She wasn't even supposed to be on school grounds outside of task days. She hadn't even been able to get permission for the Yule Ball; a photographer had been sent, but a different reporter was along with them. The write-up had been a tasteful article about the whole affair, with a rave review

of the Weird Sisters and hardly any mention of Harry save for the bit about the champions opening the ball. It was brilliant.

“Maybe he was telling someone else, and she was eavesdropping. Still doesn’t explain what she was doing on school grounds, though.”

They didn’t have much time to talk about it, or they’d be late for Herbology, but with Care of Magical Creatures on his schedule for before lunch, Harry didn’t worry about it too much. That changed when he arrived at Hagrid’s hut with the rest of his class to find a woman waiting for them who was definitely not Hagrid.

Professor Grubbly-Plank was a perfectly competent teacher. Possibly even a more competent teacher than Hagrid. But that didn’t mean Harry was going to sit back and let Hagrid be bullied out of his job by that awful Skeeter woman. He hung back once class was over, knocking on Hagrid’s door. “Hagrid, it’s me!” he called, knocking louder. “Come on, Hagrid. You *know* I don’t care about all that. Just let me in.” He kept knocking, and let out a frustrated noise. “Hagrid, for the love of Merlin, if you don’t let me in I’m breaking the door down.” That got a reaction. The lock clicked, and the door opened the tiniest crack, just enough for Hagrid to glare through with one bloodshot eye.

“Go away, ‘Arry,” he muttered. Harry jammed his foot in the doorway, shouldering his way into the cabin. Hagrid clearly didn’t want him gone that bad, or he would’ve tried harder to keep him out.

“Nope, sorry, not listening.” He looked up at the enormous man, his heart clenching at the tear-streaked skin hidden behind his mass of hair. “Hagrid. You can’t really think people care about that sort of thing, do you?”

“Those people do,” Hagrid retorted, gesturing to his table, where a stack of letters sat, most of them opened. “Those people ‘ave a *lot* to say about it.” He choked out another sob, and Harry threw his arms around the man the best he could.

“Hagrid, if there’s one thing I’ve learnt from the media, it’s that you can’t win over everyone. And unfortunately, the loudest voices are also usually the worst ones. For all these letters on your table, I bet there’s fifty people who read that article, shrugged, and got on with their day.”

Hagrid didn’t look convinced. “They won’t want me teachin’ their kids, not knowin’ what I am.”

“My first ever Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher *literally* had Voldemort in the back of his head, and no one complained about him.” Of course, no one *knew* about him, but the point still stood. “No one in this castle knows more about creatures than you do, Hagrid. Sometimes your judgement about what’s class appropriate is a little... off.” Hagrid snorted, unable to help himself. “But you’re a brilliant teacher. Grubbly-Plank’s alright, yeah, but she’s not you. She’d never let me ride a hippogriff,” Harry added, grinning.

“Not sure if tha’s a good thing,” Hagrid pointed out dubiously. Harry shrugged; it had been a good thing for him.

"How did Skeeter even find out all this?" Harry asked, leaning against the kitchen counter. Hagrid sniffed.

"No idea. I was... I was tellin' Olympe — Madame Maxime — but... there weren't no one about when I told her. We were at the Yule Ball, everyone was inside. I jus' thought... it's daft," he said with a shake of his head. "Bloody big bones, I never." That was muttered under his breath, and made little sense to Harry, but he presumed it had something to do with Maxime, and why she'd been curt with everyone since the ball according to Fleur.

"Skeeter couldn't have been at the Yule Ball. Someone would have seen her." Unless she had a way of getting around undetected. Maybe she had an invisibility cloak, like Harry.

"What's it matter 'ow she found out?" Hagrid wailed. "Everyone knows, now!"

"So?" Harry argued. "No one cares, Hagrid; not anyone that matters!" He was still trying to block out Draco's taunts about it, knowing the boy had no choice when he had an audience. Surely Draco didn't really care about Hagrid's blood status. "Class won't be the same without you. Hogwarts won't be the same without you." Harry reached up to put a hand on the man's elbow. "You were the first friend I ever had in the wizarding world, Hagrid. Don't let this be what takes you away from it."

Hagrid sank into a chair, choking on another sob. "Y'know, Harry," he said once he'd composed himself a little. "When I firs' met yeh, yeh reminded me a bit o' meself, like. Parents gone, not quite sure 'ow yeh were gonna fit in at Hogwarts. But yeh did. Look at yeh now." Pride shone in his eyes.

"That's partly because of you," Harry insisted softly. "I thought I wouldn't fit in, and you looked at me like I was mad for thinking it. You told me Hogwarts would be home, and it was. I reckon I wouldn't have even been brave enough to get on the train if I didn't know you were there at the end of it." He'd been desperate to get away from the Dursleys, to do anything to leave that house. But he might have just run away into muggle London instead.

"Don't say that, Harry. Yer a Gryffindor."

"And so are you," Harry reminded, remembering what Tom Riddle's diary had shown him. "The Sorting Hat knows what it's talking about." It certainly had with Harry, telling him he would've done well in Slytherin. If only he'd listened.

Hagrid was silent for a long moment, wiping at his eyes, until finally he managed a small smile in Harry's direction. "Yer wise beyond yer years, y'know that?" he said. "Yer gonna be a great wizard someday."

"I'll be a better one if you go back to teaching me," Harry replied with a grin. Hagrid sighed.

"I... I can', yet," he murmured. "But maybe after a bit. Lie low, like. See if it all blows over." Harry figured that was the best he could get, and he patted Hagrid's hand supportively.

"That's the spirit." And in the meantime, Harry would figure out how the hell Rita Skeeter was getting her information.

“What’s been the matter wi’ you then, these days, anyways?” Hagrid asked, eyeing Harry shrewdly. “Hardly ever see yeh wi’ Ron and Hermione anymore.”

Harry grimaced, running a hand through his hair. “Well, Ron’s still not over me being in the tournament,” he said ruefully. “And Hermione... we’re growing older, Hagrid. People change. I’m sure the friends you had when you were eleven aren’t the same friends you have now.”

“But the three o’ you’ve been through so much together.” Hagrid was frowning now, and Harry sighed, wishing there was an easy way to make the man explain. He couldn’t tell him the truth about Dumbledore; it would break the man’s heart. Hagrid worshipped Dumbledore.

“Sometimes shared trauma isn’t enough to keep people together,” he said eventually. “I’m not saying we’ll never be friends again, but... I dunno, it’s weird right now. I’ve been hanging out with Neville a lot lately, though.”

“Aye, ‘e’s a good kid, the Longbottom lad. Always helpin’ Professor Sprout wi’ the greenhouses.” Hagrid’s faint smile returned. “As long as yer not by yerself too long, Harry. That’ll get yeh nowhere good. ‘Specially not at your age.”

“I’m not alone, Hagrid,” he promised. “And if I am, I know I’ve always got you, right?”

“Always,” Hagrid vowed, covering Harry’s hand gently with his own. “No matter what, Harry, I’m on your side.”

Harry hoped that proved true. “Thanks, Hagrid.” He glanced at his watch; if he was quick, he’d have time to run to the kitchens and grab something to eat before his next class. “Look, I’ve got to go back to classes, but... don’t lock yourself away in here, alright? And don’t listen to whatever’s in those letters. There’s always gonna be people who like to complain about things.”

Harry gave the man one last hug before leaving, hurrying up to the castle the best he could in the snow.

If Dumbledore’s manipulations ever cost him his friendship with Hagrid, Harry would obliterate the old headmaster where he stood.

Chapter 30

With the news that Rita Skeeter was sneaking around the castle, Harry's paranoia ramped back up to a hundred. He had far too many secrets to risk slipping up with any one of them. If he wasn't in or between classes, he was under his invisibility cloak or enveloped by a privacy ward. He made sure to pass the information on to those who shared his secrets, too, which turned into an impromptu study group on privacy wards and silencing spells.

"I don't know how she's getting around, so she could be anywhere," he told the other heirs in their fortnightly meeting. "Just make sure you're never discussing secrets — mine or your own — without putting some kind of warding up."

"Thanks for the heads up, Harry," Ernie said, looking grim-faced. "I had wondered how she was getting all those quotes from the Slytherins. Obviously they're in the know."

Several heads turned towards the trio of Slytherins in the group, but all of them shook their heads. "I haven't heard anything," Blaise said, "but people know I'm at least civil with Harry now, so they're not likely to tell me. These two, either." After the Yule Ball, it was somewhat established that Harry was on good terms with the three Slytherins, and willing to spend time with others. There were plenty of people — Dumbledore most significantly — who didn't seem thrilled by the Boy-Who-Lived's extended social group, but at this point Harry was past caring. He couldn't hide away forever, especially not if he wanted to be able to make real changes when he came of age.

Harry remembered seeing quotes from Crabbe and Goyle in the article, as well as from Parkinson, and made a mental note to ask Draco about it all. He had to warn his boyfriend to be vigilant as it was; perhaps the blond would be able to get information from his housemates. They still trusted him, they'd surely tell him.

"Okay, well, enough about Skeeter," Harry said eventually. "Who wants to help me with some Arithmancy?" With the holidays over, his self-study was back on track as well, with Snape slipping assignments in with his returned Potions homework at the behest of Remus and Sirius. On any given day there was an inter-house study group meeting in the library now, but no one outside his trusted circle could know that Harry was studying the extra two subjects. That left helping him to this lot, or occasionally Fred.

There were a few groans around the table, before Anthony Goldstein pulled out the empty chair between him and Padma. "Come on, Potter," he said with a grin. "Let's get this over with."

Harry grinned back, shifting around the table to take the chair and reaching into his bag. Hermione had it all wrong, seeing the other students as obstacles to her success.

Hogwarts was so much better with more friends.

Of all of Harry's secrets, the one where he was still in contact with his escaped convict godfather was probably the most inflammatory for him and the people he cared about, so Harry made sure he only ever spoke to Sirius at night, in bed, with the curtains warded with about everything he could think of.

"It's starting to make my head spin, Sirius," Harry admitted late one night, looking into his godfather's sympathetic grey eyes. "I've got so much going on — the tournament, the study group, Draco, you, *Dumbledore* — I'm losing track of who knows what, and trying to keep it all from Skeeter..."

"You've got far more on your shoulders than anyone should at your age, pup," Sirius agreed. "I wish I could help you with it — I wish I wasn't just adding to it."

"You're not," Harry insisted quickly. "I don't know how I'd cope without you and the others."

"It doesn't change that we're just another pile of secrets for you to keep," Sirius said knowingly. "Look, Harry; just focus on what you can control for now. The tournament — you're working on getting the egg figured out. Ask Remus about it next time he's with Snape, he might have an idea. Everything else is beyond your hands. The study group seems to be mostly taking care of itself. Draco's a smart boy, and he'll understand if you need to ease off a little bit while you're so busy. As for Dumbledore, he's clearly willing to just sit back and see what happens with this whole tournament situation, so I don't think you have much to worry about there. He doesn't suspect anything, does he?"

"I don't think so." Harry honestly hadn't seen much of Dumbledore, lately. The man was probably busy dealing with all the behind-the-scenes stuff for the tournament. "He doesn't like that the students are mingling so much these days, but I don't think he can trace it back to me. If anything I think he thinks it's Susan's fault." She was honestly more in charge of the study group than he was, and with her Chief Warlock ambitions all the heirs seemed to gravitate to her anyway.

"She seems very much like her aunt, from what you've told me," Sirius complimented. "I'm sure she can handle it. So there you have it — the only things you *really* need to worry about right now are the egg and your boyfriend. And from what I've heard, I don't think you even need to worry about your boyfriend. He's pretty keen on you, I'd say." Sirius wiggled his eyebrows, and Harry blushed.

"Snape's been gossiping again, hasn't he?" he groused. He still hadn't forgiven the Potions Master for telling Sirius and Remus about finding Harry at the Yule Ball. Sirius had teased him about it for *days*.

"Severus? Gossip? *Never*," Sirius mock-gasped, before laughing. "It's not like he needs to; I can see it all over your face when you talk about your boy. It's very sweet." Sirius laughed harder as Harry squirmed in embarrassment.

"You just wait til you start dating again," Harry muttered. "I'll get you back for all of this."

“You might be waiting a while,” Sirius pointed out, the light in his eyes dying a little bit.
“Hard to get a date when everyone thinks you’re a murdering lunatic.”

“It won’t be forever. We’ll find Pettigrew and get your name cleared,” Harry vowed.

“I’m sure you will, pup,” Sirius agreed, smiling slightly. “You’re a determined little bugger like that.” He shook his head in a slightly canine way, then brightened up. “Anyway, tell me about what the twins have been up to — you mentioned something about hexing the Ravenclaw common room guardian?”

Harry grinned, happy to regale Sirius with the tale of Fred and George hexing the Ravenclaw statue to spout gibberish instead of riddles, so they could only get into their common room by responding with utter nonsense. One day, he couldn’t wait to introduce his godfather to the twins. Though the rest of them might not be safe once he did.

.-. .

Severus strode through the corridor towards the headmaster’s office, smirking to himself when the few students he passed hurried to get out of his way. They really were far too easy to scare.

He wasn’t sure why he’d been summoned, but it couldn’t be good. He gave the password to the gargoyle, stepping up on to the revolving staircase and tightening his Occlumency shields. He was prepared for anything, wondering which loose threads the headmaster might be tugging on now.

Dumbledore was sat behind his desk, smiling genially at Severus when he entered. “Ah, Severus. Thank you for coming so promptly,” he greeted, gesturing towards the bowl of sweets on his desk. “Lemon drop?”

Severus declined, knowing the sour sweets were usually laced with some sort of mild truth-telling potion. “What did you need from me, Albus?” he asked, taking a seat opposite the desk.

“Just a chat,” Dumbledore assured, leaning forward in his chair and clasping his hands together on the desk. “Igor Karkaroff is looking a little nervous lately. I was wondering if you might have any inkling as to why.”

Karkaroff looked like a loud noise might give him a heart attack, these days. Severus didn’t blame him; the man had a lot to be worried about, if the Dark Lord was on the rise again. “I already told you the Mark is getting darker,” Severus replied, because there was never any chance of him hiding that. “Igor is merely worried about how little time he has left.”

“And do you know the answer to that?”

“If you’re asking if I’ve heard anything about the Dark Lord’s return, the answer is no, Albus,” Severus said flatly. The headmaster’s brow furrowed.

"Severus, I understand this is a difficult time for everybody; you especially. However, the side of the light will need as much information as possible should the worst happen." His voice was apologetic, but Severus could read between the lines. 'Don't forget you're still my spy, even if Voldemort isn't around yet. You'll be back at it as soon as he pops his head up'. Typical.

"I am keeping an ear to the ground and my usual channels open," Severus drawled in assurance. "There is simply little information to share." That was true; no one from the old crowd seemed to know where the Dark Lord was, or how he was regaining strength. Severus was both glad and wary that there hadn't yet been a whisper of the name Peter Pettigrew. Severus could only imagine how much information the little rat had taken with him, after living in Potter's dorm for three years, and spending the whole twelve with a prominent light family. The Dark Lord would know far too much by now.

"I'm glad to hear it," Dumbledore replied. "I feared with the tournament going on, especially with Mr Potter's recent circumstances, it would be too much of a cover for Voldemort to gather his followers."

"Surely you don't believe Mr Potter's... circumstances are anything but an attempt by the Dark Lord's followers to kill the boy? Just because I wasn't involved in the plot doesn't mean there wasn't one." If Dumbledore truly thought Potter's involvement in the tournament was just a prank gone wrong, or a fourteen year-old boy's quest for glory, he had finally cracked. Unless the old coot had done it himself, to give Potter another chance to *prove himself*.

"I think whoever tampered with the Goblet of Fire will reveal themselves in due course, and there is little we can do but support Harry until that time comes," Dumbledore said, sounding entirely uncaring that his precious Golden Boy was in such dangerous circumstances. Sometimes it baffled Severus how this man had ended up in charge of wizarding Britain's children, and no one seemed to notice he didn't give a damn about their welfare. How were people so blind?

"If I may be excused, I have a potion brewing," Severus lied easily, getting to his feet.

"Of course, of course. I trust you'll come to me if you get any further information." Dumbledore stood as well, offering Severus a look that was supposed to be fatherly. "Dark times are coming, my dear boy, and I believe we will need you now more than ever. I am sorry to have to ask you to make this sacrifice once more, but... it is for the greater good."

Severus bit back a snarl. How many lives had this man ruined in the name of the 'greater good'? Instead he merely nodded, face impassive. "Some things are necessary," he said, turning to leave the office. It wasn't until he was back in the privacy of his own quarters that he let his shoulders slump a little, a sigh escaping his lips. And so it began, again.

.-. .

There was a Hogsmeade weekend in mid-January, and Harry found himself trudging down the slushy pathway beside Neville and Ginny, who had insisted he couldn't spend it locked inside, and that Rita Skeeter couldn't make a scandal of him *going to Hogsmeade*, especially when she wasn't even legally supposed to write about him. Harry was pretty sure Skeeter

could and would, but he allowed himself to be bullied out of the castle all the same. He'd been reading up on merpeople for the last four days straight, and it was starting to give him a headache.

Instead, he focused his attention on his companions — Neville and Ginny had been hanging out a lot ever since the Yule Ball. Harry couldn't figure out if they were dating or not. He'd never seen them kiss; but then again, he'd never seen Remus and Snape kiss, yet those two were definitely in love. As they walked, Ginny's shoulder bumped Neville's arm every few steps, and the older Gryffindor didn't seem to mind. Harry's eyes narrowed on their hands as they almost linked between them. Yeah, there was definitely something going on there.

"Let's go to Honeydukes," Ginny suggested, nudging Neville until he changed direction.
"I'm out of sugar quills."

Harry was always happy to buy sweets, and owed Remus some Honeydukes' Finest, so he trailed after the maybe-couple into the sweet shop.

As they strolled from shop to shop, mostly at Ginny's urging, Harry kept an eye out for Hagrid. The half-giant still hadn't worked up the courage to leave his hut, even after a week. The fuss from the article had mostly died down, but Hagrid wouldn't hear it, insisting to Harry that he wasn't ready yet. Harry wondered how much longer it would take for him to *be* ready.

Shopping finished, Harry suggested they head to the Three Broomsticks, as much as he was dreading the crowd. There was a chance Hagrid could be in there — and he wasn't quite done observing Ginny and Neville yet. Both of them were easy to blush, and there had been a *lot* of blushing going on all day. It made Harry smile, and he wondered if it had been like this for Sirius watching him and Draco over the summer. His godfather took a lot of joy in insisting they were both oblivious and besotted even then.

Once inside the pub, Harry wished he'd brought his invisibility cloak. When he was inside Hogwarts, it was easy to forget he was a Triwizard Champion; most people had stopped caring by now. Outside, however, was an entirely different matter. Heads turned, whispers started up, and Harry grimaced.

"We can go somewhere else if you want?" Neville suggested quietly. "Back to Gryffindor or whatever."

"No, it's fine," Harry assured, squeezing through the crowd towards the bar. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ginny's fingers curl around Neville's as they entered the fray. He smirked to himself. "What do you two want? I'm buying."

"Harry, my boy!" He resisted the urge to groan, turning to face Ludo Bagman, who was making his way over from a table full of unhappy-looking goblins. "Good to see you, good to see you! Had a good Christmas?" Bagman glanced back at Neville and Ginny. "You two don't mind if I borrow Harry here for a quick private chat, do you?"

"Actually, we do," Ginny retorted blithely. "He's about to buy us drinks. Come on, Harry." Without giving Bagman time to argue, Ginny hooked her free hand around Harry's elbow and

tugged him away towards the other end of the bar. The man looked baffled by the turn of events, and Harry snickered.

“Nice one, Gin.” Ginny smiled with dimpled cheeks.

“I don’t trust that one. He still hasn’t paid the twins their winnings from the World Cup — I caught them writing to him about it the other week.”

As if summoned by their names, Fred and George entered the pub, and upon spotting Bagman, made a beeline for him. Bagman’s blue eyes went wide, and he hurried back to the table full of goblins after a brief conversation with the twins that left them both looking disappointed. Harry thought about calling them over, but then glanced at Ginny and Neville, and stayed silent. They didn’t deserve teasing, not while they were still figuring things out.

Instead, he leaned on the bar and flagged down Madam Rosmerta to order their drinks, elbowing Neville out of the way when the boy tried to split the bill. “No, shush, this round is mine,” Harry insisted, handing over the coins before Neville could use his extra height to reach over him. Rosmerta giggled, shaking her head at their antics.

“Thanks, Harry,” Ginny chirped, sipping at her raspberry fizz.

Crowded at the bar due to lack of seats, Harry had to fight down a grin when Ginny started leaning against Neville, not looking like she even realised she was doing it. It was funny, watching two people start gravitating towards each other like that — after years of watching Ron and Hermione circle in the most uncomfortable orbit in the world, he’d forgotten what it was like for normal people to get together. He didn’t say a word about it, keeping up the conversation about the new player the Harpies had just signed.

Where he was stood, Harry had a perfect view of the door, and thus he couldn’t miss it when Rita Skeeter walked in, wearing bright yellow robes and trailing her photographer behind her. She didn’t seem to notice Harry as she ordered drinks at a small table nearby.

“What’s he doing with a pack of goblins in tow, anyway?” Skeeter was saying to the photographer, smirking. “Showing them the sights”, what tosh. He was always a bad liar. Think we should do a bit of digging? There’s bound to be something that’ll make a good headline — *Disgraced Ex-Head of Magical Sports, Ludo Bagman* — We just need to find a story to fit it.”

Harry scowled, stepping forward before he even knew what he was doing. “Trying to ruin someone else’s life?” he said loudly, glaring at the blonde woman. Around them, the pub went quiet. Skeeter beamed.

“Harry! How lovely to see you — have you changed your mind about an interview? Come, come sit!”

“I’m not going *anywhere* near you,” Harry insisted. “How dare you write that article about Hagrid! No one cares that he’s half-giant!”

"Well, if no one cares, then it shouldn't be a problem," Skeeter retorted, smirk dripping with malice. "Why don't you give me a quote, Harry? About the Hagrid *you* know." She pulled her lime green quill from her crocodile-skin handbag. "The man behind the muscle. Would you call him a father substitute?"

"Are you so bad at your job that you can't get a headline without making up utter tripe?" Ginny cut in furiously, appearing at Harry's shoulder. Skeeter glared at her, lips pursing.

"Sit down, you silly little girl, and don't get involved in matters that don't concern you," she dismissed. Ginny's hands clenched into fists at her side.

"Like you're one to talk!" she argued. "Hagrid's personal life is none of your business, but you stuck your ugly nose in where it wasn't wanted, and now look what you've done!"

Harry recognised the malicious glint in Skeeter's eye, and his heart sank. They were going to end up in more trouble than it was worth. "Come on, Ginny," he urged quietly, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Let's just go." He glanced over at Neville, who nodded and set his mostly-empty drink down, taking Ginny by the hand and urging her out of the pub. Harry didn't look back at Skeeter as they left.

"She's not gonna take that lying down," Neville said with furrowed brows, eyeing Ginny in concern. "She'll be after you next."

"Let her," Ginny replied, scowling. "I'll take whatever that lying cow can dish out."

Harry hoped that was true. If there was one thing Rita Skeeter was good at, it was hurting people.

.-. .

From books about merpeople, Harry moved on to researching water-based spells, trying to find something that might allow him to be underwater for an hour. He found spells for walking on water, transporting large amounts of water, and plenty of spells to help *find* water, but nothing that told him how to survive in it past the usual limitation of his lung capacity. There had to be something. He was just looking in the wrong place.

Remembering Sirius' words about asking Remus, Harry donned his invisibility cloak one Friday evening and headed down to the dungeons. Remus was usually around on Friday nights, and he'd mentioned something about being there when Harry had spoken to him last.

He glanced around to check the coast was clear, then knocked on the frame of the portrait. It opened, and he snuck inside, waiting until the door was closed before removing his cloak. He looked around the unusually empty room, frowning. "I thought Remus was supposed to be here?"

"He was," Snape replied curtly. He'd taken off his teaching robes, leaving him in just a black shirt and trousers. He looked exhausted, if Harry was honest. "There was a change in plans."

“Is everything okay? Is he alright?” Harry asked, brain immediately throwing dozens of disaster scenarios his way.

“He is well. The mutt is merely having a difficult time; Remus didn’t feel it prudent to leave him alone.”

Harry winced; Sirius was doing a lot better since moving into Seren Du, but every now and then he had nightmares from Azkaban and got stuck inside his own head for a little while. It was happening less and less, especially after Snape helped him with his Occlumency shields over the summer, but... twelve years surrounded by dementors had left him with a lot of damage.

“Oh,” he said, feeling awkward now he knew it was just him and the Potions Master. “I’ll, just, uh— go, then. Sorry to disturb you.”

“Not so fast, Potter,” Snape drawled before Harry could put the cloak back on. The man looked skyward for a moment, like he might regret what he was about to say, but carried on nonetheless. “There was clearly a reason for your visit here. Sit; perhaps I may be of assistance. I am not Remus, but I’m also not an idiot.”

Harry blinked, needing several seconds to comprehend the man’s words. Snape was... inviting him to stay? “Oh,” he said again. “I— okay then. If you’re sure.” Harry walked over to his usual spot on the sofa, and his eyebrows rose when a steaming teacup floated his way. “Thanks.”

Snape sat in his armchair, raising one eyebrow. “Well? What dilemma do you need a way out of now?”

Harry bit his lip. Snape had been a lot better since the summer, in private at least. He could trust him. “Well, I know what the egg’s clue means now. I just don’t really know what to do about it.” He drank his tea, unsurprised that it was exactly the way he preferred it. Snape was a spy, after all; he was supposed to be observant. “I have to be able to breathe underwater for an hour.”

He explained the mermaid’s song to Snape, whose lips pursed. “Of course they’re sending you into the Black Lake in *February*,” he muttered. “No wonder Poppy asked for those extra-strength Pepper-Up potions. Honestly!”

Harry hadn’t even thought about the issues that might arise from the temperature of the water, and grimaced. Could he hold a Warming charm for an hour? Should he just wear one of his charmed robes, even though it would slow him down in the water?

“There is of course the Bubblehead charm,” Snape continued, demonstrating with a wave of his wand. A large bubble appeared around his head, like he was wearing a fishbowl as a helmet. “Useful for being underwater, and also to avoid noxious fumes from potions. I often teach it to my NEWT students.” His voice was somewhat distorted by the bubble, but Harry could still hear him. Another wave of his wand, and the spell ended. “However, keeping the spell up for a full hour — especially in the face of whatever trials there will no doubt be waiting for you — requires a lot of concentration, and is a risk for someone as unfamiliar

with the spell as you are. I would recommend you learn it as a precaution, but not as your main method for the task.”

“So what do I do, then?” Harry asked, watching Snape think.

“There is no similar limitation to the first task, where you could only use your wand?” the Slytherin checked. Harry shook his head.

“It doesn’t say anything about it, so I assume we’re fine to have other things. If not, I could always summon something again,” he added ruefully. “Why? Are you thinking about some sort of scuba diving apparatus? Because I thought about that but I don’t know how mechanised they are, and I didn’t know if the magic in the lake might mess with it.” The last thing he wanted was for an oxygen tank to fail on him in the middle of the Black Lake.

“No, that wouldn’t work,” Snape dismissed immediately. “But there is a plant — gillyweed. If you eat it, you will grow gills; and also sometimes fins. The effects vary from plant to plant, which makes it a somewhat risky approach, but if you carry enough for a second dose, that will cover you should the first dose lose its effects before you’ve finished.”

“Brilliant!” Harry breathed, perking up. He just had to eat this plant and he’d be all set! “Where can I buy it?”

“It’s rather rare,” Snape told him, making Harry falter. Of course it was. Just his luck. “However, it is used in several potions, so I keep some in my private stores. I will provide you with some when the task is nearer.” The Slytherin smirked. “If anyone asks where you got it, tell them you stole from me. There will be a detention for your efforts, after the task. Remus has been looking for a chance to test your Ancient Runes progress.”

Most of Harry’s Snape-related detentions turned into private lessons these days, so that didn’t bother him too much. “You’ll just give it to me? Really?”

“It would rather upset Remus if I just let you drown,” Snape pointed out mildly.

Harry was hit with a burst of bravery — or perhaps stupidity. “You’d be sleeping on the sofa for at least a week,” he teased. Snape stared at him, unimpressed.

“Don’t make me regret my offer, Potter,” he muttered. Harry just laughed.

“Wouldn’t dream of it, sir,” he assured, before sobering. “Seriously, thanks. I was starting to run out of options.”

“I’m sure Mr Longbottom would have enlightened you, had you shared your dilemma with him,” Snape said, and Harry wondered if that was a gentle reminder to trust his friends more. He was happy to talk about the egg with the other champions — at least, he had been before Viktor had solved the clue — but he’d been keeping it quiet around the rest of his friends, not wanting to worry them by explaining what he was about to undertake.

“But then I still would have had to figure out where to get this gillyweed stuff,” Harry pointed out. “So really I just skipped the middle man.”

Once again, Snape looked unimpressed, but he didn't say anything. With his problem solved, Harry wondered if he should leave. He'd gotten quite used to spending Friday evenings in the Potions Master's quarters with Remus, doing his homework and catching his pseudo-godfather up on everything he hadn't managed to tell him through the mirror. The thought of going back to Gryffindor Tower so early made something in his chest twinge sadly.

"I won't help you with your homework," Snape declared flatly. "But if you wish to avoid the antics of the many Weasleys you surround yourself with, you may stay."

Harry checked his Occlumency shields for a minute, worried he had let Snape slip in. But no, they were as solid as ever. He was just pathetic and transparent, evidently. What had his life come to that he'd rather do homework in his most hated professor's private rooms rather than up in the common room with his friends?

"Would you... if you're not too busy, would you teach me the Bubblehead charm? Please?" he requested tentatively. Snape's dark eyes surveyed him for a moment, and then he sighed.

"Very well," he assented. "But if your essay on Monday isn't of O level quality, you'll be in detention until Easter."

Harry laughed, wondering when threats of detention had become endearing rather than terrifying. "Yes, sir," he agreed, grinning.

The Bubblehead charm wasn't particularly difficult, but Snape was right that it took concentration to maintain. Harry couldn't get it to stick for more than five minutes by the time Snape told him to give it a rest and get on with his homework, claiming he had essays to mark. The Potions Master didn't kick him out even then, so Harry settled in to do his homework at the man's coffee table, the pair of them sitting in surprisingly companionable silence as they each got their work done. Every now and then, Harry asked Snape a question, like he might Remus or Sirius. To his utter astonishment, Snape would actually answer, explaining concisely until Harry could make sense of the work he was doing. He was a great teacher when he wasn't being an evil git, in more subjects than just Potions. It was almost like being back at Seren Du, but... easier. Over the summer they'd still had a lot of prejudice and awkward history to work past. Now, Harry was actually enjoying being in the man's company. It wasn't quite as relaxing as being with Remus or Sirius, but it was... nice.

He wondered if Snape was enjoying it as much as Harry was; what he might go and tell Remus about it when he saw the man next. Harry could imagine it already; Remus' eyes lighting up at the news, that happy little proud smile that he got whenever he saw Snape loosening up around people who weren't him. Whenever his newly reunited family started truly acting like one.

Harry didn't mind so much, having Snape in the family. He was Draco's godfather, after all. But all that aside, he was Remus', and that made him Harry's to some degree, too. Whether Snape liked it or not.

Chapter 31

“Potter, stay where you are.” The sharp voice rang out through the Potions classroom, and Harry grimaced, shaking his head when Neville shot him a concerned look.

“I’ll catch up,” he assured, wondering what he was in trouble for this time. Perhaps, after having the weekend to think it over, Snape regretted being so nice to Harry. They’d had a pretty pleasant evening working together in his quarters, and he probably just wanted to make it clear he was still the evil, terrifying dungeon bat Harry had thought he was for the first three years of schooling.

When they were the only two left in the classroom, Snape locked the door and went through a series of privacy wards; he, too, was aware of Skeeter’s subterfuge. Harry stayed in his seat, waiting for the explosion.

“How often do you check the map?”

Harry blinked at the unexpected question. “I— what?”

“The Marauders’ blasted map,” Snape clarified. “How regularly have you been checking it?”

“At least three times a day, lately,” he said. “Looking for Rita Skeeter.” So far nothing unusual had come up, except for Mr Crouch being in the school sometimes. But he was probably just organising tournament stuff. “Why do you ask?”

Snape scowled. “Someone broke into my private stores recently.”

“Was it another champion looking for gillyweed, do you think?” Harry queried, wondering who would be stupid enough to steal from Snape.

“No; the only thing of note that was missing was boomslang skin.” His dark eyes turned pointed as comprehension dawned on Harry’s face. “You haven’t been brewing Polyjuice potion again, have you, Potter?”

“What? No!” Harry denied immediately. “What use would I have for Polyjuice? Wait, how do you know about the first time?”

“Miss Granger was indelicate in breaking into my stores, and left her magical signature all over the place,” Snape replied. “Don’t tell me what you used it for, I’m quite certain I don’t want to know. I assume it had something to do with Miss Granger being partially transformed into a cat.”

Harry snickered at the memory. “Yeah, bit of a mix-up there.” Snape gave him a despairing look. “I swear, sir, I don’t know anything about any Polyjuice being brewed. Couldn’t you tell who did it this time?”

"Whoever it was, they were very thorough in removing any trace of their presence," Snape said, looking quite annoyed by that. "They stole enough for quite a large batch of Polyjuice, so I suspect they won't need any more for a while."

Harry glanced up sharply as the man's words settled in his brain. "You think it's for long-term use."

"I think there is someone in this castle who is not who they appear to be," Snape confirmed. "Whoever it is, they're doing an impeccable job at impersonating their chosen target."

"Do you think they're the one who put my name in the Goblet?" Harry asked grimly. Snape nodded.

"It would make sense, yes. Stay vigilant, Potter, and check the map whenever you are able. If any name is unfamiliar to you, come to me immediately."

"Yes, sir." The map was enormous, but Harry would keep an eye on it the best he could. "Can I go, sir? I'm going to be late to History of Magic."

"Which would, of course, be such a tragedy," Snape retorted dryly, making Harry snicker.

"Oh, I'd be devastated," he agreed. Snape rolled his eyes, turning away.

"Get out, brat. Come to me at lunchtime on the 23rd, I'll get you your gillyweed. The fresher it is, the more potent it will be."

"Thanks, Professor!" Leaving the classroom, he made sure to school his expression into something appropriately downtrodden as he walked past the crowd of second years waiting for their lesson to begin. As soon as he was past them, it turned into a concerned frown, his hands suddenly itching to pull the map from his bag. That was... concerning news. At least now they had something to look for.

.-. .

Harry was getting used to being manhandled out of the common room by one or both of the Weasley twins by now. He didn't put up a fight, letting them drag him up to their dorm room. "What are you two planning now?" he asked suspiciously. They sent him identical innocent grins, which didn't fool Harry for a second.

"Nothing untoward!" Fred insisted.

"We were just talking about you," George said conversationally.

"As we often do."

"And we realised that we're putting an awful lot of trust in that boyfriend of yours."

"We know *you* say he's alright, but you're a bit daft sometimes."

"No offence."

“So we were thinking, as the only two of your brothers who know the truth.“

“We should meet him, properly, make sure he’s *actually* a decent bloke like you say he is.”

Harry wasn’t thrown off by the alternating sentences, but their words did make him blink. “You’ve met Draco,” he said, perplexed. “Many times. Played quidditch against him. Remember?”

Both twins rolled their eyes. “We’ve met *Malfoy*,” George clarified.

“Slytherin Prince and pureblood prat,” Fred added helpfully.

“We haven’t met Draco. Not your Draco, anyway.”

“And we thought you might hex us if we took that meeting upon ourselves.”

“So we decided to ask you if you’d arrange something.” George looked hopeful, leaning against a bedpost. “It’s obvious you’re mad about him. I know you said Sirius and Lupin have met him, so obviously he’s not terrible since they approve, but...”

“You’re family,” Fred finished, his tone surprisingly serious. “And if he’s everything you say he is, then hell, he might end up family too, one day.” Harry blushed furiously — that was getting *very* far ahead, Merlin, they were only fourteen!

“So can we meet your boyfriend?” they finished in unison.

There was a funny little warmth curling in Harry’s chest. The twins wanted to meet Draco, to see him how Harry saw him, to *genuinely* get to know him. Even Neville hadn’t said anything more about Draco since the Yule Ball. “You promise you’ll be nice to him?” he asked cautiously. George grinned at him, for once without any mischief or dramatics.

“He makes you happy,” he said simply. “That’s enough to at least get a pass on any pranks for one meeting.”

“After that, we’ll decide,” Fred finished with a smirk. Harry snorted; that was all he could ask for, he supposed. Even he didn’t get a complete free pass for prank immunity. Though that could be because the twins had discovered Harry would give back as good as he got, after spending half a summer living with Sirius and Remus. Harry still hadn’t told them the truth about the two Marauders; he was saving that little gem for when he needed it most.

“I’m meeting Draco tomorrow night,” he said eventually. “I’ll check with him, but you two can come with me.”

The twins beamed. Harry hoped he was making the right choice. The more people he had on Draco’s side when they eventually went public about their relationship, the better.

Harry managed to catch Draco after breakfast the next morning, and the blond looked incredibly uneasy at the prospect of being introduced to the twins as Harry’s boyfriend. But after a promise of no pranks — and several kisses to ease his nerves — Draco agreed to the

meeting, and so Harry found himself squeezed under the invisibility cloak with the two tall redheads that night after curfew.

“This thing is amazing,” George murmured softly, in awe of the cloak. “No wonder you sneak about so much.”

“Can we borrow it sometime?” Fred asked. “This would come in handy for so many things!”

“As long as you’re careful with it,” Harry agreed. “It was my dad’s.” He was pretty sure his dad would like the idea of the twins using his cloak to cause mischief. Sirius certainly would.

They reached the empty Charms classroom and Harry nudged the door open, smiling to see Draco perched on the teacher’s desk inside. The Slytherin was nervous, Harry could tell by the line of his shoulders, but there wasn’t a sign of it on his face. Harry dropped the cloak, greeting Draco with a grin. “Hi,” he said quietly, taking a step forward, then hesitating as the twins appeared behind him. He’d never kissed Draco in front of another person before. Was it okay if he did?

The light in Draco’s eyes dimmed a little when Harry didn’t move towards him, and that made up his mind; he closed the distance between them, pressing their lips together without hesitation, even as his cheeks turned red. One of the twins — he was pretty sure it was George — let out a wolf-whistle.

“Our little boy’s all grown up, kissing Slytherins.” That was definitely George, mock-sniffing and wiping an imaginary tear from the corner of his eye.

“Just following your example,” Harry retorted sweetly, making George freeze.

“What do you know?”

Harry laughed, shaking his head; it had just been a hunch, but that definitely confirmed things. George had kissed at least one Slytherin in the past. He wondered who it was.

Taking Draco’s hand in his, he tugged the blond off the desk and closer to the twins. “Draco,” he started, “this is Fred and George. Don’t worry if you can’t tell which is which, yet.” Harry wasn’t even sure how he could tell anymore, he just *knew*. “Fred, George, this is Draco. My boyfriend.” He couldn’t stop the grin that took over his face at the announcement, and George cooed.

“Look at him, Freddy— about ready to fight us, isn’t he?”

Harry hadn’t realised he’d taken a protective stance, keeping Draco ever so slightly behind him. He blushed, but didn’t move.

“You can relax, Harrikins; this is a peaceful mission,” Fred insisted, holding out a hand towards Draco. Draco shook it, trepidation on his face. “So. Your dad’s a Death Eater.” He said it as if discussing the weather, and Harry flinched.

“*Fred.*” His tone was warning, but Draco’s hand rested briefly on his shoulder.

"It's fine," he assured, meeting Fred's gaze with his head held high. "He is. But I am not my father, and I'd rather die before I knelt to that twisted monster."

Fred's gaze assessed him carefully, then he eventually nodded. "Good. I reckon Harry won't let either of those things happen to you, so you're alright there."

George jumped in at his twin's side, grabbing Draco's arm in a handshake. "You're better at Potions than Harry is, aren't you?"

"That's not difficult," Draco replied, smirking. Harry jabbed him lightly in the side. He was okay at it, now! "Why?"

"We've been working on this variation of the Swelling Solution for one of our products," George explained, "and we've been having a bit of trouble getting it to only work on certain parts of the body."

Harry was left blinking as his boyfriend was stolen away by the twins, dragged towards some empty chairs and brought into a debate about ingredient measures and brewing times. Still, he couldn't be too mad about it; the twins were trying *so hard*. They hadn't brought *any* Wheezes products, and other than Fred's first remark, not a single mention of Draco's family escaped their lips. Harry wasn't sure what he'd been expecting when he'd agreed to the meeting, but something with more of a fight had certainly crossed his mind. Draco *had* been pretty awful to the Weasley family in the past, even if not to the twins specifically. Their families had a blood feud that had lasted for generations.

He couldn't be much help discussing Potions, but Harry pulled up a chair next to Draco anyway, smiling when the blond tangled his fingers in Harry's without even thinking about it, his other hand making a series of gestures to help explain whatever he was explaining to the twins. A lot of it went over Harry's head, but it was apparent Draco knew what he was talking about, and the twins clearly appreciated the input.

"We might have more questions for you," George warned, after Fred finished writing down Draco's instructions. "We're both decent enough at Potions, but it's never been our favourite. Spells are so much easier to manipulate."

"I suppose I can help where possible," Draco acquiesced. "As long as I can trust you not to use my own work against me."

The twins shared a smirk. "I think that's fair," they agreed. George glanced down at his watch.

"Right, we'd better leave you two alone, then," he said, smirk widening as he gave Harry and Draco a lewd wink. "Don't want to take up your whole night."

Harry was immeasurably grateful for that. He was over the moon that the twins and Draco seemed to get along well, but he also just really wanted to be able to snog his boyfriend in peace.

The twins stood, and George ruffled Harry's hair fondly. "You were right," he declared. "He's not as much of a prat as he likes to pretend he is."

Draco made a vaguely offended face, but Harry ignored him, grinning up at the older boy. "So I can keep him, then?" he asked in a falsely casual tone. Fred snickered.

"As long as you remember to feed him, and walk him, and don't let him piddle on the carpet," he replied, earning a bark of laughter. He clapped Harry on the shoulder. "We'll see you in the morning. Don't stay up too late."

"Remember the spells in the book," George added, making Harry splutter. As if they were anywhere *close* to needing those spells!

"We'll see you around, Draco," Fred said to the Slytherin, nodding. Draco nodded back, and Harry felt like he was missing something.

"If you have any more Potions questions, write them down and send them with Harry," the blond instructed. "I'll do what I can."

The twins grinned, then disappeared from the classroom, leaving Harry's invisibility cloak pooled on the floor in the doorway. They'd been sneaking around the castle long enough not to need it. Harry didn't really need it either these days, but he brought it out of habit.

There was a beat of silence, then Harry let out a long breath. "That was alright, wasn't it?" he asked worriedly. "They were okay?"

Draco's hands rested on Harry's hips, and the smallest smile curved at his mouth. "I expected more hexing," he admitted. "Possibly a bit of yelling. Certainly not... that."

Harry smiled faintly. "Yeah, they'll surprise you." He hadn't realised how nervous he'd been about the whole meeting until it was over, and his heart was thudding in his chest. "I'd say it went better than either of us expected. They like you." If they didn't, they wouldn't have left Harry behind.

Draco leaned in, lips brushing against Harry's in a way that had the Gryffindor following when he pulled back. "Let's stop talking about Weasleys, shall we?" he drawled, hand sliding around to the small of Harry's back.

There wasn't much talking about anything for a while after that.

.-.-.-.

It was starting to become a thing, Harry thought to himself, entering the common room to see Ron and Hermione sat on the sofa by the fire and staring at him intently. He reluctantly veered in their direction, raising an eyebrow expectantly. "We had something we wanted to say," Hermione said by way of greeting. Harry snorted, perching on the arm of the chair opposite.

"I can see that," he muttered to himself. "Go on, then."

“Everything has been a bit of a mess lately,” Hermione said earnestly. “Between the tournament, and Viktor, and... everything else.” Harry wondered if she was referring to Ron’s attitude, or his many other friends. “I think it all just got out of hand, and we let it. But Harry, the three of us have been best friends since first year. Surely we can’t let a little drama and a boy get in the way of all that?”

She was oversimplifying things so enormously that Harry goggled at her a little. “First off, I’ve never had a problem with Viktor,” he pointed out. “He’s great, we’re friends, if you want to date him then go right ahead. Ron’s the one with that issue there.” The redhead flushed, looking a little angry, but after a glance at Hermione he swallowed it back.

“Ronald and I have worked out our differences,” Hermione assured him. Harry doubted it, but let her keep up her illusion. “We miss you, Harry. I know you’ve been busy with the tournament, but all that aside, this year has been different for all of us. We’ve hardly spent any time together. It feels like we’re losing you.” Her voice cracked slightly, and guilt reared within Harry’s chest. It wasn’t their fault he now had a mountain of secrets he was keeping from them.

“That hasn’t all been my fault,” Harry pointed out, thinking of the multiple arguments he’d had with both of them over the last couple of months. Hermione ducked her head.

“No, it hasn’t,” she agreed. “Which is why I thought it’d be best if we just drew a line under all of that and started over, back how things were. You, me, and Ron.”

Obviously the tentative truce they’d agreed upon before the Yule Ball wasn’t enough for her. Part of Harry wondered why she was trying so hard to salvage a failing friendship; then he realised she didn’t exactly have anyone else to turn to. Maybe he’d been too hard on her lately. On both of them. It had to be strange from their perspective, seeing Harry change so drastically as a person seemingly for no reason. They didn’t know about the Compulsion charm.

Once again, Ron was being very silent, and Harry glanced at the redheaded boy. “What do you reckon?”

Ron looked up at him, smiling very faintly. “I reckon if some nutter’s out to kill you again, you could use all the friends you can get.”

Harry cracked a grin in return, even as his stomach churned uneasily. Ron and Hermione really did deserve more of a chance than he’d been giving them lately, after everything they had been through. Harry wasn’t quite ready to start sharing his secrets, but he could at least stop expecting the worst of them.

“Have you two done the essay for McGonagall yet?” he asked tentatively, offering an olive branch. Hermione beamed, even as Ron groaned at the mention of homework.

“We were just about to start,” Hermione said, reaching into her bulging backpack. “Do you want to join us? I’ll help you if you like.”

Hermione had to be desperate, Harry mused, to be volunteering to help him with work. Not that he needed it these days; if she'd been paying close attention, she'd notice he was doing just fine on his own. "Yeah, alright."

He pulled out his Transfiguration textbook and writing supplies, sliding down into the armchair to lean over the coffee table. Ron grumbled a bit, but got his things out too, and the three of them settled in to work. Harry couldn't really call it working together — despite Hermione's offer, she kept to herself and glared at Ron every time he tried to sneak a look at her parchment — more just working in proximity to one another, but it was a start.

Harry was only half-focused on his work, the rest of his brain still trying to figure out what had prompted the change of heart. Despite the agreed-upon truce, after the disaster of the Yule Ball and the following fallout, Harry had expected to go the whole rest of the year without overtures of any kind from Ron and Hermione. Ginny was still pissed at Ron for ignoring Luna all night, Hermione wasn't impressed by the rumours circulating about her and Harry, and Harry had thought Ron was still convinced he was some kind of traitor for making friends with people from other schools and houses. What had happened to make them so determined to clear the air and start over?

It was a testament to how fractured their friendship had been lately that the sight of the three of them studying together gained many odd looks from the Gryffindors who passed through the common room. Neville was one of them, eyeing Harry in concern, but Harry just waved him off. If they wanted to try, he was willing to try.

When he finished his essay — faster than Ron and Hermione, though Hermione was at least four inches over the requirement with no signs of stopping — Harry sat up with a stretch. "I'll be right back, I'm gonna go get my History of Magic book." Might as well get a head start on the next essay, even if he couldn't finish it in one night.

Heading towards the dorms, Harry started jogging up the stairs, almost falling flat on his face when an arm reached out and yanked him through a door. "What the hell, George?" he asked the redhead, straightening up with a scowl. It faded when he saw the concern on George's face.

"What did those two say to you?" George asked. Harry frowned.

"What? They just want to try being friends again. I guess Hermione misses me, I suppose Ron might as well." Ron was still a little off with him, but he'd tried cracking a few jokes while they worked, some of which were actually funny. To Harry's surprise, that made George grimace.

"I don't want to ruin anything, in case they genuinely mean it," he started cautiously. "But I thought you should know. I saw the two of them talking with Dumbledore after lunch today." Harry's heart sank. "I couldn't get close enough to hear what they were saying, not without risking being caught. But he looked like he was annoyed with them for something, and Ron didn't seem too pleased about whatever he was saying."

"Do you think..." Harry trailed off, unable to voice his concern.

"That Dumbledore isn't happy they're no longer keeping an eye on you, and told them to get back in your good books?" George finished grimly. "I'd bet my broom on it, mate."

Harry's blood became ice in his veins, and George squeezed his shoulder sympathetically. "I'm sorry," the redhead murmured. "If I thought they were honest, I'd let it go, but... there's too much at stake for you to risk this. And honestly, some of the stuff Ron's said about you lately when you're not around, I find it hard to believe he's had a change of heart, even with Hermione pestering him."

"Right." Harry definitely didn't want to know what Ron had said. He wasn't sure he could take it. "Yeah. I... shit." He ran a hand through his hair, hating the way his eyes were starting to itch. He didn't even *like* Ron and Hermione that much anymore; why did it hurt so much to have his fears confirmed?

All of a sudden he was wrapped in a hug, his face pressed against George's chest. "You're still family," George promised, hand warm and solid on Harry's spine. "You've got us, and Bill and Charlie, and even Ginny. If Ron and Hermione are working for Dumbledore, you're better off without them."

That was true, but it didn't change the fact that they were the first friends Harry had made at Hogwarts; the *only* friends he'd had for a long time. To learn it was all a lie — even if it had been genuine once, it wasn't anymore — Harry couldn't help but feel his heart break just a little bit.

"Thanks for telling me, George," he said eventually, pulling away and trying to compose himself. "I'd love to say I'm surprised, but..." George shared his uneasy look. "I should go. They'll be wondering what's taking me so long."

"If you need a rescue, you know the signal," George told him, not arguing when Harry left the dorm.

Hurrying up to his own dorm to grab the book he'd originally gone up for, Harry went back down to the common room with a smile on his face like nothing had happened. Hermione smiled back at him when he approached. "Everything alright?"

"Yeah, fine," he lied breezily, cracking open the textbook. They would definitely get suspicious if he turned on them so quickly after agreeing to make friends again, but Harry was pretty sure they'd end up arguing within a week or two and he could break away then. It might be worth trying for a little longer, to give them something to take back to Dumbledore. Reassurance that Harry was still his old self — still under the Compulsion charm and blissfully unaware of anything to do with his inheritance or pureblood culture or the Wizengamot.

If they were going to spy on him, he might as well use it to his advantage.

....

Being friends with Ron again meant it was difficult for Harry to sneak out of the dorm to meet Draco, but he managed it eventually, filling the blond in on the situation as they sat

together on the floor of the Transfiguration classroom, a Cushioning charm making the stone surprisingly comfortable. Harry's head was in Draco's lap, the Slytherin's narrow fingers running through his hair, a frown at his lips. "I don't like this," he said eventually. "It's hard enough keeping all your secrets in order when no one is looking at you, let alone with Weasley and Granger sniffing around."

"Someone's always looking at me," Harry insisted. "At least if I know they're looking I can direct them elsewhere." Barely a week into their renewed friendship and Ron and Hermione were already pestering him to open up to them; Ron in the guise of wanting gossip about who he was snogging, Hermione pretending to be concerned about Sirius. Harry wondered if Dumbledore was frustrated at not knowing where the dog animagus was hiding.

"That doesn't mean you should let them look so closely."

"I'll feed them enough lies to get Dumbledore off my back, then wait for Ron to be a prick again and stop talking to them," Harry promised. He'd already managed to get them to believe that Sirius was hiding in Central America, hence the lack of frequent letters. He'd also told Hermione that the people at the Yule Ball were mostly Susan's friends, and he'd just pretended to hang out with them to keep her happy. Susan was fine with that misdirection, happy for Dumbledore to be aware that she was bridging the gaps between houses.

Draco looked doubtful, and Harry sat up enough to kiss the frown off his face, sneaking his tongue between the Slytherin's lips. Draco moaned softly, pulling Harry into his lap. "You're trying to distract me," he declared with an annoyed look. Harry smirked.

"I am, and it's working," he retorted knowingly, trailing a finger up Draco's bicep and across his chest, leaning in for another kiss. "Just relax, and trust me."

Draco's head tipped back against the stone wall, and Harry used the movement to kiss down his jaw to his throat, teasing the sensitive spot below his ear that made Draco grip him tighter and hiss with pleasure.

"You're too damn Slytherin for your own good sometimes," Draco muttered, his hand up the front of Harry's shirt. Harry's green eyes flashed playfully.

"That's why you like me so much." He nipped at Draco's earlobe, rocking forward in his lap a little. They still hadn't gone any further than rutting up against each other, but that was more than enough for Harry. He was getting pretty good at Cleaning charms these days.

Draco's mouth was too busy for him to argue back for several minutes after that, and by the time it was free he was too dazed to remember his objections. Harry was only a little bit smug about that, but it was enough to have Draco scowling at him when they said their goodbyes. "I still don't like it," the Slytherin insisted. Harry kissed him.

"I know. I'm not thrilled about it either," he admitted. "But it won't be forever, and if I'm too resistant to them, Dumbledore will start asking questions." He doubted he'd have to wait long for one or the other to screw up and get angry with him. They didn't like the person he'd become, that much was abundantly clear. Hermione had been biting her tongue all week, and she would only last so long. If Ron didn't explode first, of course.

The pair eventually parted ways, and Harry slipped away towards Gryffindor under the cover of the invisibility cloak. His mind still on the feeling of Draco's soft skin under his fingertips, Harry hardly noticed the insistent push of magic against his own; the castle trying to warn him of something. It was only when he heard the faint thunk-thunk of Moody's wooden leg that he froze. Slowly, he tried to back around the corner, away from the source of the noise.

"Potter!"

He cursed under his breath. The invisibility cloak was useless against Moody's magical eye. "Professor Moody," he greeted, dropping the hood reluctantly. Moody limped closer, smirking at Harry in the dim light.

"Out for a little late night stroll, are we?"

"I don't sleep well sometimes," Harry replied evasively, hoping he didn't look as ravished as he felt. Draco was usually pretty good about not leaving marks, unlike Harry. They both knew Moody could see through glamour charms, and Harry didn't want questions in class. "I'm sorry, I'll go back up to my dorm."

"Don't worry about it, Potter," Moody waved him off. "What McGonagall doesn't know won't hurt her." Harry thought it interesting that he chose to mention the Gryffindor housemistress and not the headmaster. Was he implying Dumbledore already knew, or just that he was likely to tell the man? "Listen, while I've got you here; how are things going with that egg of yours?"

"Fine," Harry replied, eyes narrowing. "I'm not supposed to accept help from people. Especially not teachers." As if he hadn't been helped by Snape plenty already. But Moody didn't need to know that.

The Defence teacher let out a raspy laugh. "Like you'll be the only champion getting outside help," he pointed out. "You sure you don't want to talk it over? My office is always open to you."

"No, I've got it covered, thanks," Harry insisted. "Look, if you're not going to take points or anything, can I go? I'd really like to go to bed now." It was nearing midnight, and he had Potions first thing in the morning. Snape would crucify him if he dozed off in class.

"Aye, be on your way, Potter. But be careful; there's all kinds of strangers in this castle. Even with that fancy cloak of yours, you wouldn't want one to come and snap you up." Moody grinned, though it was more of a grimace, his disfigured face twisting in a way that could easily give a person nightmares.

Harry almost pointed out that Professor Moody was one of those strangers, but quite frankly he was ready for that whole interaction to be over as quickly as possible. He nodded, throwing the hood of the cloak back up to cover himself and hurrying away from the creepy professor.

When he was several corridors away, Harry paused and pulled the map out of his bag, wanting to make sure Draco got back to his common room safely. If Moody came across him

too, he might end up drawing some conclusions. His eyes scanned the paper, relief hitting him when he saw the dot labelled '*Draco Malfoy*' down in the dungeons, approaching the Slytherin common room. Then, Harry frowned, his brow furrowed.

According to the map, Moody was in his office, behind the desk, like he always was. How was that possible? There was no way he could have made it back that quickly! He kept looking around the map, wondering if there was some sort of mistake, but other than Barty Crouch walking down the hall away from Dumbledore's office entrance — that was an absurdly late meeting, surely the tournament arrangements couldn't be that urgent? — He didn't see anyone out of place.

Harry shook his head, wiping the map away and continuing on to Gryffindor Tower. Perhaps Moody knew of a secret passageway Harry didn't. He wasn't so arrogant to assume he'd figured out all of Hogwarts' secrets, even with the help of the Marauders.

.-.-.-.

The night before the task found all four Triwizard champions tucked away in a small living room in the Beauxbatons carriage, Fleur insisting it was the best place for privacy as none of her schoolmates would bother them. It was certainly more comfortable than hanging out in an abandoned classroom in the castle, so Harry wasn't going to complain.

"So is everyone ready for tomorrow?" Cedric asked, leaning back in his armchair with a bottle of butterbeer in his hand. The champions were all avoiding alcohol, not wanting to be hungover when they plunged into the Black Lake in the morning.

"As ready as I'll ever be," Viktor replied with a shrug. They'd all agreed not to say a word about the methods they planned to use, wanting it to be a surprise when the task began, but it was hard *not* to talk about what they were about to undertake.

"I am curious about what zey 'ave taken from us," Fleur mused. "I 'ave not noticed anyzing missing."

Harry hadn't either, but his three most important possessions — the cloak, the map, and Sirius' mirror — were in his bag pretty much permanently, so he couldn't see how anyone could take them. Maybe they'd take his Firebolt.

"It's whatever we'll *sorely miss*," Cedric said, rolling his eyes. "Maybe they've nicked my Potions notes. I've got an essay due on Friday." The other three laughed.

"Maybe they vill take a person," Viktor suggested. Harry and Fleur shared skeptical looks.

"Surely they wouldn't take that risk? If we don't make it in the hour..." Harry trailed off at the pointed look Viktor gave him. "Right, yeah, dragons." They hadn't cared too much about the safety of the spectators in the first task. Who was to say they wouldn't put an innocent person in danger to motivate the champions? "I guess we'll find out in the morning."

"D'you think we'll have to fight the merpeople, or just find them?" Cedric mused. "To get whatever it is back, I mean. Merpeople are supposed to be a warrior race. Do you think

they'll just let us take it and go on our way?"

"I'd like to think the challenge is in getting to them in the first place," Harry said grimly. There were all sorts of creatures in the lake that would make it difficult enough. "But I wouldn't put it past them."

"I will just charm zem," Fleur declared, tossing her hair. "Zen zey will 'ave to let me go past."

"Does that work on merpeople, then?" Harry was curious, knowing very little about veela and their charm. "What are the limits of it? Can you charm, like, cats and owls and stuff, or do they have to be humanoid? Or a certain level of intelligence?" Harry presumed if Fleur was capable of charming non-human creatures, she would have tried to charm the dragon in the first task. "Or does it only work on boys? There might be mermaids down there." The dragon was a nesting mother, so maybe that was why it didn't work.

"I 'ave not tested ze specifics," Fleur admitted, looking amused at the line of questioning. "And I am not as strong as a full veela. But a veela's charm will work on anyone 'oo is attracted to 'umanoid women. I would assume merfolk would be similar enough for eet to work."

"That explains why it didn't work on me at the World Cup," Harry murmured in comprehension, realising after a beat of pointed silence that he'd said that out loud. "I mean. Err." His face went hot as the other three stared at him wide-eyed.

"Did you just..." Cedric looked hesitant, like he didn't wait to say it out loud until Harry did.

"Accidentally come out?" Harry confirmed sheepishly. "Apparently. Please don't tell anyone." He wasn't ashamed, not really, but it was attention he didn't really need right now. People were judging him enough as it was without knowing that.

"Your secret is safe wiz us," Fleur promised, reaching over to squeeze his arm fondly. "I admit, I did suspect. I 'ave tried to charm boys wiz you around before, and you did not even seem to notice." Harry blinked, staring at her with raised eyebrows.

"How often do you use that charm of yours?" he asked suspiciously. Her response was an innocent smile, and Harry assumed by the way Cedric and Viktor's eyes turned adoring, she was using her charm right then. Harry laughed.

"I never use eet when eet matters," she promised, the boys turning back to normal after a second. "But sometimes eet is ze easiest way to get boys to leave me alone."

"Not Harry, clearly," Cedric teased, his grey eyes playful without a hint of judgement. "You're stuck with him."

"I haff to say, this makes me feel better," Viktor declared, earning a confused look. "I know you are not the type to interfere with another person's relationship, but I had vorried about the rumours of you and Hermy-own."

"Oh, those are completely made up by Skeeter," Harry promised. "She's all yours, don't worry." That made Viktor grin, and something in Harry's chest twisted. He hadn't realised the Durmstrang boy liked Hermione quite so much. Should he say something? Tell Viktor that his sort-of-girlfriend was maybe spying on Harry for Dumbledore and who knew what she really wanted with Viktor? No, he couldn't do that. The worst Hermione could likely be accused of where Viktor was concerned was using him to make Ron jealous.

It was none of his business, Harry decided. Viktor would leave at the end of the year anyway.

"So who *were* you with at the Yule Ball, then?" Cedric asked curiously. "If it wasn't any of the girls. It certainly wasn't George; him and Boris made it pretty clear where they were going when they left."

Harry ducked his head, cheeks turning red. "No one important," he lied.

"Was it Cassius? Wait, no, he was still in the hall while you were gone."

"Why does everyone think I'm with Cassius?" Harry despaired, remembering Neville's assumption too. Did he really spend that much time around the older Slytherin? No wonder Dumbledore was getting worried. "Leave it alone or I'll tell Skeeter it was you I was snogging," he told Cedric, who snickered.

"I could do worse," he said with a shrug, winking. "Not sure Cho would be pleased about it, mind. She'd want to watch if I was snogging you."

Harry made a face. "That's more information than I ever wanted about you or your girlfriend." Maybe Cedric wasn't as incredibly straight as George had assumed.

Cedric burst into laughter, and even Fleur and Viktor joined him at the disturbed expression Harry wore.

"On zat note, I think eet is time to go to bed," Fleur suggested, still giggling. "Since 'Arry will not share 'is rendezvous wiz us."

"If we all survive this bloody tournament, I'll tell you," Harry grumbled, getting to his feet.

It was later than they probably should have stayed out considering their early start, but Cedric and Harry weren't remotely tired as they snuck back up to the castle, bidding Viktor goodnight on the lawn. They parted ways at the stairs, and Harry quickly made his way up to Gryffindor Tower, creeping up to his dorm. All the other beds had the curtains drawn, so Harry tried to be quiet as he got ready for bed, squeezing his eyes shut and trying to force himself to sleep. He'd need all the rest he could get.

Chapter 32

The morning of the second task dawned bright and early, thankfully fairly mild for late February. Harry readied himself in the dorm, putting on his swimming trunks under his robe and stuffing the gillyweed in his pocket. Neville was waiting for him in the common room with a bacon sandwich, and Harry grinned at him. “Is the hall a bit mad?”

“It’s been worse,” Neville said with a shrug, “but I still thought you’d prefer to avoid it.”

“Where are Ron and Hermione?” Harry was surprised the pair weren’t there with them, since they were so determined to be his best friends again. They hardly let him go to the bathroom without their company these days.

“I haven’t seen them, actually,” Neville replied. Harry frowned, but shook it off; he had bigger things to worry about.

Eating his sandwich on the way down to the lake, he raised his eyebrows at seeing the stands from the first task constructed on the bank of the lake, overlooking the calm water. Neville hugged him and wished him good luck before hurrying off to get a seat, and Harry made his way towards the judges’ table, where he could see Viktor waiting. There was no sign of Fleur or Cedric yet.

“Morning,” Harry greeted, glad for the Warming charm on his robe. Snape had promised the gillyweed would help him adjust to the water temperature, and Harry prayed he was right about that. It had to be freezing in there. Viktor nodded in greeting, his dark eyes fixed sharply on the water. He was clearly in the zone, and Harry left him to it, scanning the rest of the crowd. He was surprised to see Percy sat in Mr Crouch’s seat, and he wandered over. “Where’s Mr Crouch?”

“He’s still not well,” Percy told him with a frown. “Terrible thing, he hasn’t been in the office in weeks. Of course, I’m handling everything as per his instruction — owls me every morning, you see. I have it all under control.” Percy puffed out his chest. “But of course I wish him the speediest recovery.”

Harry’s brow furrowed; that couldn’t be right. He’d seen Mr Crouch’s name on the map half a dozen times since the Yule Ball. But of course he couldn’t say that, or he’d have to explain the map, and then he’d be in all kinds of trouble.

Before he could ask for any detail on Crouch’s mysterious illness, Bagman appeared at Harry’s side, slinging a heavy arm over his shoulders. “Alright, there, Harry?” He ducked in close, dropping his voice. “Need any last-minute pointers?”

Harry firmly removed the man’s arm from his person, taking a step away. “I’m fine, thanks.” Why was the man so insistent on helping him? Surely Harry didn’t look *that* pathetic.

The arrival of Cedric and Fleur was the perfect excuse for Harry to ditch Bagman, and he bumped Cedric’s shoulder with his own. “You ready for this?”

“Don’t have much choice, do I?” Cedric pointed out dryly. “Hey, have you seen Cho this morning? She wasn’t at breakfast.”

“I haven’t,” Harry replied, puzzled; that wasn’t like Cho at all. “But I didn’t go to breakfast. Neville brought me up a sandwich so I could avoid the crowd.”

“It’s not him, is it?” Cedric asked with a wiggle of his eyebrows, making it clear what he was referring to. Harry blushed, jabbing the Hufflepuff in the side.

“No!” he hissed, wide-eyed. “It’s not Neville, God! And keep your voice down, Skeeter’s bound to be around here somewhere.”

Cedric looked apologetic, glancing around for any sign of the blonde reporter. “That is weird, actually; she’s usually right on top of the action. Maybe your lawyer finally scared her off.”

“I can only hope,” Harry said ruefully.

It drew closer to the starting time, and as the stands began to fill with people Bagman cast Sonorus on himself, striding out to the water’s edge and starting up a chatter to pass the time. “All four champions are ready and raring to go! For those of you who aren’t aware, the second task is thus; each champion has had a person they care about taken from them, stolen away into the depths of the lake by its resident clan of merpeople. It is up to the champions to find what has been taken from them and retrieve them within the hour!”

At Bagman’s words, all four champions shared horrified looks. “A person,” Viktor murmured grimly.

“Cho!” Cedric gasped, casting panicked eyes on the water’s surface. Harry gripped his arm to stop him diving in then and there.

“They’re safe, they have to be. The task hasn’t started yet.” He wasn’t sure which of them he was trying to reassure.

“But after an hour...” Fleur trailed off, her blue eyes fearful. “I do not know ‘oo zey ‘ave taken from me.” She disappeared, hurrying over to her headmistress, and there was a rapid conversation in French that ended with Fleur’s hands sparking with fire in her fury.

“Gabrielle!” The quarter-veela stomped over to Ludo Bagman, grabbing him by the front of his robe and hoisting him off his feet, glaring. Her hair had flames licking at the tips, and Harry could smell burning ozone. He hadn’t realised Fleur had that much of her heritage in her. “If *anyzing* ‘appens to my leetle sister, I will *kill you*, Bagman,” she declared spitefully. Harry’s jaw dropped. Fleur had talked about her little sister before; Gabrielle was barely nine years old! How could they possibly think it was a good idea to put her at the bottom of a lake?

Bagman looked like he was about to wet himself, but he bravely patted Fleur on the shoulder. “Not to worry, Miss Delacour,” he said, voice shaking. “We’ve got every precaution in place.”

That didn't seem to satisfy Fleur, but she huffed, dropping him to the ground and turning on her heel back to the other champions. Harry could see several boys in the stands watching with a mixture of fear and awe; even he had to admit that was terrifyingly impressive, watching her pick up Bagman with one hand.

"Remind me never to piss her off," Cedric muttered. Harry and Viktor both hummed in agreement.

With Fleur pacing like a caged tiger, Bagman and the other judges seemed to realise it was best to get started as quickly as possible.

Harry stripped off his robe and shoes when the other champions started doing the same, leaving him in the swimming shorts and tank top he'd been supplied with the day before. The other male champions were dressed similarly, and Fleur wore a silver one-piece swimsuit, oblivious to the looks she was getting once she dropped her robe. She was too focused on her sister and the lake.

"Champions, you have one hour!" Bagman announced, still eyeing Fleur warily. "Start on my whistle. One... two... *three!*" Bagman blew his whistle, and they immediately jumped into action. Harry shoved the gillyweed in his mouth and began to chew, wading out into the freezing cold water. All three other champions blazed past him, disappearing under the surface of the water. Harry refused to do so until he was absolutely sure this whole thing would work.

I really should've tested this, he thought to himself as he swallowed the slimy plant, ignoring the faint laughter he could hear from the stands as he stood in the shallows like an idiot. *Don't fail me now, Snape.*

When it finally started working, it kicked in remarkably quickly, and Harry had to throw himself into the water to avoid choking on air. His feet elongated into flippers, his hands webbing between the fingers, and he grinned to himself as he swam forwards, the water feeling more room temperature than the near-ice he knew it was.

Snape hadn't let him down. He could do this.

.

Much more than an hour later, Harry burst through the surface of the lake and took a glorious gasp of air, having lost his gills about fifteen feet under. He dragged Ron and Gabrielle with him, both of them regaining consciousness once they were above water. Gabrielle's eyes immediately filled with tears as she splashed and gasped her sister's name, and Harry let go of Ron, letting the little girl wind her arms around his neck. "There you go, I've got you," he soothed, unsure how much English she spoke. "Fleur is okay," he said, though truthfully he didn't know what had happened to the French girl. "Can you swim?" Gabrielle sniffled and made a so-so gesture with one hand, the other gripping Harry's shoulder tightly.

"Harry, hurry up! What's she doing here?" Ron asked, impatiently treading water, his red hair plastered to his forehead.

"Fleur never showed up, I couldn't leave her there." Harry started to swim the best he could with Gabrielle hanging on his back. He was glad for all his time in the pool at Seren Du now.

"You idiot, you didn't seriously think they'd let us die down there, did you?" Ron burst out.

"That's not a risk I'm willing to take with the life of a nine year-old girl," Harry retorted sharply. "Just swim." The closer he drew to the bank, he could see a crowd gathered with their wands out, fire flaring from somewhere in the middle. Madame Maxime towered over it all, looking like she was struggling to keep hold of something. Or someone. Fleur.

"*Gabrielle!*" The crowd was forcefully parted as Fleur broke away from her headmistress' hold in a blast of flames, rushing towards the water's edge. On Harry's back, Gabrielle perked up, calling for Fleur.

"She's fine!" Harry assured as loud as he could, swimming faster. Fleur clearly couldn't enter the water when she was in her veela state, and she prowled the bank until Harry was close enough to let Gabrielle down, the little girl hitting the shallows and sprinting into her sister's arms. Fleur immediately calmed, muttering in French and smoothing a hand down her sister's wet hair. Ignoring Ron as he was bundled away by Percy, Harry hurried to Fleur's side.

"She's okay, right? The merpeople wouldn't let me take her at first, but you didn't show up — I couldn't leave her there."

When Fleur looked up at him over Gabrielle's head, her eyes were filled with tears. "I was attacked by ze grindylows," she sobbed. "I lost my Bubble'ead charm. Water ees not my strongest element." There were still embers flying off her hair, and Harry squeezed her shoulder.

"I got her. She's fine." Next thing he know, he was being dragged into the sisters' hug, Fleur pressing kisses to his face.

"You saved 'er, even though she wasn't your 'ostage,'" she breathed thankfully. "Zank you, 'Arry."

"I couldn't leave her there," Harry repeated, hugging Fleur. Now that he was closer, he could see she had dozens of vicious-looking cuts all over her skin, blood dripping down onto the sand. "Fleur, you need to see Madam Pomfrey."

"She's not the only one, Mr Potter." Harry's head snapped up to see the mediwitch in question stood behind him, lips pursed as she surveyed the scene. "All of you, come with me. Honestly, sending children into the lake in *February*, it's a wonder you didn't all go hypothermic!"

With Fleur refusing to let go of Gabrielle, the three of them followed Pomfrey over to the first aid tent, where the other five task participants were waiting. Cedric and Cho were huddled together in a fluffy towel, otherwise no worse for wear. Viktor had an arm wrapped around a shivering Hermione, his head human once more, and nearby Ron was sat in a towel of his own, glaring at the Bulgarian boy.

Pomfrey wrapped a towel tightly around Harry's shoulders, then thrust a vial into his hand. Harry recognised it as Snape's extra-strength Pepper-Up potion, and downed it happily, sighing as the steam began to gush from his ears.

"Gabrielle first," Fleur insisted stubbornly when the matron turned to her. Pomfrey huffed, but obligingly wrapped the girl in a towel and gave her a potion too — only then did Fleur allow her to start healing her wounds.

"Alright, Harry?" Cedric asked, his grey eyes dark with concern. "You were down there a long time."

"I'm fine," he assured, casting a Drying charm on himself. He cast one on Gabrielle too, and the girl's violent shivers lessened. "You? Cho?"

"We're both okay," Cho promised, managing the barest smile. "I don't really remember much, to be honest. One minute I was in Dumbledore's office, the next I woke up in the middle of the lake." Cedric definitely didn't look impressed by the proceedings, and Harry didn't blame him. He would probably be far more furious himself if it had been Neville or Draco or even Ginny — especially Ginny, after her ordeal with the Chamber two years ago — but obviously Dumbledore had done the choosing, if he thought Ron was who he'd miss most.

"Harry!" Hermione gushed, eyes bright. "You did it! You worked it out all by yourself!" She sounded equal parts surprised and impressed, and Harry smirked; no one would even believe him if he admitted to getting help from Snape of all people.

"I told you I had it sorted."

"You haff a water beetle in your hair," Viktor said to Hermione, reaching up to gently brush the beetle away. Hermione smiled at him, but turned back to Harry.

"What were you thinking, going back for Fleur's sister like that? You wasted so much time! Viktor said you were there before any of the others."

"I was thinking I wasn't going to let a nine year-old *die*, Hermione," Harry bit out, wondering how she and Ron both could just trust Dumbledore when he said nothing bad would happen. The first task had been *dragons*, and they thought everything was going to be perfectly safe?

He could see Dumbledore conferring with the mer-chief at the edge of the water, and then gathering the other judges to discuss something. Harry barely paid attention to the scores — he didn't care if they gave him a zero, as long as he was done with the task. Still, it didn't surprise him to hear that Dumbledore had somehow managed to spin his decision to save Gabrielle into some sort of example of martyrdom, giving him extra points for it. He was tied for first with Cedric now.

"Just one more to go," Cedric said as they were all herded up to the castle, towels still draped around them. "Then it's all over."

“Thank fuck for that,” Harry declared vehemently. He didn’t have to think about the bloody tournament for three whole months; then they’d be told about the third task, and a month later it would be done. “Merlin, I can’t wait to take a bath.” Cedric laughed as Cho made a loud noise of agreement, and they glanced back at Viktor and Hermione; Viktor seemed to be trying to talk to Hermione, while she just wanted to walk up ahead to talk to Harry. Harry was glad Viktor knew he had no interest in Hermione, or it would all look a bit suspicious.

All Harry wanted was a hot bath, a hot drink, and bed, in that order. And to call Seren Du — he needed to talk to Remus about getting a present for Snape. The man had definitely saved his arse on this task.

.-. .

The day after the task was a Saturday, and Harry was inordinately pleased not to have to go to classes. He emerged for breakfast wearing a thick jumper and two pairs of socks, his Gryffindor scarf wrapped around his neck — even after the Pepper-Up and a long bath, he couldn’t quite shake the chill that had settled into his bones. He sat with the other champions and their assorted crowd at breakfast; everyone else who had been in the lake was layered up as well, except Viktor. “I am Slavic,” he said by way of explanation, reaching for the coffee pot.

Fleur had Gabrielle sat on her lap, and was dropping kisses on the girl’s silver-blonde hair every few minutes. She was still clearly shell-shocked from thinking she had failed her sister in the worst of ways. Harry squeezed her hand under the table, offering a supportive smile.

“I get that you lot were all risking your lives down there and everything,” Fred remarked from across the table, “but it was a bit boring for the rest of us to watch.”

Harry had wondered about that. “Did they not have screens, or anything with tracking charms so you could watch?”

Both twins shook their heads. “We sat and stared at the lake for an hour,” Cassius confirmed in a drawl. “It was thrilling, really.”

“You’d think they would’ve figured something out,” Cho mused, leaning into Cedric’s shoulder, swamped by a huge Hufflepuff Quidditch Team hoodie with ‘*Diggory*’ on the back. “The tournament being a spectator sport and all. At least the first task was fun to watch.”

“Hopefully the third task will be more entertaining,” Harry said. The other three champions groaned.

“Let’s not talk about the third task yet,” Viktor begged wearily.

After he’d eaten his fill, Harry took advantage of Hermione being distracted by Viktor — and thus Ron being distracted by Hermione — and snuck away with Neville and Ginny back to the common room. The rug by the fire was calling his name.

“I can’t believe you’re tied for first,” Neville mused aloud once the three of them were settled in front of the fire, Harry sprawled out on his belly with one of his muggle fiction books open

in front of him. “You might actually win this thing, y’know.”

“I don’t know about that,” Harry waved him off.

“He’s right, though,” Ginny insisted. “You’re doing really well, Harry. And you’ve always been good at getting through dangerous situations. You could take the Cup. Imagine if you did win!”

“I don’t care about winning,” Harry said tiredly. “I just want to not die.” It weighed heavy in the back of his mind that whoever had entered him into this tournament had done so for a reason, and had yet to reveal themselves. The clock was running down, and they could end up getting desperate.

.-.-.-.

By the middle of the week, Harry was about ready to hex Ron’s mouth shut. As one of the few people who had been under the surface of the lake — regardless of the fact that he’d been unconscious for 95% of it — he had taken it upon himself to answer the questions of anyone curious enough to approach Harry. He’d gone from admitting to being put in an enchanted sleep for the whole thing, to insisting he’d fought off a whole group of merpeople bare-handed. Even Hermione was getting sick of him; though she was getting sick of everyone, after spending several days being teased about being the one Viktor would miss most.

On his way back from his last class of the day, Harry froze when his name was called across the hallway. “Mr Potter, would you mind following me to my office?” Dumbledore strode towards him, eyes twinkling genially. “I won’t keep you from your friends too long. I merely wish to talk.”

“We’ll see you at dinner, Harry,” Hermione said, tugging Ron along with her, leaving him alone with the headmaster. Harry had no choice but to follow Dumbledore up to his office, the headmaster conjuring a tea set once he was sat at his desk.

“Milk and sugar, Harry?” he offered, as if it were perfectly normal for him to invite a student up for tea without reason, even if that student was Harry Potter.

“Please.” Harry had zero intention of drinking anything Dumbledore gave him. He accepted the mug, putting it to his lips, but didn’t drink. Dumbledore’s smile widened. “Why am I here, sir? Is something wrong? Is it Sirius?”

“Everything is well,” Dumbledore assured. “I have not heard from Sirius for a while, but I am sure he’s doing just fine.” Harry hid a smirk at that; if only Dumbledore knew. “I merely thought I would see how you’re faring after the second task. You’re handling the tournament remarkably well, and I’m impressed. Your use of gillyweed was truly inspired.”

“Neville told me about it,” Harry lied earnestly. He didn’t look Dumbledore in the eye. “I had to, uh, borrow some from Professor Snape. But I think that was worth it.” As promised, Snape had given him three days of detention for theft. The first detention had been spent with Remus going over his Runes, and the second had become a lesson on cauldron monitoring

charms while Snape brewed more potions for the Hospital Wing. Harry would have his final detention after dinner.

Dumbledore chuckled. “Professor Snape is often possessive of his store rooms. Sometimes, these things are necessary.” The headmaster’s gaze flicked to Harry’s teacup, and Harry wondered what sort of potion was in it that he was supposed to be reacting to. Dumbledore would notice if the level in his cup didn’t get any lower. Pretending to take another sip, Harry screwed up his nose in concentration, trying to vanish the contents of the cup. He hadn’t tried a Vanishing charm wandlessly before, but with a little nudge of his magical core, the tea disappeared. When he set down the empty cup, Dumbledore looked approving behind his smile.

He didn’t seem to be expecting Harry to pass out or some such, so Harry just continued on as always, still not looking the man in the eye. “How are you feeling about the third task, Harry?”

“It’s a little way off yet, so I’m not too worried about it,” Harry replied. “Maybe in a couple of months I’ll start freaking out. I’m not used to getting so much advanced warning before I end up in a life or death situation, it’s really quite disconcerting.” That made Dumbledore chuckle.

“I can only imagine. You seem to be getting along well with the other champions — no worries about facing them one last time?”

“No, they’re all really nice. I don’t think they expected me to be much competition.” Harry wasn’t sure how he was supposed to be answering when he didn’t know what the potion was supposed to do, so he just kept smiling and hoped for the best.

“You are a young man of many surprises,” Dumbledore complimented. “Have you anything else to tell me? Noticed anything… unusual, lately?”

“Not that I can think of,” Harry said with a shrug, wondering what Dumbledore thought he was mixed up in. “Why, should I have?”

“I was merely concerned; with all the unfamiliar people walking these halls, there’s always the possibility that one of them may wish to do you harm. Would you mind if I just gave you a quick check over? There may be a hex on you going unnoticed.”

Harry’s heart dropped, but he tried not to let it show on his face. His pulse picked up, and he gave a false grin. “Sure!” he chirped, betting anything the tea was supposed to make him compliant. “Madam Pomfrey checked me over after the task, but if you think it’s necessary, sir.”

Dumbledore smiled, raising his wand. Harry had to force himself not to flinch. “Excellent. One moment, please.” He murmured a quiet spell, and immediately Harry felt as if something slimy was crawling over him, stuck to his magical core — the sensation the books said he would feel when someone placed a charm or curse on him. In the back of his mind he vaguely felt his inhibitions lower, but he was mostly concerned about the wrong-feeling magic. He kept up his smile, keeping his panic locked down.

“Am I all good, sir?”

“Yes, you’re in top shape, my boy,” Dumbledore assured. “Thank you for indulging an old man’s fears.”

“Can I go to dinner now, sir?” Harry asked, glancing at the clock on the desk.

“Of course, of course. But are you *sure* there’s nothing you wish to tell me about, Harry?”

There was a strange moment when the unfamiliar magic choking Harry’s squeezed down, urging him to blurt out all his secrets. Harry raised his Occlumency shields to push the urge away, managing a relaxed shrug. “I can’t think of anything, sir, but I’ll come to you if that changes.”

That seemed to satisfy the headmaster, and he let Harry go with a cheerful wave. As soon as Harry was away from the gargoyle, he squeezed his eyes shut and sucked in a deep breath, shuddering as the magic wrapped tighter around him. It was suffocating. How had he gone years with Dumbledore’s magic on him and never noticed before? Now he was aware of his own magical core, the foreign intrusion felt awful. He’d had some practice with it over the summer — Snape or Remus or Sirius putting curses and charms on him, so he could feel what it was like. None of them had been like *this*.

He didn’t want to draw attention, so he forced himself to straighten up and head down to the Great Hall for dinner, sitting between Ron and Hermione even though there was an empty seat next to Neville. “What did Dumbledore want?” Ron asked around a mouthful of chicken, and Harry shrugged.

“Just to see how I was holding up with the tournament and everything,” he replied nonchalantly.

“That was nice of him,” Hermione said with a smile. Harry could hardly eat he felt so sick — did Ron and Hermione know what Dumbledore had planned? Had they been warned he was going to be a little different, and it was because of a spell?

“We should play exploding snap after dinner,” Ron suggested. “It’s been ages since we’ve done that.”

“Can’t — detention with Snape, remember?” Harry’s grimace hid his near-palpable relief at having the perfect excuse to go see Snape as soon as possible.

Ron made a face. “Can’t believe the greasy git gave you detention for taking what you needed for the task,” he grumbled. “You’re a Triwizard champion! He should be happy to help you beat those other schools.”

“As if Snape has ever missed out on a chance to give me detention,” Harry pointed out. He forced himself to eat the last bite of his shepherd’s pie, pushing his plate away. “I should get going before I’m late and he gives me even more detention for it. I’ll see you later.” The crush of the magic was getting worse, seeping into his pores until all he wanted to do was run to Dumbledore and spill his secrets. Harry pushed it away, shouldering his bag and hurrying

down to the dungeons. He was sweating with the effort of resisting the magic by the time he burst into Snape's office, startling the man. "Help me," he gasped, throwing himself down into a chair, gripping the edge of the desk hard. Snape leapt to his feet, locking and warding the room with a spell as he rushed to Harry's side.

"What happened?" Cool fingers gripped his chin, raising his head so the man could look him over.

"Dumbledore. Cast a spell on me," Harry bit out. "I think— Compulsion, again."

Snape straightened up, waving his wand over Harry. He frowned. "Sit still." He began to chant quietly in Latin, waving his wand in a complicated motion. Much like it had with the goblins, a ball of black glowing magic began to form over Harry's sternum, growing until Snape suddenly wrenched his wand upwards and the ball dissipated. Harry felt the foreign magic smothering his core melt away, and sucked in air like a drowning man. Snape's hand came down on his shoulder, steadyng him. "Easy, Potter." His voice was surprisingly gentle, and he waved his wand again, no doubt checking Harry for any other spells. "You're clear."

Harry slumped back in his chair when Snape released his shoulder, running a hand through his hair. "Thank you. Merlin, that was awful. Does it always feel like that?"

"Being cursed, once you're aware of your own magic?" Snape clarified. Harry nodded. "Not always to that degree — Dumbledore's spell was exceptionally powerful — but yes, it's always... uncomfortable. If you're that sensitive to it now, I suspect the headmaster won't be able to put so much as a light Tracking charm on you without you noticing."

Harry was glad for that, but he hoped he never had to experience it all the same. "Was it the same one as before?"

"I cannot be sure, as the goblins removed that before I had the chance to study it. But it was a powerful Compulsion charm designed to make you both reckless and extraordinarily trusting of the caster, so it's likely, yes."

"I felt like I just wanted to run up to the headmaster and tell him everything," Harry said with a shudder. He blinked, and there was a glass of water being pressed into his hands. He took it with a grateful smile at Snape, downing the cool liquid.

"It is... concerning that he felt the need to refresh the charm. Likely he thinks you're just shedding it as you grow older — not uncommon with adolescents, as their magic is constantly growing and changing."

Harry caught on to what Snape wasn't saying. "But it means he's starting to suspect I'm not under his thumb anymore."

The Potions Master nodded. "You'll have to be incredibly careful in the next few weeks. He will believe the charm is strongest — he may expect you to come to him, or to Weasley and Granger. It will look even more suspicious if you continue on as you have been."

Harry grimaced. “So I’ll spend a few weeks playing good little Gryffindor, make up some things to tell them that’ll have them believing I’ve given up all my secrets, and then...” He trailed off, unsure what came next. Keep pretending until Dumbledore was dead? How long was he supposed to keep up the charade?

“You only need last until the end of the school year,” Snape assured him. “Even so, I think you can get away with avoiding Weasley and Granger before then, as long as you keep your public friendships to mostly Gryffindors. Dumbledore won’t have done anything to change your personality too drastically — people would question if you suddenly refused to speak to the other champions, after being outwardly friendly to them for so long. Likely he just wants a little more insight into your private escapades.”

It was a small mercy, but a mercy nonetheless. “I suppose we’d better figure out what I can tell him to get him off my back, then,” he said with a shrug, pulling his password protected notebook out of his bag.

There had to be something he could let go of, to protect the secrets he really cared about.

.-.-.-

About a week after the second task, Harry walked into the Great Hall to find all eyes on him — not unusual in itself, but the wave of whispers and giggles that broke out immediately after gave Harry a pretty good idea what might have happened. Harry sank into the empty seat between Neville and Ginny, raising an eyebrow at the redhead girl. “What’s the damage this time?” Ginny giggled, passing him a copy of *Witch Weekly*. He studied the magazine. “Not the *Prophet*?”

“This one isn’t exactly *Prophet* material,” Ginny told him, opening the magazine to a specific page. She seemed amused, so Harry figured it couldn’t be too bad. Ron and Hermione sat on the bench opposite them, Hermione casting a disparaging look at the magazine.

“I can’t believe you have a subscription to that rag, Ginny,” she remarked. Ginny shrugged.

“Not all of it is garbage.”

Harry was busy reading the article in question — which was *definitely* garbage.

‘Harry Potter’s Woes of the Heart

A boy like no other — but still suffering the trials of any teenage love affair. Deprived of love since the tragic demise of his parents, fourteen year-old Harry Potter found solace at Hogwarts; or so he thought. His steady girlfriend, muggleborn Hermione Granger, seems to have developed a taste for famous wizards.’

The article went on to express how Hermione had cruelly cheated on Harry with Viktor Krum, breaking Harry’s heart shortly before the Yule Ball and sending him into Ginny’s arms. “Oi, Gin, there’s a quote here from you about me being a crap kisser,” Harry pointed out, and the redhead snorted.

"Yeah, sorry about that. I told so many people, I suppose one of them went to Skeeter about it. At least she's excusing it as you being heartbroken and not just you being bad at snogging," she said with a supportive pat to the shoulder. "I'm sorry I can't be... '*the one you truly yearn to be with*', by the way," she added, checking the article quote by leaning over Harry's shoulder. "Clearly while I resemble your mother, it's not enough to tear your heart away from that harlot over there."

"I beg your pardon!" Hermione gasped when she realised Ginny was talking about her. Beside her, Ron went almost purple in the face. Harry tossed the magazine her way, watching her eyebrows rise into her hairline. "This is... where did she get all this?"

"Out of her arse, by the looks of it," Ginny mused. Neville snorted pumpkin juice from his nose.

"No, the bit about Viktor asking me to come to Bulgaria. That was right after he pulled me from the lake, there's no way she was around to hear it!" Hermione explained. Ron spluttered, grabbing the magazine to read it himself.

"He wants you to go to Bulgaria? *Never felt this way about any other girl* — don't tell me that's all real?"

Hermione nodded, blushing faintly. "That part is. Obviously the rest of it is drivel."

"I don't know, Granger," the soft drawl of Draco Malfoy cut through the air. "That bit about Potter being a terrible kisser probably isn't too far off the mark. I don't blame you for setting your sights higher. Positively Slytherin of you." The remark made Ron growl, and Hermione glare. Harry just snorted.

"At least I can improve my kissing skills," he said, meeting grey eyes with a devilish look. "Sadly I don't think there's anything you can do about being an utter prat."

"You'd have to find someone willing to help you improve, Potty," Draco taunted. Harry winked at him.

"Are you offering, Malfoy?" That made several people eavesdropping choke on whatever they were eating, while Ginny howled with laughter. Draco went bright red, turned on his heel and left. Harry's smirk widened.

"I can't believe you just propositioned *Malfoy!*" Hermione hissed. Harry shrugged.

"Made him leave, didn't it?" He couldn't wait to get Draco alone later; he would *pay* for that comment about Harry's kissing skills.

"Still. Gross, mate." Ron shuddered, making a face. Harry didn't react, even when Neville nudged him under the table, the tiniest grin on his lips. "This article is out of order, though. It makes Hermione look like some sort of... scarlet woman." Ron was blushing as he said it, and Hermione's lips pursed.

“Oh, come off it,” Ginny argued. “No one with half a brain is going to believe this rubbish. I think it’s hilarious, to be honest. Kudos to you, Hermione, for clearly being sexy enough to score two super famous wizards. Sorry I’m such an opportunistic slag that I sunk my claws into Harry as soon as you tossed him aside.” Ron looked like he was going to have a stroke at the language coming from his baby sister’s mouth.

“Quite frankly, I’m offended,” George announced, dropping onto the bench on Ginny’s other side, his twin following. “I spend *way* more time with Harry than Ginny does. Why can’t I be the opportunistic slag?”

“You were too busy sucking face with Durmstrang boys, remember?” Harry pointed out. George pouted.

“Just the one Durmstrang boy, thank you!” he protested. “Who do you think I am, *Hermione*?” This was said with a wink towards the curly-haired girl, and actually startled a laugh out of her.

“I can’t believe you’re laughing about this,” Ron muttered, scowling at his plate of eggs. Harry shrugged.

“The worst thing we can do is give it credibility by being upset about it. Best to just laugh and move on.” No one whose opinion mattered would believe it, and it would die down quicker if they didn’t let it get to them.

Ron didn’t look convinced, and Hermione still didn’t seem sure how to react to the whole thing, but then Ginny grabbed the magazine and started dramatically reading the best (rather, worst) bits, so Harry was too busy laughing to care.

.

It was hard, but Harry managed to escape Ron and Hermione long enough to get to the heirs’ meeting a few days later. They were easing up on him a little, after he’d spun a tale about getting a letter from Sirius saying he was somewhere in Ireland, and also told them about seeing Mr Crouch on the map. Even Snape had been confused by that one, but agreed it was fairly harmless on the spectrum of secrets Harry was keeping, and would be a good measure of whether Ron and Hermione had told Dumbledore about the map. He hadn’t said anything directly to Dumbledore yet, but that didn’t seem to be bothering the headmaster, increasing Harry’s suspicions that his two ex-best friends were spying on him. He felt sick every time he thought about it.

He was glad to be in a room full of people who hated the headmaster as much as he did, Susan squeezing his shoulder in sympathy when he told them all about Dumbledore’s plot. “I can arrange for someone to hex Weasley if you’d like,” Daphne volunteered. “Or Granger. I’m sure Pansy would jump at the opportunity.”

“Not Malfoy?” Harry asked with a brow raised. Blaise, Daphne and Cassius shared a glance. Harry’s stomach flipped. “What?”

“Draco has been acting… strange lately,” Blaise admitted.

“Strange how?” Fear gripped Harry’s heart — had Dumbledore got to Draco too? He hadn’t thought to ask Snape to check him over.

“He isn’t going on about how much he hates muggleborns, for one,” Daphne drawled. “He’s been positively *nice* to the first years. And he came with me when I went to study Arithmancy with Ernie and Terry Boot.”

“It was a bit weird,” Ernie piped up. “I kept expecting him to hex me, but he was surprisingly polite.”

Harry’s panic began to fade; Draco was just starting to lose his Lucius-Malfoy-clone persona. There were worse things to happen. He bit his lip, thinking; it wasn’t his place to start sharing Draco’s secrets, but... he could set the stage for things. “Maybe he’s not as evil as we’ve always assumed.”

Parvati laughed. “Nice one, Harry. As if you’ve not been fighting with him since the day you stepped foot in the castle.”

“When was the last time you heard about me and Malfoy fighting? *Actually* fighting.” They’d exchanged insults, but they hadn’t raised wands at each other in weeks. He watched Parvati’s face grow confused as she thought it over.

“I think we should trust Harry on this one, guys,” Neville cut in supportively, his eyes knowing.

“What do you know that we don’t?” Sullivan’s tone was a mix of curious and suspicious, and Harry smirked.

“Daphne, Blaise, why don’t you two bring Draco to our next meeting?” he suggested, noting the wide eyes when he used Draco’s first name. “Parkinson and Bulstrode too, if you can convince them.” Draco trusted the two girls, and insisted they didn’t want to follow their parents’ footsteps. They could probably do with knowing they weren’t alone.

“You want us to bring three kids whose parents are Death Eaters to our top secret meeting on how to save the world once the Dark Lord is dead?” Blaise’s voice was unimpressed. Harry nodded.

“Yeah, sounds about right. Not everyone is the same as their parents. Look at Cassius. No offence,” he added to the older boy, who snorted.

“None taken, my father was a stain on the family tree and the rest aren’t much better,” he agreed freely.

“Exactly. So give them a chance, you might be surprised,” Harry said. Not everyone in the room looked convinced, muttering to each other. Eventually, Susan cleared her throat.

“Look, guys, Harry wouldn’t suggest it if he thought it would jeopardise anything we have here,” she said confidently, before turning her hazel eyes on Harry. “You trust Draco Malfoy?”

"I do," he said firmly, ignoring the way several sets of eyebrows rose incredulously. "And he trusts Bulstrode and Parkinson. That's three heirs we could really do with having on our side."

"I still think you've lost it," Blaise muttered. "But alright, we'll bring them. On your head be it."

Harry grinned, even as his stomach churned at the prospect of bringing three more Slytherins into the fold. He was excited to connect Draco with the other heirs, but... the two girls might take a little convincing.

....

That night, when Harry snuck out to meet Draco, he told him about what he'd said to Blaise and the others. "So don't be surprised if you and Bulstrode and Parkinson get approached sometime next week," he finished, sitting back to let Draco process it all. The blond stared at him, his expression unreadable.

"You've never had a civil conversation with Pansy or Millie," Draco pointed out. Harry shrugged.

"I've done study group with Bulstrode a few times; she seems alright. And you trust them."

"That's good enough for you, is it?"

"Why shouldn't it be?"

Draco stared at Harry for a long moment, then leaned in to kiss him, lips curling in a reluctant smile. "Sodding Gryffindor," he muttered against Harry's mouth. "You're lucky I'm not taking advantage of you."

"Mm, feel free to take advantage of me whenever you like," Harry retorted cheekily. "I've a feeling I might enjoy it."

Draco rolled his eyes with a huff, nipping at Harry's lower lip. "Are we telling them about this, then?"

Harry leaned back, needing his head a little clearer for his next thought to form properly. "I think we can admit we're friends," he said slowly. "But not... anything more. I trust them, but they're keeping enough secrets for me as it is, and this is none of their business." He paused, wondering if he'd failed some sort of test. "Unless you want to tell them, of course?"

"I don't need a bunch of heirs nosing into my private life," Draco said haughtily. "It'll be bad enough if my father finds out I'm friends with you, let alone anything else." His expression softened. "Maybe in the future, when things are more dire. When I need to take a stand to be with you. But until then, we'll keep it quiet."

"I'd never make you take a stand to be with me," Harry insisted. "I just want you to be happy and safe."

"You really think I could be happy hiding in some safe-house while you get all the glory by facing the Dark Lord?" Draco retorted lightly, his silver eyes fixed intently on Harry, saying everything that wasn't coming out of his mouth. "I'm going to have to be open about my loyalties eventually. I'm not cut out to be a spy like Uncle Severus." He took Harry's hand in both of his, bringing it up to kiss the knuckles. "When the time comes, I will be by your side. Stopping your idiot Gryffindor arse from getting hexed to death before you can off the bastard."

Despite his derisive tone, his words took Harry's breath away. He almost responded by blurting out three little words it was *definitely* too soon for, but he held his tongue and just kissed him instead, trying to push everything he felt into the kiss. Draco groaned, pulling Harry closer and tangling his fingers in dark hair. Harry was pretty sure he got his point across.

Chapter 33

Harry entered the next heir's meeting with trepidation, knowing they would have three extra members. The larger group of Slytherins were already there when he arrived, Parkinson and Bulstrode with their arms folded over their chests and wary expressions on their faces as they eyed the rest of the room. Draco had his hands in his pockets and was rocking back in his chair, every inch the effortlessly uncaring pureblood. It made Harry grin. "Sorry, Malfoy, have you got somewhere else to be? You look a bit bored."

Draco smirked at him. "As a matter of fact, I promised I'd help some idiot Gryffindor with a Potions essay. But he was late." His gaze turned pointed, and Harry rounded the table to claim the empty chair beside him.

"You try getting away from Hermione bloody Granger when she's in one of her moods," Harry retorted, elbowing Draco so that only a quick spell had his chair slamming back to rights rather than sending him flying backwards. "You shouldn't sit like that, y'know. You'll crack your head open." He pressed his knee to Draco's under the table in a show of silent support, knowing the blond was far more nervous than he let on.

"I appreciate your concern," Draco replied wryly. "Now, would you care to explain to the girls why you insisted Blaise drag us here?"

Harry looked up, seeing the faces around the room had all turned varying shades of bewildered. Neville was the only one who looked amused, sitting between Parvati and Sullivan. "Right, yeah." Harry stood, turning to the two Slytherin girls, and bowed with palms open. "Well met, Heir Parkinson, Heir Bulstrode," he greeted. "Might I introduce you to... honestly, most of the named heirs of the current Wizengamot seat-holders. We're only missing a handful."

"You're taking the Potter seat?" Bulstrode blurted, her pureblood manners disappearing in the face of such a shock. "We thought you wanted nothing to do with it."

"I didn't know it existed until summer before third year," Harry told her. "Raised by muggles, kept ignorant by Dumbledore."

"Harry, be careful how much you tell them," Susan warned. Harry waved her off, sitting back down.

"Draco trusts them," he reminded her. "That's enough for me. Besides, if we have any hope of convincing them to trust us, they need to know we're not in league with *him*."

"Harsh words from the Gryffindor Golden Boy," Parkinson teased, leaning forward in her chair in a way that showed off her cleavage where her shirt was undone by several buttons. Harry didn't look for even a second.

"I haven't been quite so golden in a while," he replied evenly. "No one in this room serves Albus Dumbledore. And I know you don't want to serve Voldemort, either." Parkinson

flinched.

“The Dark Lord is dead.”

“Is he?” Harry met her eyes with a knowing gaze. Parkinson faltered. “You know as well as the rest of us it’s just a matter of time. Draco tells me neither of you ladies want to follow your parents. No one here will make you. Cassius is here for the same reason. But we aren’t going to tell you to go to Dumbledore for help, either.”

“So what are our options, then?” Bulstrode cut in sharply. “You?”

“If you like,” Harry agreed. “For various reasons, I’m not going to be able to sit this war out. But even if I could, I don’t think I’d want to. Neither side has a particularly fantastic political manifesto, and we in this room plan to offer... let’s call it a third side.” He hadn’t been quite so bold in stating it before, but the others had to know it was where he was headed. “We are the future of the government, as long as we manage to get Dumbledore’s claws out of the Wizengamot and Voldemort’s lunacy removed from society entirely. If you’d like to join us, we would gladly appreciate the extra numbers. If you’d like to turn around and keep your mouth shut and wait for Voldemort to come back, that’s fine. The offer of help stands regardless of what you do from this point on; if you and those you care about ever need a place to avoid either side of the war, you have my word that the Noble and Most Ancient House of Potter will be ready to assist.”

Both girls’ eyes went a fraction wider at the magic that accompanied his vow. “You’re really serious about this,” Bulstrode murmured. Harry nodded.

“I have to be.”

“We aren’t going to let the wizarding world languish like it has been for the last century,” Susan said, unflinching as she eyed the Slytherins. “And we’re certainly not going to let it stay in Dumbledore’s hands. We know that we can be better. But we will do so with all magical people as equals. Purebloods, half-bloods, muggleborns, even those with creature blood; all of them have just as much right to be here as anyone else. If you have a problem with that, you can leave now.”

“I don’t want muggleborns dead,” Parkinson sniffed, “I just want them to stop bringing their filthy habits and customs into our world. If we’re not careful, the Statute will be broken, and it’ll be the Witch Trials all over again.”

“If they have magic in their blood, they have the right to use it,” Draco agreed. “But we also have the right to teach them to be like us, rather than being expected to become like them.”

“That’s fair,” Anthony murmured, relaxing a little. Clearly a few of the heirs had been expecting a rant about blood purity. Harry smiled to himself, wishing he could take Draco’s hand under the table. One meeting wouldn’t change the years of animosity built up in the group, but... it was a start.

“We’ll have plenty of time to talk politics in future,” Harry said, reaching into his school bag. “But I *really* need to get this essay done.” He set his Potions textbook on the table, digging

around for a quill and the half-written essay. “If Hermione tries to help me with it one more time I am going to *scream*.”

“Well, we couldn’t have that,” Draco drawled lightly. “Let’s see what you’ve got so far.” He stole Harry’s quill off him, setting in to read the unfinished essay with a faint frown on his lips. Harry wished they were alone, so he could kiss it off the blond’s face.

“No wonder your grade has been improving this year,” Parkinson mused, and Harry chuckled.

“It’s not entirely his doing,” he insisted. “I’ve been paying better attention. But not having this git throwing things into my cauldron helps.” Draco elbowed him in the side without looking up from the essay. “Oi! Now who’s the barbarian?”

“It’s still you,” Draco assured. “You’re a terrible influence, too.”

Harry grinned cheekily. “Someone has to keep you humble.”

They were being stared at, but he refused to quit goading Draco, wanting everyone to see that they weren’t going to start hexing each other. That Draco could be trusted.

It would be slow going, but he’d get there.

.-.-.-.

Harry didn’t think much about the extra mail Hermione had been receiving in the days since the *Witch Weekly* article. Ginny had some too, but not nearly to the level Hermione was getting. Ginny burnt hers without even opening them, but Hermione insisted on reading every one. “I want to know what they’re saying about me,” she said, reaching for the letter on top of the stack.

“Why? It’s all bollocks,” Harry pointed out, picking up a discarded letter. “‘*Harry Potter is too fine a young man to be played around by you, trollop*’.”

“So you are too fine, but I am okay?” Viktor asked, dropping into an empty seat on Hermione’s other side. He smiled at her, leaning in to kiss her on the cheek; ever since the second task, he seemed bolder in his affections. It was sweet, if Harry didn’t think too much about how false Hermione was.

“I mean, look at me,” Harry said, mock-posing. Ginny smacked him over the back of the head as she passed, not breaking her conversation with Luna. “Rude!”

Suddenly Hermione screamed, jumping to her feet and dropping the letter she was holding. Harry’s wand was in his hand before he could even think about it. Her hands were covered in a yellowish-green liquid that smelled strongly of petrol, and was making enormous boils appear on her skin.

“Bubotuber pus!” Viktor exclaimed, sliding down the bench to avoid the nasty liquid. Hermione’s hands were entirely covered in boils by now, and she bit her lip against a whimper of pain. “Come, I will take you to your medivitch.”

"I'll clean this up," Harry promised, already vanishing as much of the pus as he could see. Viktor placed an arm around Hermione's shoulders, hurrying her out of the hall.

"I warned her not to mess with Skeeter," Ron muttered, still eating despite the chaos. "This is probably just the beginning."

"This has gone too far," Harry muttered, scowling. It was one thing when the articles were just a minor inconvenience he could laugh at; if people were actually getting hurt because of the things Rita was writing about him, that was too much.

"What are you gonna do? Give Skeeter an interview?" Ron asked. "She'd probably stop if you told her who you snogged at the Yule Ball."

That gave Harry an idea.

He jumped to his feet, hurrying around the tables until he was by Ginny and Luna at the Ravenclaw table. "Hi," he greeted, squatting down to be at their level. "Luna, your dad runs a magazine, right? The *Quibbler*?" He was sure she'd talked about it before to him. The blonde girl nodded, smiling. "Would he be willing to run an article for me?"

"I'd have to check what his schedule is like for the next issue — there's supposed to be a fantastic article about the Blibbering Humdinger coming in — but I'm sure he'd be happy to publish you. Are you going to tell people to leave Hermione alone?" Luna asked curiously. Harry's answering smirk was purely Slytherin.

"Not quite. I'm going to give him the scoop Rita Skeeter *wishes* she could have."

.-.-.

It only took an evening for Harry to write an article he was happy with, and he brought it down to Luna the next morning, handing over the rolled up parchment. She unrolled it, reading quickly, her pale eyebrows rising with every line. "This is awfully brave of you, Harry," she commented once she was done. Harry shrugged, ducking his head uncomfortably.

"If people want to be angry, I might as well give them something true to be angry about," he reasoned. And then they'd have to be angry at him, and not the people around him. He could handle hate mail.

"Well, I'm sure Daddy would be happy to run it; I'll send it to him right away. I don't know when the next issue will be released, though."

"That's fine. Thanks so much for this, Luna. And thank your dad, too. I really appreciate this." This was the only way he could be sure his words would go to print exactly as he had written them. Luna smiled.

"Anything for a friend, Harry." She tucked the parchment safely inside her robes.

Harry returned to the Gryffindor table, sitting down next to Neville. "What was that all about?" the taller boy asked, and Harry shot him a quick grin.

“Just giving Rita Skeeter something to really complain about,” he replied vaguely. He glanced back at Luna, and then his gaze caught something that made him pause. Ginny was over at the Ravenclaw table too, but she wasn’t sat with Luna. She was sat between two Ravenclaw boys in Harry’s year, and seemed to be flirting pretty blatantly with one of them. Her hand was on his shoulder as she leaned in close and giggled, and the boy smiled shyly at her. Harry looked at Neville. “Why’s Ginny over at the Ravenclaw table?” he asked hesitantly. Neville looked up, eyes casting over to the redhead, and then he looked away, his smile faltering.

“Oh. She’s got her sights set on Stephen Cornfoot, I expect.”

Harry’s brow furrowed, puzzled. “But… I thought Ginny liked you? After the Yule Ball you guys were all… cozy.”

“She does,” Neville confirmed. Now Harry was even more confused. Neville sighed quietly. “We talked about it, the other week. I really like her, and she really likes me, but… neither of us have ever dated anyone before. And she… Ginny says it scares her, how much she likes me, and she thinks, when it happens, we’ll be pretty serious about it. She says she wants to see what it’s like to date other people first.”

Harry blinked. “So… she likes you, and you like her, but she’s gonna go flirt with Stephen because… she likes you too much?”

“That’s about the sum of it,” Neville agreed with a shrug. “I don’t really mind waiting. When she does agree to go out with me, I don’t want her constantly thinking about what she might be missing out on. I’m not really interested in other girls, but if she wants to see what other boys are like… it’s not like I’ve got a hundred other options waiting for me.” His smile turned self-deprecating, and it made Harry frown.

Ginny’s reasoning made absolutely zero sense to Harry — what was the point in dating people you only sort-of liked if there was someone you knew you really liked waiting right there? Even if you did end up only ever dating them? — But he supposed it wasn’t really any of his business. Neville seemed alright with it, even if he was studiously avoiding looking towards the Ravenclaw table.

“Well. Okay, then. If you, uh, ever need to talk about it…” Harry trailed off, and Neville’s smile became a little more sincere.

“Thanks, Harry.” Neville paused, drinking his tea. “So what are you doing with Luna? I thought you hadn’t figured out yet how Skeeter was getting her information.”

“I haven’t,” Harry replied, though he made a mental note to double down on his efforts to figure out. “And when I do, that’ll be going to my lawyer, not to Luna. No, I’m coming out in the *Quibbler*. ”

Neville dropped his teacup. Luckily, it was mostly empty. “You’re what?”

“I’m not saying anything about, y’know,” his eyes flicked to the Slytherin table for the briefest moment, “for obvious reasons. But if Skeeter’s determined to pair me up with every

girl I barely even talk to, well, I can at least correct her on that. Then hopefully no one will get any more bubotuber pus in the mail.” He hadn’t seen Hermione since the incident, though he’d been assured she was out of the hospital wing.

“Harry, that’s… are you sure?”

“It’s bound to come out — heh — sooner or later. At least this way I can control what’s said about me. Do it on my terms.” He wasn’t blind; despite what George said about the wizarding world being accepting of it, there weren’t many people out and proud at Hogwarts. People were still talking about George and Boris going to the ball together. Whether it was the muggle attitudes influencing everyone, or something else… if he was going to make waves in the media, he’d rather it be with the truth than with Skeeter’s lies.

“Wow. Well, as long as it’s your decision.” Neville bumped their shoulders together supportively. “You’ve got me in your corner. And all the others, too. Besides, if anyone’s awful to you about it, you can always set the twins on them.” Harry grinned at that; Fred and George would certainly be happy to correct some viewpoints if Harry asked.

.-.-.-

Luna managed to give him three days warning of the article’s release, and Harry decided he should probably give some people advanced warning. He told Draco first, the first chance they were alone together. The Slytherin gaped at him. “Are you sure?”

“Bit late now if I’m not, isn’t it?” he said wryly, though he knew Luna’s dad would pull the article in a heartbeat if Harry said he’d changed his mind. “I’m sure. People will want to know eventually, and I refuse to hide such a big part of who I am. I just… I imagined my life going forward if I didn’t say anything, listening to people in the papers speculate about which girl I was dating — having people ask me when I was going to get a girlfriend, or if I fancied this girl or the other, and it just felt… awful. I have to pretend about so much, Draco. I’m not pretending about this.”

Draco stared at him for a long moment, then leaned in and kissed Harry breathless. “You noble, attractive bastard,” he muttered when they eventually parted, silver eyes dancing. “You’ll be a role model, y’know. There hasn’t been an out gay wizard of your social standing since Dumbledore came out.”

“Dumbledore’s gay?” Harry asked.

“Yes, but that’s not the point. He didn’t come out until he was old enough that no one wanted to speculate on his sex life anyway. You’re fourteen — young, gorgeous, your whole life ahead of you, and right in the public eye. It’s going to be huge.”

“Yeah, maybe. But I’m used to the papers talking shit about me. I’ll have the people who matter on my side.” Harry dropped a kiss on Draco’s lips, smiling. “I’ll have you on my side.”

That made Draco go a little pink, a reluctant smile taking over. “I can’t let you do it all by yourself. You’re barely civilised.”

Harry laughed. “At least now you’ve got a bit of a warning; plenty of time to think of some snarky little remark to make. Preferably one that’s a little better than insulting my kissing skills,” he teased, watching Draco’s blush deepen.

“I was thinking on the fly, alright? Even at my worst, I’m above insulting people for any perceived promiscuity.” Draco glared hotly. “It didn’t give me many options.”

Grinning, Harry ran a hand through Draco’s hair. He thought it was sweet that, even when pretending to be the Slytherin Ice Prince, he refused to call Ginny or Hermione sluts. “Well, I’ll be happy to take kissing lessons from you any day,” he drawled, sliding into Draco’s lap. “If you think I need improvement.”

“There’s *always* room for improvement,” Draco insisted, hand sliding down to grab Harry’s arse.

They didn’t talk any more about the article, after that.

.-.

He told the heirs in the middle of a meeting, to distract them from an argument about arranged marriages. Silence immediately followed.

“Well,” Susan said eventually. “That explains a lot.”

Harry snorted. “Thanks, I think?”

“That’s such a Gryffindor move,” Cassius added, though if Harry wasn’t mistaken the Slytherin actually sounded sort of impressed.

“He *is* a Gryffindor,” Draco sighed, as if it were some sort of unfortunate medical issue.

“You dragging some unlucky boy into the limelight with you, or?” Parvati’s eyes were bright with the potential for good gossip, but Harry shook his head.

“Nope, just me. Anyone I may or may not be involved with doesn’t deserve to be caught up in the mess that is my personal life. Not everyone can be as public as I am.”

“That’s a very roundabout way of admitting you’re seeing someone the public wouldn’t approve of,” Daphne drawled. Harry flushed.

“No comment,” he croaked. Several people laughed.

“Whatever, it’s not our business. Congratulations, I suppose. Is that an appropriate thing to say when someone comes out?” Anthony looked unsure.

“We support you? I don’t know.” Sullivan shook his head, shrugging. “As long as you’re happy. And as long as Rita Skeeter’s furious.”

“That is the plan, yes,” Harry agreed.

Last but not least, Harry gathered a small group of people in Gryffindor Tower the night before the article was due to come out, more nervous than he had been with any of the others. There were a few people in the group he'd already told, and they offered him supportive smiles.

"Hey, so, I'll try and make this quick," Harry started, knee bouncing anxiously. "I just wanted to give you a bit of a heads up about something that's happening tomorrow, since if anyone's likely to get questions, it'll be you lot." He looked around the gathered faces; his dorm mates, three of the five girls in his year, Ginny, the twins, and the rest of the quidditch team. His friends. They wouldn't judge him for this. "Skeeter's been writing a lot of crap about me lately — and about people close to me — so I thought I'd hit back with something true for once. I wrote an article for the *Quibbler*, it'll come out in the morning. And, uh, so will I, I suppose."

Both the twins looked at him in shock. "Really? To everyone?" George asked.

"Yeah. Better than having it hanging over my head, wondering when someone will find out and tell everyone. At least then it's over with and everyone knows." The more he talked about it to others, the more confident Harry was in his decision. He didn't want to keep having to come out over and over again for the rest of his life. He was in the position of being able to say something and have just about everyone in the wizarding world listen; he might as well say what he wanted.

"That's really brave, Harry," Lavender said supportively, reaching over to pat him on the knee.

"I don't get it," Ron said, frowning. "What's the article gonna say?"

Harry resisted the urge to roll his eyes, wondering if Ron was being purposefully obtuse. "It'll say I'm gay, Ron," he said, glad his voice didn't even tremble. "I've written an article in the *Quibbler* to tell everyone that Skeeter's article is bullshit because I don't even like girls."

Ron gave a forced-sounding chuckle. "That's a bit drastic, just to get her off your back, isn't it? Just make up a girlfriend or something. Let her think you're dating Ginny. Just because you don't want to tell her who your real girlfriend is."

Harry gave an exasperated look skyward. Ginny put her head in her hands despairingly. "I don't have a girlfriend. I'm not writing the article to get Skeeter off my back — I'm writing the article because I'm gay and people might as well know, if they're going to make shit up about me."

Ron turned pale, then very red, then a little bit green. "You're— what? But— but we've roomed together for years! That's— you can't be—"

"Tell me, little brother, why Harry *can't* be gay," George asked, his tone icy. Ron went even greener.

"I just meant— he's not like that, y'know? All..."

"All what, exactly?" George's voice just got colder. "Remember who you're talking to, Ronnikins." It seemed to hit Ron that his brother had gone to the Yule Ball with another boy, and he let out a quiet little 'meep' noise.

"Don't worry, I haven't been perving on you while you're changing," Harry said with a roll of his eyes. Of course Ron would have a problem with it. "You're not my type." That made George smirk.

"If you've got a problem with Harry, you've got a problem with us," Dean piped up, gesturing to himself and Seamus. "We like boys and girls. But you're not either of our types either, Ron," he added dryly.

"Welcome to the club, Harry," Seamus added cheerily, winking.

"But I— but you—" Ron didn't seem to know what to say, and Harry didn't really want to stick around for whatever awful jumble of words made it out of his mouth.

"I'm not here to argue with anyone. I just thought you might like to know before the article comes out in the morning. Now I'm gonna go to bed. So, uh, thanks, I guess." Harry got to his feet, and when he did, he ended up bundled in a hug between the three Gryffindor chasers.

"We're proud of you, Harry," Katie said with a grin, kissing him on the cheek. Harry beamed at them.

"This is because of me, isn't it?" He turned at the voice, meeting Hermione's sad gaze. Her hands were still a little raw from re-growing skin. "Because of all the hate-mail I got."

"Not completely," Harry insisted. "I just want Skeeter to know that she can't bully me or my friends. I'll do things on my terms, my way, and she can stuff it. But yeah, it'll be nice if you and Ginny stop getting hate-mail." Hermione's lower lip began to wobble, and Harry sighed. "I'm doing this for me, Hermione. I'm not waiting to be forced out whenever someone wants public opinion of me to take a hit. Might as well get it over with now."

She stared at him for a long moment, then nodded. "As long as it's on your own terms."

Harry turned away to head to the dorms, and from the sound of flesh smacking flesh behind him, Ron had finally managed to get a sentence out. Harry kept walking; George had it handled. It wasn't his problem.

....

He went down to breakfast with Neville on one side and George on the other, Fred and Ginny trailing close behind. Ron was once again not speaking to him, and Hermione didn't seem to know what to do about the whole thing, but Harry continued not to care.

Luna waved at him from the Ravenclaw table, and he waved back, otherwise keeping his head down. An unfamiliar owl flew towards him with the morning post, a rolled up magazine attached to its leg. Harry's stomach swooped like he was doing a Wronski Feint. The front

cover had a drawing of some sort of bizarre horned creature, but in bold letters it also had the words ‘*Exclusive article from Harry Potter, Page 7*’

Harry flicked to page 7, forgetting to breathe as he scanned the article.

‘Harry Potter: The Heart of the Matter’

Since I was a baby, I’ve been in the public eye. Most of that attention has come from an event I barely even remember. But it has brought me fame, and unfortunately there’s nothing I can do about that now. The older I get, the more people want to know about my life — and the more people decide to make up their own facts when I refuse to give them what they want.

Being a teenager is difficult enough without reporters watching your every move. You were all teenagers once, I assume; you remember how it is. It’s hard to figure yourself out, and even harder when you feel like you can’t even breathe without making the front page. But as I grow older, something has become inordinately clear to me, and it feels disingenuous to keep that a secret when so many people seem to care about my love life. I don’t know why; I promise you, it’s not that interesting.

I’m gay.

I’m not dating Hermione Granger, or Ginny Weasley, or any other girl the rumour mill has seen fit to link me with. I’m not dating any girls, and I won’t be, ever. I understand that it’s the default to assume that boys will date girls, but let’s be honest; I’ve never gone with the default option.

I know a lot of people will think I’m confused, or I’m doing it for attention, but they couldn’t be further from the truth. I’m doing this so that people will leave me alone. So they’ll realise that I’m just another fourteen year-old boy, who happens to like other boys, and get on with their lives. I won’t have this information used against me or anyone I care about, and one day, when I’m ready to tell the world that I care very deeply about someone, I don’t want it to be a surprise when that someone is male.

It shouldn’t be a big deal. Love is the strongest magic in the world, and it shouldn’t matter who it’s between.

I would love for there to be no articles about me in the paper, or magazines, but that doesn’t seem to be possible. So I thought I’d give this one straight from the source, so that at least somewhere is printing the truth. Whether you like it or not is none of my concern.’

Harry couldn’t help but grin as he finished reading; it was exactly how he’d written it. Ginny beamed at him, reading over George’s shoulder. “It’s perfect, Harry,” she assured quietly. Neville hummed in agreement on Harry’s other side.

“I’m proud of you, kid,” George murmured, dropping a kiss to Harry’s temple.

Not many people in the school had subscriptions to the *Quibbler*, but that didn’t matter; it only took a few copies to float around before word began to spread. Harry’s copy made it halfway up the Gryffindor table before it was nicked by Susan, who gave him a thumbs up

and passed it to Ernie and Hannah. Harry could see at least three copies on the Ravenclaw table, and two more on the Slytherin table.

Everyone was whispering, but no one was jeering. Not yet.

Harry looked up at the staff table, amused to see a copy of the *Quibbler* passing from Sprout to McGonagall. His gaze landed on Dumbledore, and his smile widened. The man looked *furious*. He was hiding it well, but he clearly wasn't impressed. Harry didn't really understand why, but he was happy to be responsible for anything that made the headmaster mad.

.-.-.

Within a day, everyone in the school had read the *Quibbler* article. Within two, it seemed like everyone in wizarding Britain had read it. Harry had eyes following him everywhere he went — which honestly wasn't that much different from a regular day, except for how some of those eyes had turned speculative. Suddenly, guys he'd never even spoken to before were stopping him in hallways, complimenting him on the article, or his shirt, or his hair. It took Neville pointing it out to him for Harry to realise they were hitting on him. It was worse than when the Yule Ball had been announced!

"Daddy says we've sold more issues of this *Quibbler* than any in the past," Luna told him one lunchtime, smiling dreamily. "I suppose the article about the Blibbering Humdingers is very popular."

"Oh, definitely," Harry agreed, stifling a chuckle. "I'm glad it's doing well, Luna. Thanks again for publishing it."

"The truth is an important tool," Luna said, and then walked away. Harry watched her go, wondering if he would ever understand her. He doubted it.

Harry had honestly been expecting a little more resistance from his schoolmates. The flurry of owls that greeted him every morning was expected — the letters of support in amongst the hate were actually a pleasant surprise — but so far, none of the other students had dared be openly rude or derisive about his sexuality. Perhaps because there were just enough people in positions of power who weren't straight that the rest of them kept their mouth shut. Draco had bumped into him on the way to Care of Magical Creatures the morning the article went out, just muttering a 'nice article, Potter' and walking away. It was the closest the blond could get to a public show of support, and Harry appreciated it. Even if in private, Draco wasn't quite so thrilled about the whole thing.

"I don't like the way that Ravenclaw sixth year was looking at you at lunch," he said with a scowl the first time Harry got him alone. "Or that Hufflepuff boy in the year below."

"I'm not interested in them," Harry pointed out, kissing the grumpy look off the blond's face. "For some godforsaken reason, I've thrown my lot in with you, and I intend to keep it that way. No many how many blokes *look at me* during lunchtime." He couldn't help but smile, finding Draco's jealousy adorable. That just made Draco scowl harder.

“But they think they have a *chance*!” Draco retorted. “Nowhere in that article did you say you weren’t single. All they know is you’re out and looking for someone to *tell the world you care very deeply about*.”

“What did you want me to say? ‘Oh, by the way, I’m dating this blond Slytherin prat, but keep it to yourselves because if his father finds out we’ll both be dead’,” Harry pointed out a little sharper than intended. Draco flinched, then sighed, his anger fading.

“I know you couldn’t,” he murmured, leaning in to press his forehead to Harry’s. “I just hate that people don’t know you’re mine.”

“I know I’m yours,” Harry assured him. “And you know I’m yours. That’s all that matters.” He tugged the taller boy into a kiss. “You’re mine, too. You know that, right?”

“I know,” Draco promised. “To my endless surprise, I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Harry’s heart pounded in his chest, and he knew it was *way* too soon to be having the kind of feelings he was having, they’d not even been together six months, but he couldn’t help himself. He was in deep, and he knew it.

He just hoped Draco was right there with him.

. . .

One person Harry didn’t tell about the article until after it was already out was Sirius; he called the man a couple of days after the *Quibbler* published, and he could tell from the look on his godfather’s face that he’d already seen it. Harry wondered if Snape had passed it along, or if Remus had seen it somewhere else. He knew Sirius didn’t have a subscription.

“That’s one way to do it,” the animagus declared, grinning. “Very well written, pup. Moony and I are so proud of you. So’s Snape, but he won’t ever say it. You have to sort-of interpret the eyebrows and the sarcasm; I’m getting much better at it, these days.” Harry laughed, shaking his head.

“Thanks, Pads. Sorry I didn’t warn you sooner.” He hadn’t felt the need to, honestly, since Sirius already knew he was gay.

“S’alright. Bit of a surprise when Severus brought it over last night, but I don’t blame you for doing it. It’ll shut Rita Skeeter right up.” Sirius looked delighted by that. “How’s it going down at school?”

Harry told him how things had been since the article came out, including Draco’s jealousy. “He seems to think I’m gonna drop him since there’s all these boys who want to date me now they know I go their way. As if I’d look twice at any of them when I have him.” He shook his head exasperatedly.

“It’s not his fault he couldn’t see how much of a fool you were for him before he decided to kiss you,” Sirius teased. “He doesn’t know he’s stuck with you now.”

"I tried to tell him," Harry insisted pathetically. He paused, biting his lip. "Sirius, am I going too fast with Draco? Not—not physically," he hastened to clarify, feeling his cheeks heat. "But it's only been a few months and I already care way more about him than I think I'm supposed to. Like... like love-kind of feelings, maybe? I don't really know. I don't know what love is supposed to feel like." He hadn't had much of it in his life.

Sirius sighed, though his eyes were fond. "You're probably better off talking to Moony than me about this, pup; I've never really been in love. But from what I understand of it, it happens when it happens and you're best to just let it. Merlin, Remus fell in love with Snape when he was twelve, even if it took him a few years to admit to it. Your dad fell in love with Lily the second he laid eyes on her when they were eleven. I'm not going to sit here and tell you you're too young to love Draco."

"But what if I tell him and he doesn't feel the same? Or something happens and it turns out it's not love after all and I end up ruining everything?"

"I think it's safe to say you're at least a little bit in love with him," Sirius said gently, grinning. "And that's okay! That's great, even! Whether you tell him or not is up to you, but allow yourself to feel your feelings however they come to you. You're young, sure, but that doesn't mean you can't feel these things just as strongly as someone twice your age. And as surprised as I am to be saying it, there are worse people to give your heart to than Draco Malfoy."

"I really think I love him, Sirius," Harry whispered, looking at the closed drapes of his bed as if someone was about to rip them open and laugh at him.

"Then you hold onto him and don't let go," Sirius said firmly. "Some people need to go through a few people before they find the one that fits. Others get lucky enough to find the right fit on the first try. You do you, pup; as long as it feels right, just go with it."

Harry thought about Ginny, flirting with random Ravenclaw boys because she was too scared of the depths of her feelings for Neville. Harry refused to be like that. He had Draco, and he wasn't giving that up for anything, even if his feelings terrified him.

"Thanks, Pads," he said quietly, smiling. Sirius grinned back at him.

"It's what I'm here for, kiddo." He paused then, looked a little more serious. "Severus said Dumbledore didn't seem thrilled by the article."

"He wasn't impressed, no," Harry confirmed. "It was actually quite funny. I don't know what his problem is, though; Draco said he's gay too, so it can't be that."

"He probably just wasn't expecting you to take initiative like that," Sirius pointed out. "The Compulsion charm isn't supposed to make you impulsive in that way."

"Only in ways he can control," Harry said with a scowl. "Well I'm not sorry I did it. I'll just have to see if he tries to cast the charm on me again." He gave his godfather a thoughtful look. "Should I reel things in a bit? Try and play into it, so he doesn't get suspicious? Or d'you think it's a bit late for that?"

“I think that ship might’ve sailed, pup,” Sirius agreed dryly. “And to be honest, I think you might want to start making preparations for the whole thing to go under. I don’t know how long playing dumb is going to work for you.”

It was nothing Harry hadn’t thought himself, but it still made his stomach squirm anxiously.

“Snape says I should hold out to the end of the year,” he said. Sirius hummed.

“I think if you can manage it, that’d certainly be ideal. Only a couple months left now. But he’s going to figure out sooner or later that you’re throwing his charm on purpose, and then it’s just a matter of time before he learns you’ve lost the block.”

“If I can make it through fifth year, it’ll be a miracle,” Harry agreed sourly. “I know it’s coming, Sirius. I’m hoping I won’t have to deal with it for a while, but I’m aware it could happen any day now.” He’d like to get a little closer to being able to claim his Wizengamot seat before having to expose Dumbledore as the manipulative old man he was, but things rarely worked in Harry’s favour.

“Just be careful, pup,” Sirius said. “You’ve got a good crowd around you there, but that’ll be for nothing if Dumbledore gets to you first.”

“I know. I will,” Harry promised. “I just want to focus on getting through the tournament right now.”

He had enough on his plate without adding Dumbledore to the mix.

Chapter 34

As it often does at Hogwarts, life moved on. Harry's sexuality was hot gossip for a week or so, but the Easter holidays began and half the school went home, and the next big topic of conversation overshadowed it, and Harry went back to his usual level of being stared at between classes. There were still a couple of persistent boys trying to flirt with him, but Harry was getting pretty good at ignoring them.

Rita Skeeter tried to fight back with an article about Harry trying to seduce Cedric away from Cho, but it was so laughably pathetic it didn't even register. The woman had lost her edge, and while Harry had no doubt she'd snoop around for some other angle to work, he'd beat her in this particular round. He just wished he was closer to figuring out how she got her information.

Luckily, Draco made a lot more headway on that than he did.

"Between you and the Weasley twins, I'm getting far too used to being manhandled into passageways," Harry remarked when Draco dragged him behind a tapestry. The blond gave him an odd look.

"Why are the Weasley twins manhandling you into passageways?" He shook his head, getting back on track. "Never mind. I have information for you about Skeeter."

Harry sobered up immediately. "What's she done now?"

Draco smirked triumphantly. "Seems your godfather isn't the only unregistered animagus we know," he drawled. It took a minute for Harry to connect the dots.

"No. Really? What's her form?"

"A beetle," Draco told him. "I found out from Crabbe and Goyle; it's how she got quotes from them for the whole Hagrid article. Pansy always met her down in Hogsmeade, but I suppose she thought the boys were too thick to tell anyone about her animagus form. Tiny little thing like that, she could get into all kinds of places."

No one would pay attention to a beetle on a wall — or in their hair. He remembered Viktor brushing the bug from Hermione's hair after the second task. That must have been how she got the information about the pair of them! "That's sort-of brilliant," he admitted. "But definitely illegal, right?"

"Maybe not Azkaban-level illegal, with her contacts," Draco said, "but if it gets out she'll never be trusted to write another article for any reputable publication. She'll be ruined."

"Oh, what a shame," Harry said sarcastically, grinning. He leaned forward to kiss Draco quickly. "I need to go write to my lawyer. You're the best!" Before he could run away, Draco grabbed him by the shirt collar and yanked him in for a proper kiss.

“Don’t you forget it,” he murmured, letting Harry go with a smirk.

It took a minute for Harry to remind his legs how to work before he could leave.

.-.-.

Easter break passed in a blur of homework, spell practice and avoiding Ron and Hermione, for Harry. Due to the tournament, he was exempt from his exams, but that didn’t mean he was exempt from all the work that accompanied them. Harry didn’t mind, really; it was good for him to test his skills after the year’s studying, and it was nice being able to do it with the knowledge that he wasn’t going to be tested on it all. He got his work done early, and spent the rest of the break researching spells that might come in handy for whatever the final task turned out to be.

Finally, on May 24th, Harry was told to meet the rest of the champions and Ludo Bagman by the quidditch pitch at 9pm sharp. He bumped into Cedric in the Entrance Hall on the way down, and fell into step beside him. “What do you think it’ll be?” he asked, shivering a little as they walked out into the evening air.

“Who knows. I was talking to Fleur the other day, she reckons it’ll be some sort of underground tunnel system.” Cedric shrugged, and Harry contemplated the prospect.

“As long as we can still use the quidditch pitch by next year, I don’t really care.” Cedric made a firm noise of agreement.

The pitch had been off-limits since the second task, and when the two boys walked through a gap in the stands, Harry’s jaw dropped. “Our pitch!” Where the smooth lawn had once been was a series of low hedges criss-crossing all over the surface, about three feet high.

“Hello, there!” Bagman was at the centre of the pitch with Viktor and Fleur, waving cheerfully. “Come on over!”

Climbing over the hedges, Harry and Cedric joined the others, staring around in horror. “What’ve you done to our pitch?”

“Isn’t it brilliant? Give it a month, Hagrid’ll have them twenty feet high!” Bagman enthused, his expression faltering when he saw the indignant looks on the two Hogwarts students’ faces. “It’ll all be back to normal by the summer, of course! Not to worry. Now, can anyone tell me what we’re making here?” He asked as if they were a class of toddlers, and got four unimpressed expressions in reply.

“Maze,” Viktor said eventually, and Bagman beamed.

“Exactly that, Mr Krum! The third task is really quite straightforward; the Triwizard Cup will be placed in the centre of the maze. The first champion to touch it will be the winner.”

“We seemply ‘ave to get through ze maze?” Fleur asked, looking down at the hedges around them.

"Well, there will be obstacles, of course," Bagman said, looking quite pleased about it. "Hagrid is providing a number of creatures; there'll be spells to break, all that sort of thing. We can't make it too easy on you!"

He went on to explain the specifics, how they would go in by order of points, and beamed at them when he finished, rocking on his toes. "Should be fun, eh?"

None of the champions looked like they agreed with the assessment, but they all nodded politely. Bagman deflated at their lack of enthusiasm. "Right. Well. If you've not got any questions, we should head up to the castle; getting a bit chilly out here!"

They all turned to leave, clambering over the hedges, and Viktor sidled up beside Harry when they left the stands. "May I talk to you for a minute? Alone?" he asked quietly, his dark brows furrowed.

"Yeah, sure," Harry agreed, perplexed. He waved off Bagman's concerns and followed Viktor away from the rest of the group, heading towards the edge of the forest. "Is everything alright?"

"It is Hermione," Viktor sighed, folding his arms over his chest. "Ever since the second task, she has been... distant. She spends less time in the library, and I wonder if it is because of me?"

"Oh." Harry tried to keep his face blank, wondering what the hell he could say in the face of that. "Viktor, I... it's probably just because of exams, mate. Hermione always gets a bit single-minded when it comes to academics. She's probably just too busy studying in her room to go down to the library. She doesn't like it when it gets as busy in there as it does during exam season." He hoped it was just that. Hoped it didn't have anything to do with him, or Dumbledore.

"You do not think it is because of that Skeeter woman's article? And the press? If I had come on too strong, been too forward..." Viktor looked distressed, and Harry clapped him on the shoulder.

"I don't think it's that," he assured, wishing he could be as confident as he sounded. "No one really remembers the article after mine came out. Just give her a bit of space while she studies, yeah?" He eyed the Bulgarian boy in consideration. "You really like her, don't you?"

"We do not get girls like her in Bulgaria," Viktor said, a smile tugging at his lips. "I am not blind; I know she does not have the same feelings for me that I do her. But... I would still like to end this well even I leave here."

Part of Harry was glad, that Viktor seemed to realise that Hermione was just biding her time while Ron got his head out of his arse, but it still made a pang of sadness rise in his chest. Viktor deserved better.

He opened his mouth to assure the other seeker that Hermione would be alright, when something moved in the trees behind them. He grabbed Viktor by the arm on instinct and pulled him away, raising his wand. "What is it?"

Harry shook his head, keeping his eyes peeled.

The interaction that followed was one of the most bizarre moments of Harry's life, and that said a lot. Viktor was wide-eyed when Harry declared he was going to get Dumbledore. "Don't leave me here with him!" he yelped, gesturing to the babbling Mr Crouch. Harry grimaced.

"I don't really have a choice. I'll be right back!" He turned and sprinted towards the castle, only realising once he reached the stone gargoyle that he had no idea what the password was these days. "Open up, please!" he begged, nudging with his magic, hoping the castle would help him out. "It's important! I need to see Dumbledore!"

The hidden staircase revealed itself, but not because of anything Harry did. Snape stared at him from the stairwell, dark eyes incredulous. "Potter? What's the matter?" He pulled his wand, doing a discreet scan of Harry's magic, but Harry didn't have time to be thankful.

"I need Dumbledore. It's Mr Crouch," he blurted, watching Snape's eyebrows rise. "He's by the forest, I left him with Viktor — he's gone mad! Keeps talking about his son, and Voldemort, and says he needs to speak to Dumbledore, says he's done something terrible."

Snape's gaze sharpened, and he stepped out into the corridor. "By the forest, you say?" Harry nodded. "The headmaster is in his office. I will aid Mr Krum." With that, Snape disappeared, and Harry hurried up the stairs. Dumbledore was sat behind his desk, and he smiled cheerily at Harry's entrance.

"Mr Potter! What an unexpected pleasure. Is everything alright?"

"I need you to come with me," Harry urged. "It's Mr Crouch, he's by the forest. I think he's gone mad. He wants to speak with you."

Dumbledore rose to his feet immediately, his smile dropping. "Lead the way."

As Harry hurried back down to the Entrance Hall, he explained what had happened the best he could. Striding out into the darkened grounds, they both picked up the pace when they saw the glow of wandlight by the edge of the trees. Snape was there waiting, and at his feet was—"Viktor!" Harry's heart leapt to his throat, and Snape shook his head.

"Merely Stunned," he assured, his face sharp in the light from his wand. "No sign of Crouch, Headmaster. Should I go look for him?"

"No, stay here." Dumbledore murmured something, and a streak of silver — a Patronus — shot off towards Hagrid's hut. "Harry, tell me everything you can remember Mr Crouch saying."

"Shouldn't we go get Madam Pomfrey?" Harry asked, eyes still fixed on Viktor's unconscious form.

"No need." Dumbledore revived Viktor himself, and sent Hagrid to fetch Karkaroff. Moody appeared — how he knew something was going on, Harry didn't ask, but Dumbledore didn't

look surprised to see him. The next thing Harry knew, Karkaroff was convinced it was all some sort of plot to have Hogwarts win the tournament, Moody was off into the woods in search of Crouch, and Snape was escorting Harry up to Gryffindor Tower.

Harry didn't dare talk to the Potions Master, not with so many portraits on the walls. Heart still pounding, he followed the man through the corridors, still trying to process the events of the last half hour. "Stay in the tower," Snape instructed once they reached the portrait entrance. "Tell no one what you saw tonight. There's enough trouble as it is without rumours spreading. Perhaps it's best if you go to bed early." He gave Harry a pointed look, making it very clear that while he shouldn't tell any of his fellow students, there were two people who definitely needed to know what had just happened.

"Yes, sir." Harry gave the password and stepped inside the common room, blinking at the number of people still up and about. It felt like it had been hours since he'd gone down to the quidditch pitch, but it wasn't even ten yet.

"Alright, Harry?" Fred called from the sofa by the fire, grinning. "What's the third task, then?"

"It's a maze," Harry replied, trying to keep his voice from shaking. "Big hedge maze, over on the quidditch pitch. I guess they're gonna fill it with creatures and spells and stuff. The Cup'll be in the middle, and whoever gets there first wins."

"Wicked," the twins murmured.

"You okay? You're looking a bit pale." That was Ginny, her brown eyes concerned. Harry forced a smile.

"Yeah, just a long day. Lots to think about. Think I'll just go up to bed."

The three Weasleys were clearly concerned about him, but didn't question it when he went up to his dorm, kicking off his shoes and squirreling himself away in bed behind heavily warded drapes. He pulled out the mirror, speaking Sirius' name.

"Hiya, pup! What's wrong?" Sirius' grin dropped when he got a proper look at Harry's face, and Remus squeezed in beside him, looking worried.

Harry told them all about Crouch and Viktor, watching them grow graver and graver. When he was finished, Sirius swore.

"This just gets better and better," he muttered.

"I don't understand," Harry said helplessly. "How does Crouch know Voldemort's getting stronger? And why did he keep talking about his son? Who is his son, anyway?"

"Crouch's son was a convicted Death Eater," Remus explained patiently. "Sent to Azkaban at the end of the first war by Crouch himself. He died, about a year or so in; couldn't handle the dementors, I suppose."

Harry gaped. "He sent his own son to Azkaban?" Sirius was hollow-eyed, as he was whenever anyone mentioned the prison.

"His wife died soon after. She took a turn as soon as he was locked up. Grief, they say," he said quietly. "Crouch has always been firm in his hatred for dark wizards. Sounds like one of them might've got to him at last. Or he just cracked under the guilt."

"But he's been in and out of Hogwarts for ages. I see him on the map all the time." Always wandering about in the late evenings, or sometimes in the middle of the day. "If... Percy said he's been out of the office for a while. How come he's still visiting Hogwarts, if he's been sick?"

Remus and Sirius shared a look. "It's possible he's been looking for signs of darkness at the school," Remus said eventually. "What with Karkaroff about. And Merlin knows plenty of people still don't trust Severus." He scowled briefly. "But if his mind has been going this whole time, who knows what he's been after. Are you sure it's him, Harry?"

"How many '*Bartemius Crouch*'s can there be?" Harry retorted. Again, the pair shared a look, but they didn't say anything. Harry let out a frustrated noise. "None of this makes any sense."

"It's nothing you can do anything about, anyway," Sirius said, clearing his throat. "Just focus on the third task. A maze, you said?"

Harry had barely spared a thought for the maze all evening, and he slumped back against his pillows. "Yeah. Full of obstacles; they're a bit vague on the specifics. I suppose I'll just practice the usual defensive lot and hope for the best." All his training over the summer would be worth something; it was the most confident Harry had felt about a Triwizard task so far.

"All your little escapades at school will finally come in handy. Good experience, that," Sirius remarked with a grin. Harry snorted, remembering the obstacles in front of the Philosopher's Stone.

"Anything in particular you'd recommend I work on?" he asked, since they clearly weren't going to give him any more information about Crouch. He'd bet anything Snape would go to Seren Du as soon as he was able, and the three would talk about whatever it is they weren't telling Harry. He tried not to let it grate on him too much; he trusted them to tell him what he needed to know. If there was more information... Harry just hoped it wasn't relevant to him. People keeping things from him 'for his own good' tended to have a habit of backfiring in spectacular ways.

Conversation turned to spellwork, and by the time Harry let the pair go to bed, he was feeling a lot calmer. Still utterly confused by the whole Crouch situation, but at least people other than Dumbledore were aware of it.

.-.-.

Once Harry had sent a letter to Mrs Frobisher explaining Rita Skeeter's secret animagus form, it had slipped from his mind entirely in favour of all the other things he had to worry about. As such, he was surprised when three people in dark grey robes burst into the Great Hall one lunchtime, their wands raised. Harry's wand was in his hand before he could even think about it, but Neville gripped his shoulder.

"They're aurors," he breathed. Now Harry looked closer, he could see the Ministry crest on their robes. The man in front, a muscular black man with a shiny bald head, strode up to the head table.

"Headmaster Dumbledore," he greeted, his baritone voice holding a hint of a Caribbean accent. "Apologies for the disturbance, but we have reason to believe there is an unregistered animagus hiding in this school." For one heart-stopping minute, Harry thought he was talking about Sirius. "May we have permission to check the hall?"

"Absolutely, Auror Shacklebolt," Dumbledore agreed, looking vaguely bemused by the intrusion. The auror nodded, then turned back to his colleagues, nodding sharply at them.

Harry's gaze fell on the one female auror, and his eyebrows rose when he realised he recognised her. Her hair was ice blue and down past her shoulders this time, but she was Charlie's friend from the Quidditch Cup. As she walked past the Gryffindor table, she caught his eye, and winked.

The three aurors positioned themselves at the edges of the hall, their spell loud and clear in the silence hanging over the students. All of a sudden, a tiny black dot rising towards the door grew larger, until Rita Skeeter was immobilised in mid-air, a look of shock on her face. Several people gasped.

"Rita Skeeter, you are under arrest for trespassing, unlawful gathering of journalistic information, and the use of an unregistered animagus form," the bald auror declared, walking calmly towards the woman. "You have the right to an attorney, but please be aware, anything you say in the course of your arrest may be used as evidence in trial." With a wave of his wand, Skeeter was on her feet with her hands bound behind her back. Only then was she released from the Immobilising jinx, and her face turned an angry red.

"Injustice!" she screeched as the aurors dragged her from the hall. "You won't get away with this! I'll have all of you sacked, just you watch!" Her words grew faint as they left the hall and shut the door behind them, and there was a long silence, before Dumbledore clapped his hands together.

"Well, that was a break from our usual afternoon routine!" he said, as if it were some sort of organised performance piece. "However, I believe all of you have classes to be getting to soon. Eat up!"

That prompted a wave of chatter to flood the hall, everyone baffled by what had just happened.

"An animagus!" Hermione exclaimed. "That explains so much! No wonder she was able to overhear Viktor and I at the lake." Harry smirked to himself, turning back to his sandwich.

“Aren’t you surprised, Harry?” He looked up, meeting Hermione’s gaze.

“I suppose,” he agreed neutrally. Her brown eyes narrowed.

“Did you have something to do with all that?” she asked suspiciously. Harry put on his best innocent face.

“Me? Never!” Beside him, Neville snorted.

“You could try a little harder to be believable, mate,” he advised. “Your lawyer finally rooted Skeeter out, did she?”

Harry kept silent, merely eating his lunch with a slightly satisfied smile, pointedly keeping his gaze away from the Slytherin table.

That was one problem sorted, at least.

.-. .

With the third task only a few weeks away, and the rest of the school in panic-mode for their upcoming exams, Harry and the other three champions were about ready to be done with it all. As the third task was almost as much of a mystery as the first — they knew absolutely nothing about what they might face in the maze — the four could often be found hanging out in empty classrooms in their free time, going over spells that might be useful. It was probably a breach of the tournament rules to all be training together, but none of them really cared, and their friends all had better things to do.

After a lunchtime session practicing shield charms, Harry headed off towards Divination, already dreading the hot, perfumed fire that burned within the tower. Summer was well and truly beginning, and Trelawney didn’t seem to have noticed, still wrapped in her layers of shawls. Harry felt lightheaded by the time he sat down; trying to stay awake during the lesson was going to be *impossible*. Even Parvati and Lavender were looking a little drowsy after the first ten minutes.

Harry tried his best to stay awake, but between the comfortable armchair, the heat and the dimmed lights, it was a lost cause.

It had been so long since his last dream of Voldemort that Harry almost forgot what it was like, but the dread seeped in as he found himself in a room with a familiar cold voice.

When Voldemort cast the Cruciatus curse on Wormtail, Harry felt it as if he was under the curse himself. He came to lying on the floor of the Divination classroom, his hands over his scar and his throat sore like he’d been screaming. Everyone was staring at him.

“What was it?” Trelawney pressed, her eyes even bigger than usual behind her glasses. “A premonition? An apparition? You have awoken your inner eye, Potter; tell me what you saw!”

Something had awoken, but it certainly wasn’t Harry’s inner eye. “Nothing,” he lied, pulling himself into a sitting position. His hands were trembling. “Just dozed off. I have a headache.”

“Your scar.” Trelawney’s voice was knowing. “You were clutching your scar.”

Harry didn’t need to look in a mirror to know the scar in question was red and inflamed, like it was fresh. “I think I’m going to go to the Hospital Wing.”

Trelawney tried to call him back so he could delve deeper into the beyond, but Harry ignored her, and all the people staring at him. Shoving his things in his bag, he hurried down the ladder and set off down the corridor — not towards the Hospital Wing, but to the dungeons.

He knocked on the door of Snape’s office, with no idea whether the man was teaching a class or not. Harry was in luck; the door opened, and Snape’s dark eyes met his. “Shouldn’t you be in class?”

Harry waited for Snape to lock and ward the office before he sat down, spilling everything he’d seen in his vision, watching Snape’s lips grow thinner and thinner with every word.

“I’ve been Occluding!” he finished. “My shields are always up. I even have the wardstone from Draco! Why do I still get these dreams?” Harry wasn’t sure why he was calling it a dream when they both knew what it truly was; a vision, a peek inside Voldemort’s head. What Harry had seen had happened, in real time, somewhere in the country.

“I suspect because it is not Legilimency being used,” Snape told him. “Whatever magic still resides in your scar, it evidently left you with a connection to the Dark Lord. Some sort of mental link. Now he’s regaining his strength, his mind is seeking yours more frequently. Whether he knows he’s doing it or not remains to be seen.”

“So he’s just pulling me into his head?” Harry asked, fear gripping his heart. “Will it happen every time I fall asleep while he’s still awake?” How long could a person go without sleep?

“It’s too soon to tell,” Snape confessed. “I’ve never seen anything like this before.”

“Great,” Harry bit out. “So I just have to live with the possibility of getting randomly sucked into Voldemort’s head every time I fall asleep. Fantastic.”

“You said Wormtail had failed him somehow,” Snape said, bringing him back on topic. “Was there any information as to how?”

“Someone’s dead, who wasn’t supposed to be,” Harry recounted, trying to force the dream back into his mind. “Someone sent Voldemort an owl to tell him Wormtail’s mistake had been fixed. So Wormtail must not be the only one who knows where Voldemort is. Also he wants to feed me to his snake.” That was said with a shrug, fairly low in priority compared to the rest of his concerns. “Who d’you think the owl came from?”

“It could be a number of people,” Snape murmured. “There are many Death Eaters who managed to escape judgement.”

Harry bit his lip. There was still one thing he didn’t understand. “Professor?” Snape looked up. “If... Voldemort shouldn’t have a body, right? He was just that weird shadow thing when he left Quirrell’s head. But... how did he hold the wand?”

"It has been a long time since the Dark Lord possessed Quirrell, Potter," Snape pointed out quietly. "With Wormtail aiding him, Merlin only knows what form he inhabits now." Harry's stomach churned. "Here, take this." He summoned a vial from his shelf and passed it to Harry, the label declaring it to be a Headache-Relieving potion. "It's no ordinary headache, but that should take the edge off. I suggest you go back to your dorm and check your Occlumency shields are as they should be. After an intrusion like that, I wouldn't be surprised to find them... rattled."

Harry downed the potion, grimacing at the taste. "Will you tell Remus?" he asked. Snape nodded. "Good. I... can I go back to sleep, or will it happen again?" the vision had left Harry wrung-out, and he was desperate for a nap.

"I imagine the connection only forms when the Dark Lord is feeling particularly strong emotions," Snape said. "As long as he is done... celebrating, you should be safe to sleep. If it happens again, call for Ceri and have her bring you to me."

"Yes, sir." Harry got to his feet, leaving the empty potion vial on the desk. "Thanks. I... yeah. Thanks." He almost thought about giving Snape a hug, desperate for some kind of contact after a vision like that, but he kept his hands at his sides. Their relationship wasn't there yet. He could probably persuade the twins to hug him without asking questions, they were good about that.

Harry left the dungeons, taking his time on the way up to Gryffindor Tower. On the third floor, he paused when he heard voices. "Terrible thing, terrible thing. So close to the end of the tournament, too!" It was Minister Fudge. "With any luck, we'll find him wandering the forest and pack him off to St Mungo's. Can't say I'm surprised he cracked, what with his personal history."

"I'm telling you, he's not in the forest." That was Moody, his familiar growl echoing through the corridor. "He got out of there awfully quickly for someone who's supposedly lost his mind."

"Gentlemen," Dumbledore cut in, "I'm sure there's a reasonable explanation for all of this. Now, shall we?" They rounded the corner before Harry had a chance to hide, and he was left stood at the foot of the stairs, wide-eyed. "Harry. Shouldn't you be in class?"

"I came over a bit faint in Divination," Harry told him, looking sheepish. "Think I've been burning the candle at both ends, y'know, getting ready for the third task. Professor Trelawney sent me back to the tower for a rest."

"Don't overwork yourself, my boy!" Fudge said, looking impatient. "Come, Dumbledore; I have meetings after this one, you know!"

Dumbledore gave Harry one last searching look, then followed Fudge and Moody down the stairs. When they were gone, Harry let out a relieved breath, carrying on up to the Tower.

So even Fudge was involved in the search for Crouch now, hmm? He wondered if they would come up with anything.

.--.

By the next day, Harry's little fainting spell in Divination had been passed along to just about everyone in the school. General consensus was that the pressure of the tournament had made him crack. Harry didn't really care what people thought of him; he had bigger things to worry about.

Sneaking through the Transfiguration corridor under the cover of the cloak, Harry slipped into the classroom, getting quickly to work. He cleaned off the teacher's desk with a quick spell, setting his burden down in the centre. Another series of spells had soft balls of light floating around the ceiling, and two chairs brought up to the desk. Harry seated himself in one of the chairs, and waited.

He didn't have to wait long. The door eased open, and there was an intake of breath as Draco slipped inside. "What's all this, then?" he asked, looking about the room. Harry grinned.

"Happy birthday, Draco."

Draco moved closer, his eyes landing on the small cake on the desk, a single candle burning happily on top. "Where did that come from?"

"I asked Ceri to make it," Harry admitted. "Blueberry and white chocolate, your favourite. And—here." He reached over to pick up the wrapped parcel, thrusting it into Draco's hands. "I hope you like it."

Draco closed the gap between them, ignoring the second chair and straddling Harry's lap to kiss him softly. "And you say *I'm* the romantic one," he teased quietly, stroking Harry's cheek. The Gryffindor smiled.

"I've picked up a few tricks here and there."

Draco leant back just far enough to unwrap the present between them, revealing a plain wooden box. He opened it with a curious frown, brows rising at the rows of inkwells inside. "It's something the twins have been working on," Harry explained, as Draco picked up a bottle of dark green ink. "Password-protected ink. You set a password to the bottle, and it dries invisible. Whoever wants to read it needs to speak the password with their wand to the paper in order to reveal the message. I thought — things might be difficult, over the summer, for you to properly write to some of your friends. With your dad, and their parents. You can share the bottles around, that way you can write to each other without getting caught."

Draco was wide-eyed as he held the bottle up to the light. "Fascinating," he breathed, then glanced to Harry. "You really do think of everything, don't you?" He smiled fondly.

Harry began to insist that the twins had done all the real work, but Draco cut him off with a firm kiss, his free hand tangling in Harry's hair.

When they broke the kiss, Draco looked towards the little cake. "I suppose I'd better blow out my candle," he mused, still seemingly quite comfortable on Harry's lap.

“Don’t forget to make a wish,” Harry added. Draco rolled his eyes, leaning over to blow the candle out neatly.

“I don’t suppose you remembered to bring cutlery?”

Harry pulled a knife and two forks from his bag, and Draco cut the cake neatly in half. It was sized perfectly for two people, just as he’d requested. Ceri had outdone herself, and the pleased hum Draco let out at the first bite had Harry’s trousers tightening uncomfortably. Draco ate his entire piece of cake perched on Harry’s lap, and both of their trousers were feeling pretty snug by the time they were finished.

“What else do I get for my birthday?” Draco drawled, his eyes bright in the dim light of the room, fixed firmly on Harry’s. Harry smirked, letting his hands wander.

“I’m sure I’ll think of something suitable.”

.-.-.-.

By the morning of the third task, everyone was too busy speculating over what might happen in the task to care about Harry’s sanity, or lack thereof. The students would be having their last few exams that day, and the task would happen shortly after. So far, Harry had spent the exam periods with the other champions, sometimes practicing spells but mostly just lazing about being smug at their lack of exams. He was expecting to do so again, when McGonagall came to him at breakfast. “Potter, the champions are gathering in the chamber off the hall after breakfast.”

“What surprise have they got for us now?” Harry asked with a grimace, wondering if there was going to be some unexpected extra layer of difficulty. They had to do the maze blindfolded, or something. McGonagall smiled slightly.

“You’ll like this one, Mr Potter,” was all she said before leaving the hall. Harry stared after her for a moment, then shrugged.

“Guess I’ll see you later, then,” he said to Neville, finishing off his orange juice and getting to his feet. “Good luck with History of Magic!”

Neville made a face and Harry laughed, heading towards the door to the side chamber. He met up with Cedric on the way over, and eyed him curiously. “Any idea what this is about?”

To his surprise, Cedric grinned at him. “You’ll see.” The Hufflepuff pushed the door open, sending Harry in first. He looked around the room; Amos Diggory was stood next to a pretty dark-haired woman, beaming proudly; over in a far corner were two dark-haired people who, judging by the man’s nose, could only be Viktor’s parents. Near them was a beautiful blonde woman, her hand securely wrapped around Gabrielle’s — Fleur’s little sister. And over by the fireplace…

“Surprise!” Bill Weasley strode forward, grabbing Harry in a hug. He was quickly followed by his mother.

"The champions are allowed to invite family to the final task," Mrs Weasley explained, kissing him on both cheeks. "Dumbledore thought you might like us to visit."

"Charlie wanted to come, but he couldn't get time off work," Bill volunteered. There was a squeal by the door as Fleur entered the room, immediately rushing over to her mother and sister with a babble of excited French. Harry noticed Bill's eyes following her as she passed them.

Harry wasn't sure what would've been worse; having no family to visit, or having the Dursleys at Hogwarts. The latter made him snicker to himself; that would be quite the sight. All the same, he was glad Mrs Weasley and Bill had volunteered, even if he wasn't quite sure how he felt about the Weasley matriarch these days. The only thing that would've been better was if Sirius and Remus could have been there.

"Merlin, it's weird being back," Bill told him, his hand on Harry's shoulder. "Haven't seen the place in years. Bet it hasn't changed much."

"It probably hasn't changed much since *my* day," Mrs Weasley agreed. "But still, it'd be nice to take a look around."

"Fancy giving us a tour, Harry?" Bill asked with a grin. Harry looked around; all of the other champions were in with their families now. Fleur's gaze kept slipping appreciatively towards Bill, even when Gabrielle tugged on her arm and said something in French. Harry smirked at the French champion, and she gave a pointed look at Bill in reply, her intention very obvious.

"Don't you want to meet the other champions first?" Harry offered, already walking towards the Delacour family. When he was a few feet away, Gabrielle darted away from her sister and wrapped her arms around his legs, beaming up at him.

"'Arry!" she greeted brightly. Harry bent down to kiss her cheeks in a proper French greeting.

"Bonjour, Gabrielle," he said, having learnt a very basic amount of both French and Bulgarian from the foreign champions in the time he was supposed to be preparing for the third task. "Ca va?"

She babbled back a sentence that Harry only caught a couple of words of, and Fleur laughed. "Zat might be a leetle past 'is learning, Gabrielle," she said teasingly, retrieving her sister. "'Arry, introduce me to your family, s'il te plait?"

"Fleur, this is Molly Weasley, and her eldest son, Bill," he introduced, knowing Fleur would connect the dots of the surname. Fleur greeted Mrs Weasley with a polite smile, and when she turned to Bill her eyes grew darker.

"Eet ees a pleasure to meet you," she said, her voice a little husky. Bill's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed.

"The pleasure's all mine." He took her hand, bowing over it with a kiss to the knuckles. Behind them, Fleur's mother giggled.

"As my daughter is otherwise occupied," she said amusedly, only a trace of an accent to her words, "I shall introduce myself. I am Apolline Delacour; you must be the young man who saved my Gabrielle."

"Harry Potter," he offered, bowing in greeting. "Your daughter is a fierce opponent, and an even more fierce friend."

"You flatter me, Mr Potter," Mrs Delacour replied, eyeing her daughter proudly. Mrs Weasley, on the other hand, didn't seem to know what to make of the blatant flirting going on in front of her. Fleur wasn't even using her veela charm; none of the other men in the room were looking twice at her. Bill seemed entirely smitten without it.

Harry eventually managed to drag Bill away from Fleur to introduce the pair to Viktor and his parents, though their English was far less fluent. And there was no need to introduce the final family; Amos Diggory gave Harry an assessing look as he approached. "There you are! Bet you're not feeling so full of yourself now Cedric's caught you up on points, are you?"

Cedric turned red. "Dad!" he snapped, shooting his father a scolding look. "Ignore him, Harry. He's been angry ever since Skeeter's first article about the tournament. Y'know, the one where she made out like you were the only Hogwarts champion?" That article felt like a lifetime ago. Amos scowled.

"Didn't bother to correct her, though, did you?" he pointed out sharply. Harry met his gaze without flinching.

"No, I just got her arrested," he retorted, voice cool. "Did you also happen to notice I was wearing a badge with your son's name on it in the pictures? Rita Skeeter's garbage is nothing to do with me."

Amos puffed up, getting ready to respond, but his wife put a hand on his arm and tugged him away with a furious whisper. Cedric gave an apologetic grimace. "Sorry, Harry. He's... difficult."

Neither of Harry's interactions with Amos had been particularly great, but Harry waved it off, smiling. It wasn't Cedric's fault his dad was a bit of a dick. "It's alright. We're gonna go for a wander; see you at lunch?"

Saying goodbye to the others, Harry led the two Weasleys out into the now-empty Great Hall, listening as Bill began to reminisce about his Hogwarts days while they strolled the grounds. He asked after Percy, wondering how he was handling Crouch's disappearance. Apparently, not well.

The rest of the Weasley family were surprised to see their mother and brother when the trio returned for lunch, and Ginny threw herself at her big brother for a tight hug, shoving Harry out of the way so she could sit beside Bill. Harry merely scooted up closer to George.

He was surprised at how frosty Mrs Weasley turned when Hermione joined them, barely greeting the girl before turning back to her children. "Mum reads *Witch Weekly*," George murmured in Harry's ear. "But she doesn't read the *Quibbler*."

Harry grimaced, but didn't say anything. That wasn't a discussion he wanted to get into when he had the task facing him in a few hours.

"Hey, Mum," Bill cut in when lunch began to wind down. "Mind if I borrow Harry for a minute? Give him a bit of advice before the task? Man-to-man, y'know."

Mrs Weasley smiled and nodded, shooing them away. Bill led Harry with a hand on his shoulder out of the hall and into a small classroom, locking the door with an impressive set of wards. Harry supposed he *was* a curse-breaker. "I spoke to Charlie after the first task," Bill said, leaning against a nearby desk. "He told me everything. Merlin, Harry... I'm sorry about Mum."

"It's not your fault," Harry insisted automatically. "I'm... I'm trying not to think about it, to be honest. I think Ron and Hermione are under his thumb, too."

Bill didn't look surprised. "I had a feeling that might be the case. Bollocks. Well, you've got the rest of us Weasleys. Not sure where Dad stands on the matter, mind. Haven't really asked him, just in case." Harry was happy to let Mr Weasley remain oblivious, and said as much. "Now, like I said, I spoke to Gorrak back before Christmas. He mentioned a very unique case of dark magic residue on a high-profile client that he might be putting me to work on this summer. From your letter, can I assume that's you?"

"Bingo," Harry confirmed with a grimace. "Did Charlie tell you about the magic Gorrak already removed from me?" From the way Bill's lips pursed, Harry took that as a yes. "The scar is different; he said he'd never seen anything like it. It also turns out it gives me a direct link into Voldemort's head, so that's not great."

Bill's face turned horrified, and Harry gave him the cliff-notes of his visions from Voldemort. "Blimey, Harry," Bill murmured, shaking his head. "That's one hell of a curse residue. Mind if I give you a scan?"

With Harry's consent, Bill spent the next five minutes checking him over with various spells, muttering under his breath and writing things down in a little muggle notebook he pulled from his pocket. "I swear I've seen something like this before," he murmured, putting the notebook away. "The magic feels familiar, somehow. It's hard to explain," he added at Harry's bewildered look. "I'll look into it and hopefully get you some answers soon. That's not magic you want sitting on you any longer than it has to be."

"It's so mixed up with my core, it hardly feels like foreign magic, to be honest," Harry admitted, remembering how awful it felt when Dumbledore reapplied the Compulsion charm once he was aware of his core. Sure, if he poked at it it felt a little wonky, but otherwise the magic around his scar just felt like an extension of his own, which was a terrifying prospect.

"That's not unusual; it's been part of you for almost your whole life. It practically *is* yours, now." Bill hummed thoughtfully, then pocketed his wand, clapping Harry on the shoulder. "Come on, then; let's get you back to Mum before she comes looking for us. You can take us up to Gryffindor, I'd love to say hello to the Fat Lady."

Harry and Bill returned to Mrs Weasley, and the three of them spent the afternoon touring the inside of the castle, finding the few things that had changed since they had been students. Harry was intrigued to hear about some of the old staff members Mrs Weasley had stories of; he hadn't realised she had been at the school before Hagrid worked there. Harry had always assumed Hagrid became groundskeeper as soon as he turned seventeen, since he never finished his schooling. Then again, he often forgot exactly how old Hagrid was to begin with. It was hard to judge age under all that beard.

Bill said nothing more about Harry's scar as the afternoon wore on, though Harry caught the curse-breaker giving him contemplative looks every now and then. Harry tried not to let it make him too anxious; there was nothing he could do about his scar, and Bill would surely find an answer soon.

He just had to get through the task.

Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The maze was a blur.

All four champions had agreed to keep an eye out for one another during the task, to help out if it looked like someone was in a really sticky situation. With no idea what could be lurking within the hedges, it had seemed like a good idea.

Then everything went so very, very wrong.

Harry found Cedric at the mercy of Viktor, whose eyes were glassy and unfocused. A quick spell had the Durmstrang champion unconscious on the grass, and Cedric stared up at Harry with fearful grey eyes. “What the hell is wrong with him?”

“I don’t think he was himself,” Harry said, looking down at Viktor with a grimace. “Someone put him under the Imperius curse.” He was pretty familiar with the signs, after Moody’s classes. Cedric went ashen.

“Merlin. You don’t think… Fleur?” Harry hadn’t been the only one to hear her scream, then. He shrugged, shaking his head. All they could hope was that she was okay.

“We should stick together, if we’re the last two left,” Harry suggested. “Either way it’s a win for Hogwarts. And quite frankly, I just want to get this over with. The sooner we’re done, the sooner we can check on Fleur, and get Viktor somewhere safe.”

Cedric agreed, and after sending up red sparks for Viktor, the pair set off.

A sphinx and an acromantula later, and the pair of Hogwarts champions were stumbling up to the plinth to see the Triwizard Cup glowing softly in front of them. Harry had a huge gash on his leg, and Cedric was bleeding from several places beneath his shirt. “You take it,” Harry urged. “You’re the real Hogwarts champion.”

“I wouldn’t have made it this far without you,” Cedric insisted. “You take it. Show everyone what you’re made of, that Harry Potter is a force to be reckoned with. You need that more than I do.”

“Together,” Harry decided eventually, realising the Hufflepuff wasn’t going to back down. “Like I said before; it’s still a win for Hogwarts. We’ll split the money, or whatever.” Cedric could have it all. Harry certainly didn’t need it.

That seemed to satisfy Cedric, and the pair each took a handle. Harry immediately felt like something was hooking him in the navel, and the world spun.

They arrived in what looked like a graveyard, the Cup dropping to the ground between them. “Is the Cup supposed to be a portkey?” Cedric asked, his wand raised in front of him. Harry

felt dread building in his gut, every instinct insisting that something was *wrong*.

“*Kill the spare.*”

The words echoed in Harry’s head, the flash of light burned into his eyelids, and all of a sudden Cedric was on the ground and Harry couldn’t look away and he was *dead*.

Cedric was dead.

The feeling of wrongness increased when the cloaked man forced Harry to his feet and began tying him to a gravestone. Harry managed to catch the name on the stone before his head was yanked back around with a hand that was missing a finger.

TOM RIDDLE

Harry stared at Wormtail as the man secured Harry’s bindings. This was not good at *all*.

He couldn’t help but look back at the grass, where Cedric’s still form lay. He wished the boy would jump up, grinning that rakish grin, and assure Harry it was all a joke, that everything was fine. But he wouldn’t.

He was gone.

He tried to struggle when Wormtail cut into his arm, but it was fruitless, and Harry could do nothing but watch as Voldemort was reborn from the cauldron. He caught the odd hissed word from the snake circling him slowly, but his focus was on the red-eyed wraith of a man in front of him, the parchment-pale face twisted in a satisfied smirk. “We meet again, Harry Potter.”

Uncaring of Wormtail’s whimpering as he bled onto the grass from his stump of a wrist, Voldemort used the man’s Dark Mark to summon his Death Eaters, sending a fiery spark of pain through Harry’s scar. Harry looked around at the masked faces, their bodies shrouded in black robes. He wondered if Snape was one of them. Would he be expected to risk his position at the school to join them? Would Harry have one ally in this graveyard?

He wasn’t surprised to see Lucius in the mix, even as his heart twisted painfully. Draco would be upset; though he knew, deep down, that his father was only loyal to Voldemort, Harry knew there was still a part of him that hoped for his father’s redemption. Hoped it was all an act, and he was truly the loving father Draco had always wanted.

Finally, Voldemort’s attention turned back to Harry. Harry could hardly focus as the man regaled his followers with the story of his return, his head feeling like it was about to cleave in two. But he tried his best; it was all important information. Sirius and the others would need to know.

He’d thought the pain in his head was the worst thing he’d ever experienced, but it was nothing compared to the Cruciatus curse in person. Harry would have been on his knees if he weren’t tied to the headstone; almost did end up on his knees, when Wormtail untied him. It

was only sheer stubbornness that kept him upright, his refusal to show any sort of weakness in front of those people.

Even his lessons in the summer couldn't have prepared him for duelling with Voldemort, surrounded by Death Eaters. Voldemort was toying with him, making a mockery of his enemy, and Harry was torn between wanting the man to just kill him and get it over with, and desperately looking for a way out.

When it came, it was in a way that Harry never would have imagined. The golden cage of light; the shades of Cedric, of his parents, of Bertha Jorkins and the muggle man. *We're so proud of you, son.* His mother's sad smile. Cedric begging him to return his body to his father, pleading for Harry not to feel guilty.

And then he was running, dodging spells left and right, his eyes focused on Cedric's body and the faint glow of the Triwizard Cup. As soon as his hand clenched around Cedric's cool wrist, a wandless Summoning charm had the cup flying into his hand, and the world spun again.

Harry returned to Hogwarts, slamming into the ground just at the edge of the maze. He let the cup fall to the side, his grip still tight on Cedric. The Hufflepuff's face was pale, and Harry choked back a sob.

All around him, the crowd had burst into deafening applause, cheering and whooping at what they saw to be a combined Hogwarts victory. Suddenly, fingers gripped Harry's shoulder, and he was wrenched up to meet Dumbledore's gaze. "Harry," the headmaster said, looking down at Cedric. "What happened?"

"Voldemort," Harry gasped out. "He's back."

He just managed to see a flare of what looked like *triumph* in Dumbledore's eyes before his vision was blocked by a lime green bowler hat. "What's going on? What happened? Oh my word!" Fudge's eyes went wide. "The Diggory boy! He's—"

Dumbledore tried to pull Harry away, but he clung tighter. "No, he told me," he muttered. "He wanted me to bring him back. He shouldn't have been there." If he hadn't told Cedric to take the Cup with him, if he'd just accepted the victory and gone alone, Cedric would still be alive. *Kill the spare.* Harry was the only one supposed to be in the graveyard. It was his fault.

"Harry, there's nothing you can do for him now." Dumbledore's voice stood out amongst all the others, but Harry refused to let go of Cedric. Everything around him was a haze of screams and whispers and shadows, people sobbing, the word *dead* being passed around over and over, Fudge's voice getting progressively higher as he grew more and more panicked. Dumbledore released him, but a different set of hands gripped him by the shoulder, wrenching him off of Cedric and away from the huddle. Harry tried to fight it, but after multiple rounds of Cruciatus, he couldn't have fought off a kitten.

"No," he murmured, feeling the stranger usher him across the grass, stumbling as they hit the castle steps. "No, I can't leave Cedric."

“Easy, lad,” it was Moody, and Harry struggled harder. “You need a lie down, you’ve had quite the shock. Come on, that’s it.” Harry couldn’t pull away as the man took him up to a room he vaguely recognised as the Defence teacher’s office; quite different to how it had been when it was Remus’. “Tell me what happened.”

“Voldemort’s back,” Harry mumbled. “I have to get back to Cedric.”

“Back? He’s returned?” Moody checked. Harry nodded. “What else happened? Did he call his Death Eaters? Who was there?” Moody kept bombarding him with questions, pushing a potion vial into his hand, but Harry refused to drink it, knocking it away and letting it smash on the floor.

“Foolish boy!” Moody roared, his magical eye whizzing around in its socket. “Tell me what happened, so I can know if my hard work has paid off!”

Harry gaped at him. Moody smirked viciously, his scarred face turning grotesque. “Yes, I did it. I put your name in the Goblet; I turned the cup into a portkey; I made Krum attack his fellow champions. It was a bloody miracle and a half you even made it that far! Refusing all my help, making it through by the skin of your teeth. You certainly didn’t make it easy on me, Potter! But it was worth it, if my master has returned.” He raised his wand, turning on Harry. “Imagine how pleased he’ll be to hear I’ve tied up his loose ends for him.”

“Stupefy!”

All of a sudden, Moody toppled to the ground. Harry looked around to the office door, which was hanging off its hinges, to see Snape and McGonagall rushing inside. “Professors!” Harry gasped. “Moody — he did it. He did it all. Voldemort’s back and it’s his fault.”

McGonagall looked horrified, and Snape quickly bound the Stunned man. “I’ll fetch the headmaster,” the Gryffindor housemistress declared, hurrying from the room. Snape dropped to his knees in front of Harry, cupping his jaw to look him in the eye.

“Did he curse you?”

Harry shook his head. “Tried to get me to drink, but I didn’t,” he said, gesturing to the mess of potion on the floor. Snape scowled, then held up a vial from his own pocket. Harry drank it without hesitation, and the world immediately regained focus, though his hands were still shaking. “Sir, Voldemort’s back.”

“I know.” Snape’s eyes flicked down to his left forearm. “Are you alright?”

There were so many ways Harry could answer that question, but he settled for just a nod. He wasn’t dying — that he knew of — and the damage had been done now.

Snape straightened up at the sound of hurried footsteps growing closer, and by the time McGonagall returned with Dumbledore he was on the other side of the room, staring down at the bound Moody with distaste.

“Sir, Professor Moody!” Harry said as soon as Dumbledore’s blue eyes landed on him. The headmaster was furious, though Harry couldn’t tell what part of the whole evening had made him so. He certainly didn’t seem upset about Voldemort’s return.

“That is not Alastor Moody,” Dumbledore announced, striding over to the unconscious man and staring down at him. “I knew as soon as he removed you from my sight. You have never known the real Moody.” He reached down, pulling the hip flask from Moody’s robe. He popped the cap and held it out to Snape, who sniffed it, sneering.

“Polyjuice,” he declared, meeting Harry’s gaze. That solved the puzzle of who had broken into his office.

“But then— who is he?” Harry was baffled, but Dumbledore seemed to know exactly who to expect once Moody’s face returned to its original form. He sent Snape off to get truth serum and Winky the house elf, McGonagall to get Pomfrey, and then Harry was alone with the headmaster and an unconscious stranger. Harry’s heart thudded against his ribs, his wand in his hand, just in case the fight wasn’t yet over.

Far from it; Dumbledore practically ignored him, discovering the real Alastor Moody inside a magically expanded trunk. It was only when the man on the floor began to change did Dumbledore pay attention once more.

The scars melted away, the fake eye popping out as the socket was once again filled. The wooden leg fell to the ground with a clunk. Eventually, Harry was left staring at a man with a bedraggled mop of straw-blond hair, his skin pale and his face surprisingly young. He looked about the same age as Sirius, if not younger, though he was prematurely wrinkled around his eyes and brow.

“Crouch.” Snape had returned, and was stood in the doorway staring at the young man on the floor, realisation in his eyes. Winky let out a wail at his side. “Barty Crouch.”

Harry wrinkled his nose, confused — that *definitely* wasn’t Mr Crouch — before it hit him. *Mr Crouch’s son.*

The Barty Crouch he’d been seeing on the map all year long was the younger Bartemius Crouch, not the elder.

“I thought he was supposed to be dead,” Harry murmured. Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled.

“I believe that’s exactly what he wanted us all to think.” He didn’t wait for McGonagall to return, taking the small vial from Snape and dropping three drops of liquid into Crouch’s mouth. Then, he revived him, keeping his wand out.

Harry barely dared to blink as Barty Crouch Jr told his story of escaping Azkaban, Winky letting out moans of despair every few sentences. He learned the truth about the Dark Mark at the Quidditch World cup, and his involvement in the Triwizard Tournament after Voldemort came to Crouch’s house. He learned of Barty Crouch Sr’s death.

At some point, McGonagall had returned, Pomfrey in tow, and the two women were struck silent in horror as they listened. When Dumbledore was satisfied, he put Crouch to sleep with a spell.

“Minerva, would you mind standing guard while I take Harry here upstairs for a minute? Poppy, if you could, Alastor is down in that trunk, he’s in a rather dreadful state and could use your assistance.”

“Potter should come as well,” Pomfrey insisted, but Dumbledore shook his head.

“I’m afraid I need Harry for just a little bit longer. Severus,” he added, turning to the man. “Please go out to the grounds and fetch Cornelius Fudge; he’ll undoubtedly want to question this man himself. Tell him I shall be in the Hospital Wing in half an hour’s time if he should need me.” He moved to stand beside Harry’s chair, helping him onto his feet. Pain seared through Harry’s leg. “Up you get, there you go, my boy. This will only take a moment.”

The last thing Harry wanted to do was go up to Dumbledore’s office with him, but he didn’t seem to have much of a choice. Dumbledore’s grip on his arm was surprisingly firm for such an elderly wizard, and he led Harry slowly up to his office.

The journey was a haze of pain, but soon he was sat in a chair in Dumbledore’s office, Fawkes perched on his knee. It helped a little to have the phoenix’s warmth with him, but it didn’t do a thing to aid the jumble of thoughts in Harry’s mind, or his throbbing leg.

“Harry.” Dumbledore’s voice cut through the fog. “I need you to tell me everything that happened tonight.”

“Professor, I really just want to go to sleep,” Harry pleaded, his voice cracking. “Can this not wait until the morning?”

“I’m afraid it cannot.” Dumbledore leaned forward in his chair. Even in his hazy state, Harry knew not to look him in the eye. “Start from the beginning, Harry. Don’t leave anything out.”

Slowly, with his eyes closed, Harry began to recount what had happened in the maze. By the time he’d reached the part where Cedric was killed, his voice was trembling, and he jumped when the office door slammed open. “Harry!”

A faint sob escaped Harry’s lips as Sirius rushed to his side, wrapping him in a tight hug. “Oh, pup,” he breathed, stroking Harry’s hair. “It’s okay, you’re alright, we’re here, we’ve got you, you’re safe.” Harry glanced up to see Remus stood behind Sirius, glaring at Dumbledore.

“What the hell are you playing at, Albus, bringing him up here alone after an event like that? Harry needs rest!” he thundered. Dumbledore didn’t flinch.

“Some things are more important than comfort, Remus. Though now you two are here, I’m sure Harry would be happy to allow you to stay.”

Harry’s fingers twisted in Sirius’ robe. His godfather wasn’t going *anywhere*.

With Sirius' arms around him and Remus' hand on his shoulder, it was easier for Harry to tell his story. He didn't even think about what might not be prudent to tell Dumbledore, his brain too messy from the evening's ordeal, so he just spilled everything. Both the Marauders tensed when Harry told them of the shades that had emerged from Voldemort's wand; echoes of Lily and James Potter. He kept going right up until the moment he grabbed the portkey. "And then I came back to the school," he finished eventually, his throat raw and his heart aching. Saying it all out loud, reliving every moment, made it real in his mind. Cedric was dead. Voldemort had returned.

"Can he go get medical care now?" Sirius asked sharply.

"Madam Pomfrey is expecting him," Dumbledore agreed. "Harry, you have shown immense bravery tonight — equal to that of those who faced Voldemort in the first war. You have shouldered a great burden, and it is time for you to rest from it. Sirius, would you like to stay with him?"

"I'd like to see you stop me," Sirius retorted. "Come on, pup. Can you stand?"

Harry made to push himself up, and let out a cry of pain as his leg throbbed. Fawkes fluttered down to the ground, leaning his head against Harry's calf and shedding a few tears — the wound healed, but Harry still felt like his limbs were made of jelly.

"I've got you." Remus smiled softly, turning his back to Harry and placing the teen's arms over his shoulders. The next thing Harry knew, the werewolf was lifting him in a piggyback. Harry let his head rest on the man's shoulder, eyes falling half-shut.

Sirius returned to his animagus form and padded alongside Remus as he carried Harry out of the office and towards the Hospital Wing. Harry was vaguely aware of Dumbledore following them, but he was so *tired*, and he was still trembling from the Cruciatus curse.

When they reached the Hospital Wing, it was to an entire crowd of Weasleys, plus Neville, Hermione, Fleur and Viktor. They all jumped up at the sight of Harry, though several of them looked perplexed at seeing him carried by Remus.

"Poppy, he'll need a Nerve Tonic," Remus called, ignoring the audience to set Harry on the edge of one of the beds. Madam Pomfrey's eyes widened.

"Cruciatus?" she checked, and Remus nodded. Mrs Weasley gasped.

"Oh, Harry!" She rushed forward to hug him, but Remus stepped between them.

"Madam, I must ask you keep your distance; Harry has had quite the ordeal this evening, and he needs medical care and a lot of rest."

"Professor Lupin? What are you doing here?" Hermione piped up.

"We were concerned." His plural brought their attention to the large black dog sat at Harry's feet, and Ron and Hermione let out quiet 'oh' sounds.

"If Harry wishes you all to stay with him, you may," Dumbledore announced. "But please save your questions until he is ready."

Pomfrey returned with several potion vials, and Harry drank them as soon as he recognised Snape's handwriting on the labels. The matron glanced down at the dog, who stared back at her silently. "This dog will be remaining with Harry for a while," Dumbledore told her, his tone one not to be questioned.

"Very well. Into bed with you, Mr Potter," Pomfrey urged, her voice surprisingly gentle. Harry didn't care that he was still in his torn and bloodied tournament clothes, merely lying back on the mattress. Remus helped him with his shoes, pulling the blanket up over him.

"Harry." It was Viktor, approaching the bed hesitantly. "I am sorry, for what I did in the maze."

"It wasn't your fault," Harry assured tiredly. "Are you alright? Fleur, you as well?"

"We are fine," the French witch told him, offering a smile that didn't reach her eyes. "We will return to our families, but... we wanted to make sure you were okay." She approached the bed with a cautious glance towards Sirius, who didn't move. Her fingers curled around Harry's, squeezing gently, and tears welled in her eyes. "Sleep well, 'Arry. We will return in ze morning."

Viktor clasped Harry's shoulder briefly, then nodded, and the pair left the room. Harry wondered how much they'd been told; he'd tell them the whole story in the morning, or as much of it as he could bear. They deserved that much. They were all in the tournament together.

Once Harry was in bed, Pomfrey offered him another potion vial. "It's Dreamless Sleep," she explained. "I would recommend you drink all of it."

Harry's gaze turned to Remus, who smiled and moved closer. "We'll be right here until you wake up." Sirius let out a quiet bark of agreement, and hopped up onto the end of the bed to curl up beside Harry's feet. Harry drank the potion, barely managing half of it before he was slumping against the pillows.

As he laid back down, the world became hazy, his eyelids suddenly very heavy. With Remus' fingers smoothing over his fringe, he fell asleep.

.-. .

Harry awoke slowly, feeling warm and fuzzy, and like he could happily drift back off to sleep. But he could hear very faint shouting, and when he blinked his eyes open he realised he hadn't been asleep long at all.

In all the chaos of Fudge bursting into the room, no one but Sirius and Remus noticed Harry sitting up and putting his glasses back on. The huge black dog shuffled further up the bed, resting his head in Harry's lap and looking up at him with soulful eyes. Harry pet him on the head, offering Remus a halfhearted smile.

Somehow, it didn't surprise him that Crouch had been 'accidentally' Kissed before a confession could be recorded. He didn't think Dumbledore was surprised, either — it was much easier for the Ministry to stay in denial if the only proof of Voldemort's return was the word of a fourteen year-old boy. When Fudge began to doubt Harry openly, Harry stared the man down.

"I can offer Pensieve memories, if you like," he suggested hoarsely. Fudge began to splutter.

"Highly unusual! I hardly think— as if we could take memories from a boy and expect people to believe it!"

Fudge continued to have his head firmly buried in the sand as he argued with Dumbledore, ignoring the headmaster's suggestions about the dementors and the giants. Harry didn't know why Dumbledore was bothering; they all knew Fudge wouldn't accept Voldemort's return until the man appeared in front of him himself.

Even when Snape showed off his Dark Mark, he refused to believe it, making his excuses to leave. He almost forgot to give Harry his winnings — Harry had entirely forgotten he was owed them. When the Minister left, Dumbledore let out a sigh.

"There is work to be done," he declared. By now, everyone in the room was watching the headmaster. Waiting for him to take over, as he had done in the first war, Harry realised. It made his stomach clench uneasily.

Dumbledore issued orders, and no one hesitated. Though Bill gave Harry a weighted look before he left; he would no doubt be in touch as soon as it was safe. When McGonagall and Pomfrey had both left as well, Dumbledore turned to the bed, giving Sirius a pointed glance. "It is time," he said simply.

Sirius growled quietly, but he shuffled to the edge of the bed and transformed, sitting at Harry's hip. Mrs Weasley screamed.

"Sirius Black!" she exclaimed, raising her wand.

"No!" Harry said, shielding Sirius the best he could. "He's innocent. It's okay!"

"What is *he* doing here?" Harry had almost forgotten that Sirius and Snape were supposed to loathe each other; they were glaring as if they were hoping to set the other on fire with their eyes.

"It is time to put your differences aside," Dumbledore insisted. "You are on the same side now. I will settle for a lack of open hostility."

Harry bit back a laugh as the pair shook hands, gripping tight enough to attempt to break fingers. They were probably enjoying that little act far too much. Beside him, Remus' eyes danced with amusement.

"So... not a mass-murdering lunatic, then?" Ginny piped up, eyeing Sirius warily. Harry smiled wearily at her.

“Nah, not quite. He’s my godfather.”

She nodded, apparently happy to accept that explanation. The twins and Neville, who had heard about Sirius from Harry but never met him, looked perfectly comfortable in the situation. Harry was honestly surprised Dumbledore had let them stay.

“Sirius, I need you and Remus to set off at once. The old crowd must be alerted,” Dumbledore instructed. Sirius’ eyes turned stormy.

“I’m not leaving until I know Harry’s alright,” he insisted. “A few hours won’t lose us the war, Albus. We’re leaving in the morning, and no sooner.”

Dumbledore’s lips thinned, but he didn’t argue; he couldn’t, not without revealing how little he cared for Harry’s wellbeing. “Very well, but you must leave first thing tomorrow. Severus, you know what you must do... if you are ready.”

“I am,” Snape replied, though he was paler than usual. Harry’s hand clenched beneath his blanket; Dumbledore wasn’t even *hesitating* to send him back to that awful monster.

“Then hurry. And good luck.” Snape swept from the Hospital Wing, and Dumbledore turned back to Harry. “I must go downstairs; I should see to the Diggorys. Harry, take the rest of your potion. I’ll see you all in the morning.”

Harry’s heart ached at the reminder of Cedric, and he closed his eyes against a fresh wave of grief. When Dumbledore left, he looked up at Sirius, who scooted back on the bed to put an arm around him. “He’s right, pup, you should get some sleep. We’ll stay with you.”

“Take your potion, Harry,” Mrs Weasley encouraged, still sending nervous glances towards Sirius. “Try and get your mind off things. Think about what you’re going to spend your winnings on, eh?” She tried for a smile, but it just made Harry wince, staring at the bag of galleons accusingly.

“I don’t want it. I shouldn’t even have it, I didn’t win.” He and Cedric had taken the cup together. It was his fault Cedric was dead.

“Cedric wouldn’t want you to blame yourself, mate,” Fred told him softly. “You couldn’t have known what would happen.”

Logically, Harry knew Fred was right, but that didn’t mean his heart believed it. He had survived and Cedric had not, because he was Harry Potter and Cedric was *the spare*. The Cup had been a portkey because of Harry. It was always because of Harry.

“You guys should go back to the dorm,” he muttered, looking away. He was going to cry, he could feel it, and he refused to do so in front of such a large audience. “Get some sleep, come back in the morning.”

“Only if you promise to sleep too,” Neville insisted. Harry nodded, though he didn’t speak the words.

Mrs Weasley was hard to convince, but eventually the twins managed to ease her from the Hospital Wing, leaving Harry alone with Remus and Sirius. His eyes began to burn.

“Your potion,” Remus started, but Harry shook his head.

“Not yet.” If he kept pushing the reaction away, it would only get worse. “Just... just give me a minute.”

Sirius pressed a kiss to his forehead, squeezing him around the shoulders. “Whenever you’re ready, pup.”

Leaning into his godfather’s embrace, Harry let out a shaky breath, feeling a couple of tears leak from his eyes. Cedric was dead. Friendly, funny, overwhelmingly *Hufflepuff* Cedric. The boy who had become a good friend to Harry in the last year, who had been one of the first to believe him when he said he hadn’t entered the tournament. The boy who loved quidditch, and his friends, and his girlfriend — oh, God, *Cho*. She would be devastated. Harry hoped she had someone to comfort her. He hoped she didn’t blame him.

The door creaked as it opened, and Harry tensed, expecting another round with Dumbledore. There was no one there — at least, not until after the door was closed, and a murmured incantation removed the Dissillusionment charm on the two people who had entered.

“*Harry*.” Draco hurried towards the bed, ignoring Sirius and hoisting himself up to pull Harry into his arms. “Oh, thank Merlin you’re alright.”

Harry couldn’t stop the dry, aching sob that broke free, and he buried his face in the front of Draco’s robes, letting his boyfriend soothe him with a hand rubbing his back.

“He wouldn’t believe that you were fine until he saw it with his own eyes,” Snape volunteered, striding towards the bed. Now that they didn’t have an audience, he eyed Harry with concern. “I must apologise, Harry. I had all the pieces of the puzzle, and yet I failed to put them together until it was too late.”

It took Harry a minute to realise what the man was referring to, and then he eyed him incredulously. “Crouch had all of us fooled. You couldn’t have known.”

Snape didn’t look convinced, and Remus put a hand on his shoulder, leaning in close. “It wasn’t your fault, Severus. This would have happened one way or another. The circumstances are tragic, of course, but... it was inevitable.”

“My father was there, wasn’t he?” Draco asked, voice hollow. Harry sucked in a sharp breath.

“Yeah,” he confirmed. “Yeah, he was.”

Draco’s grey eyes shuttered for a moment, and when he opened them again his jaw was set. “I won’t let him get to you.” He held Harry tighter, lips pressing to his hair.

“Everything’s going to change now, isn’t it?” Harry asked dully. Everything he’d been working towards in the last year — everything he’d planned, it was all coming to fruition. Progress could not be made until Voldemort was dead, but unfortunately that meant he had to

be alive again first. The war was on their doorstep, and it was time to fight on two fronts. “We have to make plans. We have to be ready.”

“You have to sleep,” Remus corrected softly, still holding the vial of potion. “You’ve had one hell of a day, cub. Get some rest. We can make plans when you’ve had time to recover, whenever it’s safe to do so.”

Harry wanted to argue, but he knew the werewolf was right. He was in no state to start planning a war.

“Draco, I should return you to your common room before someone notices you’re missing,” Snape added, gently touching his godson’s shoulder. Draco’s hold on Harry tightened for a moment, and then he sighed.

“The Slytherins will be worried about me,” he agreed. “They’ll want answers. I don’t know what to tell them.”

“As much of the truth as you can,” Snape replied. “They must all soon make choices. We can only hope they make the correct ones.”

Harry wondered how many students in Slytherin — and indeed, in other houses — had a parent who had been present in the graveyard earlier. How many children would be dragged into a war that wasn’t theirs to fight.

Draco cupped Harry’s face, kissing him tenderly. “I’ll see you as soon as I can,” he promised softly, then slid from the bed. He glanced up to Sirius. “Lord Black, I’d like you to write to my mother, but I don’t know if it’s safe for her to receive mail.”

“I can get a message to her,” Sirius assured. “And the offer still stands. Whatever protection the House of Black can give is yours whenever you want it. You’re family, in more ways than one.”

Something in Draco’s shoulders loosened, and he nodded, stepping back. Snape made to leave, but Remus’ hand tightened. “Be careful, Severus,” he pleaded, honey eyes fearful as he met his partner’s gaze. Harry was surprised to see Snape soften, leaning into the touch for the barest moment.

“As careful as I can. I shouldn’t be gone long; the school term isn’t over yet.” Was he headed to speak to the other Death Eaters, Harry wondered? Or to Voldemort himself? Either way, he was walking a dangerous line, even if it was one he’d walked before.

Remus’ hand moved to cover Snape’s heart for a brief moment, then he straightened up, pulling himself together. A practiced move — how often had he let the man he loved walk into the jaws of death? Harry didn’t know how he could bear it.

The two Slytherins left, and Remus stared after them for just a beat too long. “Here,” he said eventually, handing Harry the potion. “You need to rest. If you’re ready?”

Harry probably could've fallen asleep without the potion at this point, but he dreaded to think what his brain might conjure if he did. He took the vial, downing the whole thing in three large gulps. Sirius eased him down to lay his head on the pillow, then transformed back into a dog and stretched out alongside him, a comforting warmth. Harry let his eyes fall shut, and they did not open again.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorryyyyy please don't hate me too much~

If you would like to read a fic in which Cedric does not die and lives happily ever after, may I direct you to my Harry/Cedric founders reincarnation fic 'The Same, But Different'?

Either way, sorry. It had to be done.

Chapter 36

Harry woke after eight hours of restful, dreamless sleep. His body felt miles better — all his injuries from the night before had been healed, and the Cruciatus shakes had gone. But his heart still had a raw, gaping hole in it; the kind that made it hurt to breathe, hurt to think.

Sirius and Remus were still there, but they couldn't stay long. "Albus won't let us stick around much longer," Remus said sadly. "He's already been by three times this morning to see if you've woken up yet."

"Merlin forbid I have people who care about me more than the war effort," Harry replied dryly. Remus bent to kiss his forehead, right over his scar.

"Don't you forget that, cub," he breathed. "Our first priority is always you. *Always*."

Harry's heart hurt for an entirely different reason. He'd never been someone's priority before.

Sirius transformed back long enough to give Harry a hug and promise to be in touch soon. "This changes our plans, but we'll figure it out. You won't be with those muggles any longer than you have to be," he assured. "Love you, pup."

"Love you too," Harry replied, getting one last hug from both men before Sirius became a dog once more, and the pair left the Hospital Wing.

Alone for the first time since it had all happened, Harry let out a shaky breath, tucking his knees up to his chest. He wanted to call his friends back from the dorm, to surround himself with noise and people so he didn't have to try and think. He wanted to never see another human being again, not until the hole in his heart was closed over. He wanted it all to *stop*.

The door opened, and Madam Pomfrey bustled in, giving Harry a soft, knowing smile. "If there was a potion I could give you to make it all go away, Mr Potter, I would," she told him gently. "Sadly, magic can only do so much. Time will have to take care of the rest."

A wave of her wand summoned a set of pale blue pinstriped pyjamas, and she held them out to Harry. "I want to keep you until at least dinner. Go ahead and shower, it might help. I'll have breakfast waiting when you get out."

She drew back the curtains on a bed a few rows down, and Harry's eyebrows rose at the sight of the real Alastor Moody sprawled unconscious in the bed. "Is he alright?"

"He will be," Pomfrey assured. "He's had quite the year, but it's nothing permanent. Go on, off with you, get out of those awful clothes."

When he stood, Harry looked down at himself, grimacing at the dirt and blood covering his clothing. Yes, pyjamas seemed like an excellent idea.

He tried not to take too long in the shower, though half the time was spent just trying to breathe, willing the tears to come and the dam to break so he could just *get it over with*. He hadn't properly cried yet. He'd come close, had some tears escape onto Draco's shirt the night before — but it felt like it was all building up inside and he just needed to release the pressure, only it wouldn't go. Eventually he gave up, shutting off the water and drying himself with a spell, staring into the mirror for a long time. He had a scar on his forearm, now, where Wormtail had cut him, jagged and ropey. It could join his scar from the basilisk, his scars from the Dursleys' *care*. Marks of a boy who was more weapon than child. At least in the eyes of some.

As promised, there was a steaming bowl of porridge waiting on his bedside table, and a fresh set of sheets on the bed. Pomfrey was gone, and the curtains around Moody's bed were drawn once more.

As he ate, Harry forced his emotions aside to start thinking on the more rational side of his brain. Voldemort was back. He had to prepare for the worst. He wished he had his notebook, or at the very least a quill and parchment; his brain was buzzing with thoughts, plans and ideas and questions. He remembered Remus' words from the night before; *we can make plans as soon as you've had the chance to recover*.

He wasn't alone in this. As soon as he could get to Seren Du, they could figure it all out. No doubt by then they would all have a better idea of where things stood. What Voldemort was planning.

There was a knock on the door, and it swung open tentatively. The trio on the other side made the hole in Harry's heart rip open a little wider. Fleur, Viktor, and — "Cho."

The Ravenclaw girl's face crumpled, and she dashed forward, throwing her arms around Harry's neck. "Oh, Harry!" Her eyes were red and puffy, making Harry wonder if she'd spent the whole night crying.

"I'm so sorry," he choked out, holding her tight. "Cho, I'm so, so sorry, it's all my fault."

"I don't know what happened last night, but I know that's not true," Cho insisted, pulling back to look him in the eye. "Cedric cared about you so much, Harry. If he died helping you, or protecting you, or whatever he was doing — he would've wanted it to be that way."

That twisted the knife deeper in Harry's chest. "That's just it, though!" he burst out angrily. "It wasn't any of that! He was just in the wrong place at the wrong time, and they killed him for it!"

"I zink you should tell us what 'appened," Fleur cut in gently, a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Zen we can make sense of zis mess, non?"

Cho perched herself on the edge of Harry's bed, wrapping her fingers around his. Fleur took Remus' empty chair, and Viktor leaned against the bed opposite. "Vhenever you are ready, Harry," he murmured.

Harry took a deep breath, and began to talk.

He didn't tell them the details. He didn't feel the need to go into the specifics of the ritual, or the Death Eaters, or the strange Priori Incantatem as Dumbledore had called it. They weren't there for that. They were there for Cedric. "If I'd taken the Cup by myself, Cedric would still be alive. If I'd listened to him—“

"Yeah, and if he'd listened to you, You-Know-Who wouldn't be alive right now, but Cedric would still be d-dead," Cho pointed out, faltering on the last word. "If he'd stopped being so bloody *Hufflepuff* for *five minutes*." She choked out a laugh that was more of a sob, shaking her head. "Everything about that maze was designed to make you get there first. You said Crouch was rigging the whole thing. Cedric shouldn't have even been there, but he was, because both of you cared more about each other than some stupid competition. There was no way you could've known what would happen, and Cedric would hit you if he were here to listen to you blaming yourself."

"How can you say that?" Harry asked plaintively. "How can you sit here and comfort me and hold my hand when *I'm the reason your boyfriend is dead?*"

"Voldemort is the reason my boyfriend is dead!" Cho's dark eyes were burning, and she seemed to have surprised even herself by saying the name. "Don't cheapen his death by making it your own burden, Harry. It's not fair to either of you."

Harry wished he could believe Cho's words, but it didn't stop the guilt constricting his heart, so he kept his mouth shut. "What did Dumbledore tell the rest of the school?"

Fleur and Viktor shared a glance. "He said that Cedric's death was the first casualty of a new war," Viktor relayed. "He said he would explain more when time had passed, and allow a period of mourning."

That was appropriately vague and dramatic for Dumbledore. "And... Cedric's parents? What were they told?"

"The truth, mostly," Cho piped up. "That their son was killed by You-Know-Who's followers, because he got in the way of them resurrecting their master. They... they'd like to come see you before they leave, if you're okay with that?"

Harry couldn't think of many things worse than having to look the Diggorys in the eye and apologise for being alive when their son was not. But he didn't think he had the right to turn them away, under the circumstances, so he said yes.

"When do you all head home?" He directed his question to Viktor and Fleur.

"After ze leaving feast," Fleur told him. "Madame Maxime wanted us to leave sooner, but... she spoke to Professeur Dumbledore and 'e persuaded 'er to stay." Harry remembered Dumbledore saying something about speaking to Hagrid and Maxime about a job, and he wondered if it was due to that.

"Ve haff no headmaster," Viktor added with a shrug. "But ve are the ones who steer the boat anyvay. Ve vill go home when the term is finished." At Harry's look of confusion, he explained

about Karkaroff's disappearance. "Ve all knew he vas a Death Eater. I suppose he vas too scared to face his old master."

"So what will happen with Durmstrang?"

"Our deputy headmaster is a good man," Viktor assured. "He vill take over."

The door opened behind them, and a small crowd of Gryffindors paused in the doorway. "Oh, you've got company. We'll come back later," Neville said apologetically, but Cho shook her head.

"No, no, it's fine. We were mostly done anyway." She hopped off the bed, turning to Harry with a solemn face. "Thank you, for bringing him back. I'll... I'll tell Amos and Caroline they can come up and see you in a bit."

"We will see you at dinner, 'Arry," Fleur said, kissing his cheek softly. "Get some rest."

The champions and Cho left, and Neville, Ginny and the twins took their place at Harry's bedside.

"How are you feeling?" Ginny asked. Harry let out a long breath.

"That's... that's a really good question, Gin." He was simultaneously feeling a thousand things and also overwhelmingly numb.

"Is there anything we can do to help?" Neville looked earnest, and Harry managed a small smile.

"Turn back the clock twenty-four hours and make it all go away?" he joked. Where was Hermione's time-turner when he needed it?

"Mum went home, but she sends her love," Fred relayed. "She tried to talk Dumbledore into letting you come straight to ours for the summer, but he told her you needed to go to the muggles for a while."

Harry grimaced. "Not happening."

"Is that where you stayed last summer? With Sirius and Lupin?" Ginny wasn't daft, she knew Harry hadn't been with his muggle relatives. Harry nodded.

"I can't say where. But hopefully I'll be back there soon." He couldn't wait to be back in his room at Seren Du, in their little bubble of security.

"Good." Ginny's voice was firm. "I'm glad someone managed to get you away from those awful people. Neville filled me in on the whole Sirius Black thing, by the way. Hope you don't mind."

"Saves me having to do it," Harry said with a shrug, happy to have Ginny up to speed.

"So... if you don't mind us asking... what really happened last night?" George's question was tentative. "If you're not ready to tell us, that's fine," he added hastily.

"No, no, I can." Telling the other champions had been slightly easier than telling Dumbledore. Maybe it would get better the more times he said it; sink in a little deeper, so he could actually believe it had happened. So it wasn't all some awful nightmare.

Unlike with the champions, this time Harry tried not to leave anything out. Ginny buried her face in Neville's shoulder when he described watching Wormtail put the twisted baby in the cauldron and see it emerge as Voldemort. Even the twins were pale and grim-faced when he described the way their wands had connected, and he'd used the distraction to run.

"Bloody hell," George said in the end. "So that's it, then. He's really back."

"He's really back," Harry confirmed dully. "And he's got most of his followers with him."

"So what's the plan now?" Fred asked without hesitation. Harry blinked at him. "Mate, you're gonna be in the thick of it whether you like it or not, and if you think we're gonna stand by and watch you risk your neck, you've got another thing coming."

"He's right. Whatever you're doing, we want to help," Ginny said vehemently. "And if you tell me I'm too young I'll hex you."

"Hell, we're all too young for this," Harry pointed out with a wry quirk of his lips. "I... thanks, guys. We don't really have a plan yet. Need to talk to some people first. But once I know what's happening, I'll let you know."

"Whatever we can do to help, let us know," Neville said. "Gran, too. She doesn't think much of Dumbledore, but she's on your side."

When Harry thought about all the people he'd have to talk to, all the decisions he'd have to make in the next few weeks, it made his chest tighten uncomfortably. He pushed it away. There was time for all that later.

Ginny cleared her throat, drawing their attention. "What... what about Ron and Hermione?" At Harry's raised eyebrow, she continued. "They were up here last night too. They know some of what happened. But I'm not blind; you clearly don't trust them anymore. What are we supposed to tell them, if they ask?"

"I've got pretty good evidence that Ron and Hermione are spying on me for Dumbledore," Harry admitted, hating the words even as he said them. "If they ask, play dumb, act like you don't know any more than they do. And be careful; if they're watching me, they might be watching you as well."

Ginny nodded, showing no sign of sadness or disappointment that her brother was doing such a thing. Harry wondered if the twins had told her about their mother, yet.

Harry yawned, and Ginny immediately nudged him back into bed. "You should get some more sleep. We'll leave you to it. You'll be out for dinner, yeah?"

They said their goodbyes and left Harry alone once more. He ran a hand through his hair, biting his lip against a fresh wave of grief, and rolled over to bury his face in his pillow.

.-.-.

Meeting with Cedric's parents had been nothing short of awful, but Harry had made it through. He'd explained to them what happened — the truth, in case Dumbledore had seen fit to lie to them — and apologised over and over. Amos Diggory was quiet, but Caroline Diggory held him tight and insisted it wasn't his fault, that he'd done everything he could.

It certainly didn't feel like it.

He tried to offer them the Triwizard winnings, but they refused to take it. Harry was left staring at the sack full of galleons, wondering what the hell he was supposed to do with it. Send it to Gringotts and throw it in with the rest of his money? That seemed a waste. Were there charities, in the wizarding world?

Twenty minutes before dinner, Madam Pomfrey checked him over and declared him fit to leave. "Only if you want to, Mr Potter," she added with concern in her eyes. "It's no trouble to me if you want to stay another night."

As much as Harry was dreading having to face the rest of the school, the prospect of spending a night alone in the Hospital Wing was worse. Dumbledore had come by to visit not long after the Diggorys, and being alone with the headmaster had set him on edge. The night before had been fine, as Remus and Sirius had stood guard, but he didn't have that now. He'd much rather be in his dormitory.

He thought about skipping dinner, but his rumbling stomach decided that for him. He shook off the brief thought of going to the kitchens instead; he'd have to face everybody eventually. Might as well get it over with

As he walked from the Hospital Wing to the Great Hall, dressed in a fresh school uniform the house elves had fetched for him, several people stopped and stared at him walking past. He ignored them, keeping his head down as he entered the hall, whispers echoing in his wake.

"Harry!" He looked up at the call that came louder than all the other murmurs of his name, seeing Cho waving at him from the Ravenclaw table. She wasn't alone; Viktor and Fleur were with her, and the twins, and Ginny and Luna, and Neville and Susan and Hannah, and a dozen other people who had become a regular presence in their hodge-podge social group over the last few months, including several of Cedric's Hufflepuff friends. Between Cho and Viktor was an empty seat, and Harry walked towards it, dropping down onto the bench. Cho leaned into his shoulder for a brief moment, squeezing his arm. "How are you holding up?"

"I should be asking you that," Harry retorted quietly. He looked around the group, all of whom were giving him encouraging smiles. "You guys didn't have to do this."

"Yeah we do," Cho insisted. "So let us do it. You're our friend, and you were Cedric's friend, and he'd come back and haunt all of us if we just left you to the wolves."

There were several people around the room who had dark looks on their faces as they stared at Harry, even from the Gryffindor table. It was a familiar sort of look; the look of people who thought Harry was dangerous, deranged, the next Dark Lord in the making. They probably thought he'd murdered Cedric himself.

"Thanks."

Cho smiled at him, reaching over to start piling mashed potatoes on her plate.

There wasn't much conversation through the meal; a few attempts at making summer plans, or relief at the end of exams, but nothing like the usual buzz of noise. Harry looked down the table, feeling like something was wrong. Someone was missing, but he couldn't figure out who.

Eventually, it hit him; there were most of the usual Slytherins in their group, but Cassius was missing. He craned his neck to look over at the Slytherin table, seeing the sixth year boy eating with his head down, surrounded by his year mates. He looked pale and wrung out. Harry's heart clenched. Had his uncle been in the graveyard too? Had he already drawn the line on Cassius' behalf?

"Susan," he called softly to the girl sitting a few seats over on the opposite side of the table. She looked up, frowning at the grim look on his face. He gave a pointed glance to Cassius. "We need a study group meeting."

Understanding dawned in her eyes, and she shook her head. "Neville already gave us the rundown, before dinner," she assured. "I'll owl you in the summer, we'll figure things out."

That didn't satisfy Harry, but he couldn't say anything further when they were surrounded by so many people. Susan gave him a pointed glance. "Not everything's all on you, Harry. Let me take care of this one for a bit."

Harry didn't have the energy to argue with her.

.-. .

Announcing the return of Voldemort in the middle of the end of term feast was a bold move on Dumbledore's part, but Harry wasn't surprised. The headmaster had already practically declared war on the Ministry, threatening Fudge with the inevitabilities of his continued ignorance. It was a smart move, too; those who were against Voldemort would see Dumbledore standing for the truth and align themselves with him, encourage everyone to put the Ministry in his hands — because obviously they were too incompetent to keep running themselves, with Fudge in charge. Harry wondered if they'd forgotten who had endorsed Cornelius Fudge to begin with.

The game had begun, and Dumbledore was setting up his pieces. Harry would have to start doing the same, soon. The prospect made his stomach squirm anxiously. Was he really going to take on Dumbledore, the Ministry, and Voldemort?

He didn't really have a choice. Someone had to end this cycle of war and death and misinformation. Someone had to put a stop to Dumbledore's quest for the Greater Good, before he brought the wizarding world to its knees.

He looked to the Slytherins during the feast, their drawn faces and solemn eyes. He hadn't had the chance to speak to Draco in the week since the task; all of them were being watched, now more than ever. He hoped Slytherin House knew they had options. He hoped they hadn't given up already.

The feast came to a quiet end, and Harry retreated up to the dorm with Neville. He hadn't spoken to Ron and Hermione since the night of the third task. They didn't seem to know what to say to him. Harry wasn't in any rush to speak to either of them; maybe if he was lucky, Dumbledore wouldn't see the need to have them spy on him, now that Voldemort was back.

Dean and Seamus had kept to themselves in the last week; Harry hadn't asked what they thought about Cedric, or Voldemort, or any of it. He was too scared of the answer. So they said nothing when Harry changed into pyjamas and sequestered himself away behind the drapes of his bed and his usual privacy charms. He was about to call it an early night, when the mirror began to vibrate beneath his pillow. He pulled it out, answering the call and smiling at Sirius' face.

"Hi, pup. Glad I managed to catch you. How was the feast?"

Harry's smile faltered, and he told Sirius what Dumbledore had said. His godfather didn't seem surprised either. "We suspected he might do as much. Setting himself up as the leader of the light again."

"What have you been doing? Where are you?" Harry hadn't managed to speak to his godfather since he'd left the Hospital Wing, the mirror going unanswered the few times Harry had been able to try it. Sirius grimaced.

"I'm in a place I never thought I'd have to go back to," he said, which gave Harry zero information whatsoever. "Moony and I have been gathering the old crowd — everyone who fought against Voldemort the first time around. And a few who weren't old enough the first time, but will happily join us for the second." There were voices in the background, and Sirius winced. "Listen, pup, I don't have long. There's a bit of a snag in our summer plan."

Dread rose in Harry's gut. "What do you mean?"

"Dumbledore wants you monitored this summer," Sirius told him. Harry cursed. "Yeah. He wants a 24/7 guard outside the Dursleys' house, ready to follow you any time you leave the property."

"I'm not staying with them all summer." If he was left to Uncle Vernon's hands after having Snape boss the man around the summer before, he wouldn't survive to see his fifth year.

"Absolutely not," Sirius agreed without hesitation, and something in Harry began to un-twist. "We haven't quite figured it out yet, but there's got to be a way to get you out of there without Dumbledore knowing."

“The guard will be outside the house, right? Why don’t we just claim I’m being locked in my room all summer. Wouldn’t be the first time.” Something dark flashed across Sirius’ face at that admission, but it was gone in an instant.

“That could work. Someone would notice when owls don’t arrive, though.”

Harry frowned; he hadn’t thought about that. “I’ll talk to the twins.” If anyone was able to think of a way to circumvent magical supervision, it was them. “If it comes down to it, I can say the Dursleys have forbidden me from getting any post all summer. Again, not the first time. The twins will back me up, they know what my aunt and uncle are like.” Ron did too, but he wasn’t likely to say anything in Harry’s favour these days.

“It gives us options. See what the twins think, and let us know. Severus will come to pick you up as soon as it’s safe to do so. We haven’t confirmed how strict the monitoring is going to be, yet, but it looks like it’s just gonna be someone invisible hanging out by your house. Having a bunch of charms and the like over your house would be a dead giveaway.”

The voices in the background grew louder, and Sirius cursed. “I’ve got to go. Talk to the twins, and I’ll see you soon. Love you.” He didn’t wait for a reply before ending the call, leaving Harry staring at his own tired reflection.

If Dumbledore’s meddling stopped Harry spending time with his *real* family this summer, there would be hell to pay.

.....

The first of July dawned bright and clear, and Gryffindor Tower was a flurry of activity as everyone packed up their trunks and made their way down to the Entrance Hall. Even more than usual, everyone was eager to get home. Even Harry, for once, though he had to hide his enthusiasm. He trusted Sirius when the man promised he wouldn’t leave Harry to the Dursleys. They’d figure it out.

The hall was much more full than usual, with the Durmstrang and Beauxbatons students getting ready to leave as well. Harry was a lot more sad than he thought he’d be watching them go; he’d made friends with a surprising number of the foreign students over the last few months, not just Fleur and Viktor. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Boris and George kissing, and smiled sadly. Neither of them were serious about each other, and would part on good terms, but it was still unfortunate that things had to end.

Surrounded by people promising to keep in touch and owl each other, Harry squeezed his way through the crowd to find Fleur and Cho hugging each other tightly, both with tears in their eyes. Fleur beamed at him when he approached. “‘Arry!” She released Cho and grabbed him, kissing both his cheeks. “We will see each other again soon,” she promised. “I am trying to get a job ‘ere, to improve my Eenglish.”

“And to see a bit more of Bill Weasley, too, I bet,” he teased, remembering the outrageous flirting before the third task. God, that felt like months ago. Fleur’s cheeks pinked.

"Zat would 'elp as well, yes," she admitted with a grin. Sobering, she pressed their foreheads together briefly. "You 'ave been a great friend to me zis year, 'Arry Potter, and I 'ope to be ze same to you in return. Eef you ever need me, I will be zere. Zis fight is for all of us." The fire in her eyes reminded Harry exactly why she'd been chosen as Beauxbatons' champion.

"Thank you," he said sincerely. "I'll keep that in mind." He didn't want to lose touch with Fleur, or any of his new friends.

She hurried off to say goodbye to someone else, and Cho touched Harry's elbow gently. "Can I write to you? Over the summer?" she asked. "I... I've liked getting to know you better, this year. Ced was gonna invite you over to his for a bit, this summer. He thought you might want to get away from the muggles, y'know? I'd imagine you're probably not allowed to visit anyone anymore, though."

Harry hadn't been allowed to visit anyone but the Weasleys before Voldemort had returned, but he didn't tell Cho that. His heart ached for the future that might have been. "I don't know if I'll be allowed to get owls," he confessed. He hadn't had the chance to talk to the twins yet. "But if I can, I'll write to you, yeah? I've liked getting to know you, too. I'm glad we're friends, Cho."

Cho gave him a watery smile, and she hugged him. "We won't let him win," she declared vehemently, her voice a little choked. "We'll fight him. For Cedric."

She stepped away, and someone tapped Harry on the shoulder. He turned to see Viktor smiling down at him. "The Durmstrang ship is about to leave," he declared. "But I did not vant to go without saying goodbye."

Viktor wasn't the most tactile person, but he grabbed Harry in a brief, firm hug nonetheless, meeting his gaze intently when they parted. "Var is coming," he said solemnly. "And should you need the aid of Durmstrang, ve vill be happy to assist. As I said; our deputy headmaster is a good man."

Harry nodded. "I'll keep in touch." He cracked a smile. "Maybe we'll play quidditch against each other some day." Viktor chuckled, clapping Harry on the shoulder.

"I vould like that very much, Harry. Very much indeed." It was a pipe dream, a fantasy of a time when war was past, but they could hold onto it all the same.

"What's happening with you and Hermione?" Harry asked curiously. He didn't see the bushy-haired girl around anywhere. Viktor's smile faltered.

"She has promised to write to me, but things haff been... different, lately. I think perhaps she is not the girl I thought she vas." He eyed Harry knowingly. "She is not the friend I thought she vas."

It didn't take a genius to see that Hermione hadn't been anywhere near Harry since the third task. He could imagine how that came across to others. "I'm sorry." Whatever Hermione was to him, Viktor had liked her a lot.

"Vat is it you say here? There are other fish in the sea?" Viktor said, shrugging. "I am young, there is time."

Harry hoped Viktor found someone who truly deserved the strong, incredible man that hid behind the awkward, surly exterior.

The other Durmstrang students called out to their stragglers, and Viktor clapped Harry on the shoulder once more before following, falling into stride beside Boris as they returned to their ship. Soon after, Madame Maxime gathered her students, and they too were headed home. Harry grabbed his trunk and headed towards the doors, joining Neville and Ginny in waiting for the carriages. The twins joined them soon after, George's hair mussed in a way that made Harry snicker.

"Shut it, Potter," George said good-naturedly, elbowing Harry in the side. "I've seen you look worse."

The carriages began to arrive, and Harry stifled a grimace when they ended up sharing one with Ron and Hermione. It was inevitable, when he was with the rest of the Weasleys, but he wished it wouldn't happen. He didn't know what to say to either of them — would they let him just back out of the friendship without issue, or were they still trying to keep hold of him on Dumbledore's orders? He felt like they would have already tried to make amends — again — if they wanted to continue being his friends over the summer. Perhaps they recognised a lost cause, at last. Or they just assumed Harry would be thrown in with them whenever Dumbledore decided what to do with him. As if he would go passively into anything like that.

But he couldn't make any moves until he had talked over his options with Sirius and Remus and Snape. He was playing a very dangerous game.

The seven of them ended up in a train compartment together, though conversation was stilted at best. Harry spent the whole journey looking for an opportunity to get the twins alone, but it didn't happen until the very end, when they were the last ones out of the compartment at King's Cross. "Hey, wait," Harry urged, grabbing George by the arm. He shut the door quickly, raising a privacy ward. School wasn't over yet. "I need your help with something."

He explained his predicament, and the twins' faces grew contemplative. "We'll figure something out," Fred promised. "Can't leave you with those muggles all summer."

"Could be a good one to add to our product line," George agreed, grinning. "I get the feeling you're not the only one who might need a decoy, these days."

All of a sudden, Harry had the most brilliant idea he'd had in a long time.

He threw his trunk open and reached inside, grabbing the sack of galleons he'd thrown in there. He held it out to George. "Take this," he insisted. Both twins stared at him incredulously.

"Harry, mate..."

"I'm serious. Take it." Harry forced the bag into George's hands. "I don't need it, I don't want it, and after Bagman screwed you guys over you could do with it. Consider it an investment in Weasley's Wizard Wheezes. We'll need laughter now more than ever."

He glared at them both until they looked like they were no longer going to argue, and George stashed the bag away in his trunk. Harry grinned triumphantly. "Good. Just don't tell your parents where you got it, alright?" He was bundled in a crushing group hug.

"This won't go to waste, Harry," Fred promised, ruffling his hair.

Despite their lacklustre OWL marks, the Weasley twins were two of the smartest people Harry knew, and he had no doubt that they'd take the wizarding world by storm in the next decade or so. He was glad to know the Triwizard money would be going towards something worthwhile.

They caught up with the others on the platform, and Harry walked with the Weasleys through the barrier, unsurprised to find the Dursleys waiting on the other side. He said his goodbyes and strolled towards his scowling aunt and uncle.

"Come on, boy," Vernon hissed, grabbing him by the collar and shoving him towards the car park. "The sooner we get you home, the sooner we can get rid of you."

"We didn't want to come at all, but that *awful boy* insisted we keep up the charade. More trouble than you're worth, you are," Petunia told him. Harry refrained from pointing out that that *awful boy* was now a man in his thirties, smiling down at the empty owl cage sat on top of his trunk. He'd sent Hedwig ahead to Seren Du, not wanting to anger his relatives even more by making them transport a live owl.

Sirius' promise rang in his ears as he was forced into Vernon's car. He would be gone soon. He wouldn't be left with the Dursleys.

He could go home soon.

Chapter 37

To Harry's relief, he didn't have to wait long; Snape arrived at eleven in the morning the first day of summer, and glared at Aunt Petunia while Harry gathered the few things he'd unpacked.

The sight of the enormous manor house eased a tension Harry hadn't even realised he was carrying, but he gave a puzzled frown when Remus was the only one to greet them. "Where's Sirius?"

"Come inside, we'll explain over tea." Remus hugged him, but didn't say anything more until they were comfortably ensconced in the living room, a tea set on the coffee table with a plate full of homemade raspberry scones; Ceri was delighted to have Harry home again.

"First off, Sirius is fine," Remus assured, before Harry could worry too much. "But you might not see much of him this summer. Dumbledore has... persuaded him to offer up one of the other Black family properties as headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix."

Harry had heard a little about the Order, from Remus and Sirius' stories of his parents. Dumbledore's resistance against the darkness. "The Order has re-formed, then?"

Remus nodded. "As soon as Sirius and I left Hogwarts, Dumbledore had us gathering up the old crowd. He asked Sirius if he could use the house maybe three days after Voldemort returned. It all happened very quickly — clearly he's had his plans waiting for a while now." The werewolf didn't look impressed. "We can't tell you exactly where it is — it's under a Fidelius charm — but it's in London. Unfortunately, because Dumbledore has no idea about this place, he believes Sirius has been living on the run for the last year, and has *invited* him to live at headquarters."

He looked about as pleased with Dumbledore inviting Sirius to live in his *own house* as Harry did, and even Snape made a face. "He's being watched, too, then," Harry surmised, crestfallen. "Cooped up in that house under Dumbledore's thumb as much as I'm supposed to be at the Dursleys'?"

"That's about the sum of it, yes. Sirius will get away to come here whenever he can — he's been quite happily cultivating a rather grouchy persona, to excuse away shutting himself in his room for hours at a time — but I'm afraid you won't be seeing as much of us all as you did last summer. Albus knows I have my own place, though he doesn't know where it is, and he knows I don't currently have a job, so he expects me to be at headquarters quite often."

"And as far as Albus is concerned, he owns my soul, my body and every minute of my time," Snape cut in with a grimace, "so it's hard to say what he'll be expecting of me this summer."

"Between the three of us, we should manage to always have someone here to keep you company," Remus assured. "But things may be a bit quieter for the next month or so. With any luck, Dumbledore will agree to move you shortly after your birthday, as usual."

"I can keep myself occupied," Harry said, though he couldn't completely hide his disappointment. "I'm just glad to be here."

He claimed one of the scones for himself, then looked up at the two adults on the other sofa. "So how much can you tell me? What's Voldemort up to, do you know yet?" It had only been a week since the night of the third task, but Harry felt like an age had passed in which Voldemort could be gathering strength and numbers.

"I have not yet been summoned, though I suspect I will be soon now that term has ended," Snape told him. "Many of the Dark Lord's old followers have returned to him, and will soon be making overtures towards new ones."

"Has anyone found Karkaroff yet?"

Snape grimaced briefly. "Igor was found, yes. He is... no longer with us."

Harry had expected as much, but it still made him flinch. The man had been creepy, but he didn't deserve whatever awful death he'd been given at the hands of Voldemort and his people.

"Other than that, there's not much to tell," Remus admitted, leaning against the arm of the sofa. He looked weary, though Harry wasn't sure if it was the full moon or just the stress of the last week. "The Order is gathering. The Ministry continues to deny any hint of Voldemort's return — they'll no doubt start firing anyone who's too close to Dumbledore, soon."

"But surely Dumbledore wants as many of his people in the Ministry as possible?" Harry asked, confused. If Dumbledore wanted to keep his hold on the wizarding world, surely he'd need to keep the Ministry under his thumb?

"Oh, he'll keep some of his people in there. Those who manage to hide their allegiance, or are too valuable to fire. But think of it this way, Harry; the Ministry is going to fall, sooner or later. With Fudge at the helm, it's a sinking ship. How will it look if everyone on Albus Dumbledore's side is removed from their jobs, and then the Ministry crumbles?"

It all began to make sense to Harry. "It'll look like Dumbledore's people were the ones keeping it afloat," he realised. "Then when it's all over, the Ministry will be handed to Dumbledore's people to fix it again." The prospect made him nauseous.

"Albus has been playing this game for longer than the three of us have been alive, combined," Snape pointed out, lips in a thin line. "It is dangerous, for us to try and play against him."

"It's a risk worth taking," Harry insisted. "People will die if we don't. *I'll* die if we don't. I refuse to let him use me or anyone else to further his own gains."

"How have things been going on your end?" Remus questioned, reaching for another scone. "What has the school been like, in the wake of... everything?"

"Honestly, I'm not really sure," Harry admitted. "I kinda kept my head down, after everything. I'm sure Professor Snape's already told you about what Dumbledore said at the leaving feast?" Both adults nodded. "So yeah, there's that. There's definitely plenty of people who aren't convinced by it all. Who knows what they'll think of it by next year. I need to owl Susan as soon as it's safe — she said Neville told all the heirs what happened in the graveyard, but I didn't manage to meet with them before school broke up. Everyone's still in shock over Cedric, I think." Harry tried not to think about it too much, though that was hard with the nightmares. If he let the gaping hole in his heart take over, he'd be useless.

"Understandable." Remus ran a hand through his hair. "It looks like we're playing a waiting game right now, for the most part."

"Well I don't want to twiddle my thumbs while I wait," Harry insisted. "I want to get as much done as I can this summer."

Ceri popped into the room to summon them down for lunch, and Remus insisted on no war-talk at the table. Luckily, Harry was distracted by the arrival of Sirius.

"No one's home," he assured, rounding the table to squeeze Harry's shoulders, and then drop down into the seat beside him. Ceri waved her hand, and a fourth plate floated over. "I assume Remus filled you in?"

"You're living at Order headquarters now," Harry said, frowning only slightly. "Who else is around there?"

"I'm the only one there full-time," Sirius explained, talking between mouthfuls of food. "But there's been Order business every day since Dumbledore claimed the place. Not every meeting holds everyone. And there's been talk of the whole Weasley family moving in now school's over. Albus says it's because their house is too easy to reach, and everyone knows they're a light-aligned family, but really I'm betting he wants his little puppets nice and close to the action, so they can drip-feed you information without telling you anything important at all."

"He's got another thing coming if he thinks Ron and Hermione will tell me so much as the bloody weather these days," Harry said with a snort. "Has he not figured out that we don't talk to each other anymore?"

"Ah, but teenage friendships are fickle, and you'll need all the friends you can get in these trying times," Sirius replied in his best Albus Dumbledore impression. "You'll have to watch out for those two. If anyone's going to make Dumbledore realise you've shed your spells, it's them."

"No war talk at the table, Sirius," Remus warned. Sirius rolled his eyes, but obediently continued eating until his plate was empty. Harry quickly followed, wanting to get back to the important stuff as soon as possible.

Once everyone was finished they returned to the living room, Sirius sitting on the sofa beside Harry with his feet tucked up underneath him.

"I want to train," Harry declared. "Harder than last summer. I want to be as prepared as possible when the war comes. I know I'm young, but I'm part of this, and I'll need to know as much as I can."

"We know," Remus agreed, and Harry blinked. He'd been prepared to fight for that one. "There's no point in keeping you tucked away and hoping you'll stay out of trouble. It hasn't worked once yet," he added with a brief grin. "The schedule might be a little more erratic, but we can work with you like we did last year. Severus will probably cover most of it; if anyone knows what you'll need to know to fight Voldemort, it's him."

"We will do away with time devoted to practicing schoolwork," Snape told him. "I have faith in your ability to pass your OWLs without a summer of extra preparation. I will teach you what I can, but you must be willing to learn. All of it." His dark eyes bored into Harry's. "Not all of what I have to teach you will be light. Sometimes you can only fight darkness with darkness."

"I'll learn it," Harry said. "I trust you." Snape wouldn't teach him anything that wasn't useful. He needed to know how the other side worked in order to fight them.

"Once we've learnt what the Order and Voldemort's first moves are, it'll be easier to plan more long-term," Sirius said. "Getting rid of Voldemort won't be simple, but there's got to be a way, and I'd bet anything that Dumbledore knows what it is. He won't tell anyone, of course, but maybe if he leaves enough hints we'll be able to figure it out."

"Surely whacking him with a killing curse will do the trick?" Harry asked, brow furrowed. The three adults looked grim.

"The Dark Lord has devoted a lot of time towards the study of immortality," Snape revealed. "The fact that he managed to return at all means he must have managed it to some degree. Whatever magic he has performed must be reversed before we can be rid of him."

The prospect of Voldemort being immortal had Harry's lunch sitting heavy in his stomach. "Fantastic. Of course, the secret lies with Dumbledore. Merlin forbid he tell anyone just in case they steal his glory from him."

"We'll find a way," Sirius vowed.

"How much am I letting Dumbledore control me this year?" Harry asked. "He's bound to have some idea that the Compulsion charm hasn't stuck by now. And I'll be honest, I really don't think I can force myself to go back to playing nice." He'd made too many overt moves away from that behaviour, and if he went back to it he might not be able to do what he needed to do.

"Let him think you've simply grown too old and too strong for the Compulsion to stick," Remus suggested. "If my suspicions are correct, he's got bigger things on his plate right now, but as long as he can keep you close and downtrodden he'll be happy. He might actually prefer you isolating yourself from Ron and Hermione, as long as he doesn't see you gain too many new friends. He'll want you to feel like you have nothing worth living for, whenever he's ready to have you sacrifice yourself."

It was a grim time indeed when they were talking about it so plainly. “As long as he doesn’t find out I’ve lost the magical block,” Harry replied. “How do I make sure he doesn’t find out?”

“The check was easy for the goblins, but it’s a complicated bit of magic for wizards. He’d need to have you alone and unaware for at least thirty minutes,” Snape explained. “Don’t end up in the Hospital Wing, and you should manage to avoid it.”

Harry had managed to stay out of Pomfrey’s care for most of the previous year — up until the end, at least. “I’ll try my best.”

“You’ll have to be very careful meeting the other heirs, this year,” Sirius said. “The closer the lot of you get to coming of age, the more Albus will want to keep you separated. Isn’t one of them seventeen now? The Warrington kid?”

“Yeah. His uncle won’t let him take the family seat, though.” Harry had a thought, and he turned to Snape. “What’s going to happen with the Slytherins? All the ones whose parents are Death Eaters?”

“As of yet, nothing,” Snape assured. “The Dark Lord is not yet desperate enough to want to mark underage wizards. They will have their roles to play at school, of course — some more openly than others. And I too must play my role. But Slytherins are nothing if not resourceful.”

Harry was even more glad that he’d managed to get to almost all of the Slytherin heirs before Voldemort returned. There were other students with Death Eater parents, of course, but the ones in his year made up a solid chunk of them, and they needed to know they had options. With any luck, the younger years would avoid the war, and the older years... Harry prayed they could keep the casualties to a minimum.

“We’ll try and keep the inter-house relations strong with the Slytherins, especially the younger ones,” he promised. “Those who have to play their parts are one thing, but the reputation of Slytherin house is bad enough as it is. The last thing we want is a bunch of eleven and twelve year-olds thinking the rest of the wizarding world hates them. That’s how we got in this mess to begin with.” And that too was Dumbledore’s fault. Cunning and ambitious never meant evil before.

“I will protect my charges the best I can,” Snape said. “Unfortunately, as the Dark Lord must believe me loyal, those who are questioning their loyalty would never come to me. Having other avenues for them would be appreciated.”

“Maybe Blaise could be that for them. His mother is neutral, everyone knows that. I’ll owl him about it as soon as I can.” Harry had a long, long list of owls to send as soon as possible.

“Speaking of owls, do you know if the twins have made any progress on solving our little monitoring problem?” Sirius asked. Harry shrugged.

“No idea, I only managed to ask them on the train. I suppose I just have to hope no one owls me until they figure it out. Am I being monitored already?”

"Yes; ten people on a rotating schedule, to watch you all hours of the day. You got lucky; Albus almost put Moody on the rotation, but then I suppose he found another job for him," Remus said. Harry winced; Moody and his magical eye would've made it very hard to hide Harry's absence. "Sadly, he wouldn't put me in for it. Said it would be unfair to make me watch you when I'm not allowed to speak to you."

"Basically he can't trust you not to give the game away," Harry said ruefully. "He's not completely daft, then."

"No, it seems not," Remus agreed.

Sirius glanced down at his watch and grimaced. "I should probably get back to headquarters; someone usually pops in around five to make sure I'm not up to mischief."

"They expect a lack of mischief? You really have got them fooled, haven't you?" Harry grinned. Sirius barked out a laugh.

"For the most part. Twelve years in Azkaban gives me an excuse for all kinds of weird personality quirks."

"What about the quirks you had before you went to Azkaban?" Snape drawled. "What's your excuse for those?"

Sirius laughed harder. He leaned over to give Harry a hug, ruffling his hair. "I'll try and get away again when I can, but use the mirror or send Ceri if you need me urgently." He bid goodbye to Remus and Snape, then called Ceri to take him back.

"You should go unpack your things, Harry," Remus suggested. "I think we've said about all we can for now."

Harry obediently left the adults alone and retrieved his trunk from the hallway, levitating it up to his room. He turned his Wireless on to listen to music while he unpacked, a smile on his face at being back in his own bedroom. It was good to be home.

.-. .

Harry was ready to dive right into training the next day, but Remus had other ideas. "It's your first real day of summer, cub," he insisted over breakfast, "and I know once you start it'll be all you do. Take today to have fun, get used to being back here. Go fuss over Buckbeak, he's missed you." His face softened knowingly. "You haven't had any real length of peace and quiet to process what happened since the third task, have you?"

Harry's heart twisted painfully. "That was mostly intentional." He'd had one evening at the Dursleys, in which he'd read a book to keep himself distracted from the hollowness in his chest.

Remus snorted, shaking his head. "As bad as your mother, you are; she didn't like facing her grief either. Her dad died right around exam time in sixth year, and she worked right through

it until she about had a breakdown." He put a hand on Harry's back, rubbing soothingly. "Take some time to let yourself feel things. You'll appreciate it later on."

"What if I just do my homework all day?" Harry suggested hopefully. Remus levelled him with a flat look.

"I'll have Ceri confiscate all your textbooks. No homework until you've had fun for a bit." He blinked, his own words echoing in his head. "I don't think that's how grounding is supposed to work. You're a weird kid."

"So I've been told." Harry thought about arguing further, but Remus was pretty set on it, and it *had* been a while since he'd been flying. His Firebolt had been sorely neglected since Christmas. "Fine. Can I go fly? Will you be home today?" Snape had already left on Order business, and Harry wasn't supposed to go flying if no one was in the house, just in case something bad happened.

"I'll be here until five; there's an Order meeting tonight, so we'll all be out for an hour or so, but we'll be back in time for dinner."

"That's fine," Harry assured. He could handle a couple of hours alone. "I'll see you at lunch. Thanks for breakfast, Ceri!" he added to the house elf, who beamed at him.

Some of the tension in Harry's shoulders left him as soon as he kicked off into the air, and he closed his eyes against the breeze as he flew in slow laps around the half pitch. The last time he'd been on his broom, he'd beaten Viktor Krum. The last time he'd been on his broom he'd been with Cedric.

Part of Harry hated Remus for forcing him to take stock of his emotions like this, but he knew it was for the best. At school everything had been so *loud*; even when people were giving him space, the whispers had still been present. He hadn't felt any right to mourn Cedric when there were people like Cho and Patrick around; people who had known Cedric for years, who had loved him.

He still didn't feel much of a right to mourn Cedric now. Not when it was his fault the boy was dead.

Everyone he'd said as much to had yelled at him for thinking it, but he didn't see how it could be any other way. The Cup was a portkey because of Harry, Cedric had touched the Cup because of Harry; he was dead because of Harry.

Harry wondered if it would have hurt less if he hadn't spent half the year getting to know Cedric, becoming friends with him, competing against and alongside him. If Cedric was just some random Hufflepuff student, would he still feel a tidal wave of grief every time he so much as thought about him?

It was so *unfair*. Cedric was one of the best of them. He was Hogwarts champion for a reason, but more than that, he had been *good*. So Hufflepuff it had driven people mad sometimes, in the best of ways. He'd hoped to join the aurors when he left school. He'd

wanted to fight Voldemort — he'd told Harry, one night, that he would be at his side when the fight came.

But the fight got to him far, far too soon.

Harry let out a scream that was lost in the howl of the wind as he sped up, and he realised he was crying. He hadn't cried since the night in the Hospital Wing.

The hole in his heart was back, bigger than ever, and Harry imagined reaching into his chest and grabbing the edges and just *pulling* until the hole was so big it consumed him entirely, just let all his grief and rage spill out until it was all that was left of him. Sometimes, it felt like it had already done so.

He was glad, so very glad, that he wasn't being left at the Dursleys. It was bad enough being there for a regular summer; if he'd been left alone with his muggle relatives and all this grief and anger, he surely would've gone mad. Nothing to do but sit and worry at the edges of the hole, fall deeper and deeper inside it, let the guilt swallow him up.

It surprised him when he heard a bell ring in the distance — how was it lunchtime already? He'd barely even started! But apparently he'd been flying through his grief for far longer than he realised. His hands were clenched so tight around his broom it ached to move them, but when his feet touched the ground the hole in his heart felt a little bit smaller.

It wasn't magically better. Like Madam Pomfrey had said, there was no potion or spell that could fix that. But it was a start.

He was glad it was just Remus in the kitchen when he came in; he didn't think he was quite ready for Snape to see him in that state. The werewolf's face softened, and he held out his arms. Harry didn't hesitate to fall into them, burying his face in the man's chest. "I'm so sorry, cub," Remus murmured, stroking his hair. "I know he was a friend of yours, and he was far, far too young. I'm sorry."

Harry thought about his own grief, and thought about what it must have been like for Remus when Harry's parents died. They hadn't been much older than Cedric, and they were practically his *family*. "How did you do it?" he asked croakily. "How did you move on, when you lost Mum and Dad?"

"Honestly, for a long while, I didn't," Remus admitted. "I went through a bit of a rough patch. But eventually I realised that Lily would've kicked my arse six ways to Sunday if she saw what I'd let myself become, and James would have been right behind her." He held Harry close. "I know it sounds hard, but the best thing you can do for those you've lost is live. Carry on living, even when they couldn't, because that life is precious and you never know when it's going to run out. It never goes away, not truly. There are some days I can hardly breathe for how much I miss James and Lily. But those days get further apart, in time. Especially now I have you back in my life."

Harry was silent for a long moment. "More people are going to die, aren't they?"

"It's very likely, yes," Remus confirmed, voice tinged with sadness. "War and death go hand in hand. But if we're smart, and we're lucky, then the deaths will be minimal. And if we're very lucky indeed, everyone we care most about will survive the war. But I can make no promises." He leaned down to kiss Harry's hair. "You can't blame yourself for every casualty of war, Harry. Even the ones you think you could have prevented. That way lies madness, and I love you far too much to let you do that to yourself."

"I love you too, Moony." Harry still marvelled at how easy it was to say those words and mean them, after years of having no one to say them to at all. He had so, so much to be grateful for, these days. "I'll... I'll try." Guilt was a hard creature to shake, but he was working on it.

"That's all I can ask." Remus smiled, patting him on the back and guiding him towards the table. "Now sit down and eat, you must be starving."

.-. .

Remus left for the Order meeting at five, and Harry entertained himself by reorganising his bookshelf; he was slowly filling in the space, and was eager to buy more now he was home. He'd almost run out of fiction books entirely. When Ceri called him down for dinner, he was slightly disappointed not to see Sirius, and angry once he heard the reason why.

"The Weasley family and Hermione Granger are moving into headquarters tonight," Remus told him, grimacing faintly. "It's earlier than we expected. It'll be harder for Sirius to get away, but he promises he'll come over as often as he can."

"What are they all doing there, then? Surely they aren't involved in the Order; half of them are still in school!" Harry couldn't see Mrs Weasley letting her kids get involved in a war council, Dumbledore or no.

"Oh, certainly not," Remus confirmed. "They'll be cleaning mostly, I expect; the house is in a bit of a state. The twins weren't happy at being left out of meetings, since they're of-age, but Molly overruled them."

"I have no doubt they'll find a way to eavesdrop by the end of the month," Snape pointed out dryly. Harry snorted.

"By the end of the week, more like," he remarked. "They're very quick when they're motivated properly." He stabbed a roast potato. "What else is the Order up to?"

"Not much, in all honesty. We're still just gathering people and getting the word out. Albus has a few people in the Ministry trying to weed out those who aren't loyal to Fudge, but it's slow going."

"Several members of your guard seem concerned that you have not left the house," Snape told him. "Albus suggested you were merely grieving. He isn't worried about your lack of movement; with any luck, it'll stay that way."

"It's only been a few days yet," Harry said doubtfully. People wouldn't buy the grieving excuse for much more than a week or two, surely?

"I didn't manage to speak to the twins, but now they're living at headquarters it should be easier. They seemed surprised to see Sirius there; I think they thought he'd be with you," Remus added.

"They know I wasn't at the Dursleys' last summer. They probably assumed I'd be more with Sirius than you; they know Sirius is my godfather, they don't know you're practically my other godfather." That proclamation made a brief smile flicker across the werewolf's face.

"Well, if you want to send a message to them, let us know and we'll find a way to get it to them."

"You should tell them you're the Marauders," Harry suggested with a grin. "They'd do anything for you, then."

"We'll save that for when we really need a favour," Remus returned. "Or when Sirius starts going stir-crazy and needs a distraction."

"Merlin help us all if those three ever team up," Snape sighed. "It's a small mercy that I only have to survive one more year of them at school."

"It'll be quiet without the twins around," Harry agreed, though Snape was probably happier about that than he was. "So. I can start my training tomorrow, right? What's first?" Taking the day to relax had been good, and sorely needed, but he was eager to start doing things.

"You'll find out in the morning," Remus said, shaking his head with an indulgent smile. "If we tell you now, you'll spend the rest of the night reading up on the subject and pestering us to start early."

"Well, *yeah*. What else am I supposed to do all evening? You forbid me from doing homework." Snape raised an eyebrow at that, and Remus flushed.

"Stop making me sound like a monster for wanting you to enjoy your summer freedom," he argued, rolling his eyes. "If you're that desperate to write an essay, I won't stop you."

Harry shrugged; he didn't *actually* want to do his homework yet. "I'm open to suggestions."

"You're a brat, is what you are," Remus growled playfully. "You can play chess with me, and tell me how things have been going with Draco. Getting second-hand information from Sirius probably isn't as accurate as I'd like it to be."

Harry couldn't help but smile at the mention of his boyfriend, though it was lessened by the fact that he hadn't managed to spend time with him in the last week of term. He was desperate to write to him. He'd do that in the morning, if it was safe.

"Must I be present for that conversation?" Snape asked despairingly. Remus smirked.

“Well, you’re welcome to go to bed early,” he drawled. “But we get so little time together these days...”

Harry laughed as Snape glared at his partner, unimpressed at the blatant attempt at emotional manipulation.

And yet, he followed them to the living room, letting Remus lean back against his legs as he sat on the floor to play chess with Harry, pretending to ignore them while he read a book and Harry gushed about Draco. Harry knew better, though; he could tell the man was listening, as his lips quirked whenever Harry mentioned something Draco did that was particularly Slytherin.

He cared. He just refused to admit it. But Harry was starting to learn his tells.

Chapter 38

Harry woke up early the next morning, keen to start his training even though he knew it wouldn't start until after breakfast. He filled the time with his Charms homework, and met Remus and Snape down in the kitchen for breakfast.

"Now will you tell me what the plan is for today?" he pleaded, turning hopeful green eyes on Remus. The werewolf sighed.

"I suppose," he agreed, a smile creeping across his lips. "Unlike last summer, we won't divide the day into subjects; there are too many different things to teach you, and they all overlap. After lunch we'll start you off with some duelling practice, see where you stand there. But this morning I'm going to test you on Arithmancy and Runes. You have been keeping up your study, haven't you?"

"I have." Harry had spent a lot of time in the last week of school working on them; it was a good way to keep his mind busy. "So, duelling? What else?"

"If you are going to be fighting Death Eaters, there are many curses you will need to become familiar with," Snape said. "They won't stick to stunning and disarming you. I'll be teaching you to recognise some of the more common dark curses by sight and feel, and even to cast many of them yourself. There may be times when you don't want to risk your opponent escaping unharmed."

Harry swallowed sharply. He got the feeling it was going to be a very different duelling practice to the ones he'd had last summer. "I can do that."

"I will also be trying to drill some strategy into your Gryffindor skull," Snape continued. "If you are going to be leading the resistance against both Dumbledore and the Dark Lord, you need to learn to think like they think, to beat them to their mark. You will not win this war if you are one step behind the whole time, on either front."

"You're going to teach me to be a Slytherin," Harry realised with a smirk. Snape's eyes glittered.

"You keep insisting you would have done well in my house. It's time for you to prove it."

Harry could hardly wait.

.-.

He passed Remus' Arithmancy and Runes tests with flying colours, and the werewolf beamed with pride when he handed Harry back his papers shortly after lunch. "Well done, cub. If you keep it up, you'll get Os in your OWLs with no problem."

At last, Snape took Harry into the duelling room, rolling up the sleeves of his dark blue shirt. "Your duel with the Dark Lord was a mockery," he declared. "He was toying with you. You

won't be so lucky next time. You need to learn to protect yourself from all sides, from whatever spell they may send your way — the Dark Lord may insist that he be the one to kill you, but that won't stop his servants trying to harm you, or your friends."

Harry drew his wand, readying himself at the end of the duelling strip. In all his practice for the third task, he'd gotten pretty good at both defensive and offensive magic. Nowhere near the level of Snape, but he was fairly confident he could hold his own. He'd been doing well at the end of last summer.

Snape faced him, bowing over his wand. "Let's see how much you remember."

The duel began and ended in less than a minute flat. Harry was on his back, staring at the ceiling and wondering how he'd gotten there. A hand appeared in his vision. "Get up, try again."

"You were going easy on me last summer," Harry accused, allowing the man to pull him to his feet. Snape smirked.

"Of course I was, you were thirteen. Things are different now. Death Eaters won't go easy on you because you're a child."

The second duel, Harry managed to last almost five minutes. "Better," Snape approved, hoisting him up again. "Tell me what the problem here is."

"You're still using schoolyard spells." Snape hadn't sent anything stronger than an Impediment jinx his way. The Slytherin nodded.

"I will continue to do so until I can be confident you know how to dodge. Several of the darker hexes cannot be blocked by your average Shield charm. I will, of course, teach you more advanced shields, but should you find yourself in battle with an unfamiliar spell headed your way, it's always safer to dodge than to shield and hope it works." Snape's smirk widened. "Your quidditch reflexes will come in handy here, Potter. Again."

.-. .

Harry and Snape duelled until dinner, by which time both of them were sweaty, but Snape actually had an expression on his face that Harry might generously consider a smile.

They had taken breaks, to let Harry catch his breath, but even those had been spent with Snape demonstrating some of the curses and hexes Harry might come across in a real battle. By the end of the session, Harry was getting pretty good at dodging most of the spells Snape sent his way.

"Tomorrow I will show you a variant of the Shield charm that will work for stronger spells, but takes more concentration to cast, which is why it's not commonly taught." Snape passed Harry one of the glasses of water Ceri had brought, and Harry drank deeply. "Have you been keeping up your Occlumency shields?"

"Yes, sir." Harry didn't dare let them waver with Dumbledore about.

“Good. Being able to clear your mind and compartmentalise is an essential skill when duelling; a true battle requires you to be paying attention to a dozen things at once. Emotions cannot get in the way — a split second of distraction is all it takes to kill you.”

“Have you ever duelled against Death Eaters, sir?” Harry asked curiously. Snape’s lips thinned.

“We were often encouraged to duel each other to sharpen our skills. The Dark Lord didn’t like us holding back on each other; he said if we were weak enough to die, we didn’t deserve to serve him. I learned not to be weak.”

Harry sincerely doubted Snape had ever been *weak*, but he held his tongue.

They bumped into Remus in the kitchen when they went to put their glasses away, and the werewolf sniffed the air, then made an exaggerated face of disgust. “You two smell like you’ve been busy. Good session?”

“Potter isn’t as terrible as I’d feared,” Snape replied, the closest thing he’d give to a compliment. Remus grinned.

“Glad to hear it. Go wash up for dinner, both of you; I’ll lose my appetite if I have to smell that while I eat. Worse than James and Sirius after quidditch.”

Harry laughed, obediently heading out of the kitchen to take a shower. Snape didn’t follow, and he refused to think too hard about why.

. . .

Training continued the next day, though it finished early due to another Order meeting. Snape set Harry the task of reading up on the pros and cons of different types of shields, so he happily whiled away the hour in the library, with Ceri occasionally popping in to check on him while she made dinner. She took the responsibility of looking after Harry while he was home alone very seriously.

Remus and Snape returned just in time for dinner, and Remus took something out of his pocket and set it on the table in front of Harry. It was a smooth grey stone, about the size of a chicken’s egg. “Uh... thanks?”

“It’s from the twins,” Remus said, as if that explained *anything*. “They said it should solve your owl problem, at least. It’s supposed to take on your magical signature strongly enough that it’ll fool owls into thinking your delivery address is wherever you set it. They’ve been working on it for a while, apparently; ever since Ginny got all that hate mail from that Skeeter article. You can charge it up, then we’ll have Ceri pop it over to the Dursleys, and any owls sent to you will go there, so your watchers won’t wonder why you aren’t getting any post.”

“But what about all the people I want to owl me without Dumbledore knowing about it?” Harry asked, thinking of Draco and all the heirs. Not only would it be terribly inconvenient to have all those owls going to the Dursleys, it would raise far too many questions.

“Sirius had an idea about that. He said you should write to the twins and Ginny, telling them the Dursleys have forbid you from getting letters all summer. It’ll tie in nicely with the story that you’re locked in your room. Then we can give it a week or so, and if owls stop coming, we’ll pick up the stone and deactivate it, then you can get mail here instead. It just means you can’t owl any of your other friends until you’re clear.”

“I didn’t know for sure if I’d be able to owl them at all,” Harry pointed out. He picked up the stone, running his fingers over it. “This is brilliant! I knew they’d figure something out.” He pocketed the stone. “I’ll write to them after dinner. Although,” he faltered, “if I tell them not to write to me, does that mean I won’t be able to write to them all summer? Surely they’re not allowed to send owls off to whoever, living at Order headquarters.”

“Severus and I can play delivery owl for any letters you want to send them.” Snape cleared his throat pointedly. “Oh, alright, *I’ll* play delivery owl,” Remus corrected exasperatedly.

After dinner, Harry followed Remus’ instructions to push his magic into the stone until it glowed faintly, then they sent it off with Ceri to put in his room at Privet Drive. “How will we know if it works?” Harry asked.

“Ceri can keep an eye out for any approaching owls, and just pop you back there when you need to open the window. That’ll help convince your watchers you’re still there, too. Your aunt and uncle never have to know,” Remus said. “And if owls show up here, well, we know it hasn’t worked, and we’ll think of something else.”

Harry had faith in the twins. The stone would work.

He grabbed his writing supplies and brought them down to the living room, biting his lip as he thought about what to write. It was a letter that the Order would definitely read; he had to make it believable.

Dear Fred, George and Ginny,

I hope you’re having a good start to your summer! Mine has been... not great. The Dursleys are off with me again, so I’m stuck in my room for the foreseeable future. It’s not so bad — it’s too hot to go outside much anyway.

Speaking of the Dursleys, they’re not happy about the idea of me having owls coming and going — they said some of the neighbours noticed last summer, and they got too many questions. The only reason they’re letting me let Hedwig out now is that I promised to send her to you asking you not to write to me this summer. It won’t be forever; hopefully I’ll get to come stay at the Burrow soon. We just might have to celebrate my birthday a bit late.

If you’re with anyone else who might want to write to me, could you pass on the message? I don’t want a repeat of the summer before second year.

Hopefully see you all soon!

Harry

That should do it. The remainder of the summer before second year would also be a good way to convince people the Dursleys would lock him up all summer; and maybe make a few people think twice about the kind of conditions Dumbledore was willing to leave a teenage boy in.

Harry hurried up to the Owlery, where Hedwig flew down to perch on his shoulder, butting his cheek with her face. “Yeah, yeah, I’ve finally got some work for you.” She hadn’t been out except to hunt since he’d left Hogwarts; she’d be glad for the chance to really stretch her wings. “Here you go. Fly safe, girl.” He secured the letter and let Ceri transport Hedwig to leave from Privet Drive, then went back downstairs to write the letter he *really* wanted to send the three Weasleys.

Dear Fred, George and Ginny,

As you can probably assume, I’m not at the Dursleys’ house. I’m somewhere a whole lot better. I hear you’re not in your usual place, either. Hope that’s going well for you.

Fred, George, the stone is in place and hopefully we’ll test it with your return letter with Hedwig. Maybe Sirius can send one too with whatever owl he’s got with him, just to see if it works for owls other than her.

If you can convince everyone not to write to me, I’ll turn it off and be able to write to some of our other friends without anyone questioning me. Remus has agreed to be the go between for any letters between us. He’s living here too, when he’s not where you are.

I speak to Sirius most days through other means, and he keeps me pretty well updated on what’s going on there, but let me know if anything interesting happens. What are Ron and Hermione up to these days? Have you seen much of Dumbledore?

Ginny, if the twins haven’t suggested it already, you should try and learn Occlumency over the summer. Ask them to explain it to you. But it’ll be safer if you know it, with Dumbledore around. Until then, don’t look him in the eye.

Give Sirius a hug from me. I hope you’re all doing well.

Love,

Harry

He rolled it up, sealing it with a tap of his wand. “Would you give that to the twins next time you’re at headquarters?” he requested, holding it out to Remus. Remus nodded, tucking it into his cardigan pocket.

“Will do. I’ll probably be over there tomorrow for a bit; check up on how your guard is doing. I’m awfully concerned about you, y’know, you never leave your room,” he said with a wink, making Harry grin. “Fifteen more minutes, then off to bed, alright? It’s getting late, and you need your sleep.”

The gentle chiding was so *normal*, so automatic, that Harry was breathless with emotion for a second. He imagined a life in which he'd grown up like this; with Remus and Sirius and Snape, in a house full of love. He'd thought he was over that childish wish. Apparently not.

He took a steady breath, hoping Remus hadn't noticed. Snape was eyeing him with an unreadable look, and Harry didn't meet the man's gaze.

At least he had it now. Better late than never.

.-.-.-.

A few days later, Harry was surprised by Sirius' arrival shortly after lunch, the man bursting into the library and interrupting Harry's lesson with Remus. "The Order think I'm sulking in my room about not being able to bring you to headquarters," he said by way of greeting, ruffling Harry's hair. "I reckon that gives me at least two hours. Mind if I take over, Moony?" He pulled a book from the pocket of his robe, and Remus' eyebrows rose, a smirk flitting across his lips.

"It's time, is it? By all means, go ahead; we can pick this up tomorrow."

"Time? Time for what?" Harry asked, trying to see the title of the book. Sirius hid it behind his back.

"You remember last summer, when you promised you'd keep up your grades? You didn't have exams this year, but Severus assures me you're doing well in all your classes, and Moony showed me your Arithmancy and Runes tests from the other day. I think it's time I held up my end of the bargain."

It took Harry to remember the exact promise he'd made, but when it clicked, his jaw dropped. "You'll teach me to be an animagus?" he asked excitedly. Sirius tossed him the book, and Harry caught it reflexively.

A Complete Guide to the Animagus Transformation. It looked old, the edges a little worn. "This is the book your dad and I used when we learnt. There's a few more books in the library here on the subject, but this should teach you everything you need to know."

Harry's heart stuttered; his dad had used this book. His dad had studied these pages, read it over and over, maybe even made notes inside. His touch became even more reverent. "Can we start now?"

"That's what I'm here for!" Sirius agreed, dropping into the chair beside Harry. "I'll warn you, it's a bit boring at first. Finding your form can take a bit of time, though it's easier if you've already got a good base in Occlumency." He reached to open the book to the first chapter; *Finding Your Form*.

Harry read quickly. Finding an animagus form involved a lot of meditation to prepare, and then entering some sort of trance with some potion fumes in the air to actually find the form itself. "Moony brewed the potion for us last time, but Severus said he'll do it," Sirius informed him. "So it should be ready by Saturday. Think you can meditate enough by then?"

Harry would meditate continuously until Saturday if it meant finding out his animagus form.

Sirius explained the basics to him, and sat opposite him to help him through it to begin with. “You can’t just think about being an animagus,” he said softly, his hands in Harry’s. Harry’s eyes were closed, and his breathing was steady. “You have to let your magic do the talking. Breathe into it, let it search your mind until it can find the form waiting to be unlocked. Everyone has one; some are just a bit shit.” Harry snickered, his concentration broken, and he opened one eye to glare at Sirius. “Oops, sorry,” he said with a grin.

“Don’t expect it to happen instantly. These things take time,” Remus murmured.

Harry tried to focus, do what Sirius and the book said; let his magic reach within him. But it was a lot easier said than done. After a while, he began to get a headache, so he opened his eyes and told Sirius as much.

“Good, that means you’re doing it right,” Sirius assured. “Like Moony said, it takes time. You’ve got five days before the potion will be ready, and we don’t have to do it as soon as it’s brewed; it’ll keep for a month. There’s no rush to this, Harry.” He glanced over Harry’s shoulder, and frowned. “You alright there, Moons?”

Harry turned around, catching Remus quickly wiping at his eyes. “Yes, yes, I’m fine,” he insisted. “It’s just... Merlin, it’s like looking in a pensieve.” Sirius’ mouth twisted in a grimace, but he covered it with a smile.

“It can’t be, I was way better looking when I was sixteen,” he insisted jovially. “And Prongsy was never that short.” He got to his feet, striding over to Remus and pressing their foreheads together for a minute. “If James can’t teach him, he’d be happy to know we are.”

“Do you think I’ll be a stag, like my dad?” Harry asked softly, not wanting to interrupt their moment. Both men turned to look at him.

“I don’t think so. James needed those antlers to hold his massive ego,” Sirius joked, making Remus choke on a laugh. “It wouldn’t surprise me if you’re something with wings, the way you are on a broom.”

“That would be cool,” Harry agreed, but it didn’t feel quite right. Privately, he hoped he was something that could run with Moony and Padfoot on full moons. He wanted to be part of that.

Sirius insisted that Harry shouldn’t push through his headache to continue, so they gave up on the meditation for now. Instead, Harry pleaded for stories about Sirius and his dad learning to transform.

“When you start working on the transformation itself, it comes in stages, yeah?” Sirius said, grinning. Remus groaned; he knew where the story was going. “So your dad, right, he was dead set on transforming before me, so he’d work on it any spare minute he got. Including in the dorm between meals. And one day, I hear a crash, so I run up to the dorm thinking he’s become a great big stag in the middle of the room, only to find him perfectly human but for the massive set of antlers on his head, all tangled up in his bed curtains!” Sirius howled with

laughter at the memory, shaking his head. “It took me and Moony both to get him out of there, and then he could barely stand up, the antlers were so heavy. We had to go to dinner like that and pretend it was a prank gone wrong.”

“He didn’t manage to get rid of them until about one in the morning,” Remus added, chuckling.

“Not as bad as the tail I got stuck with for about two days,” Sirius pointed out ruefully. “It was a nightmare! I couldn’t sit properly in class, people thought I had some sort of medical problem.”

“Nah, Robin Waters just told everyone he shagged you bow-legged,” Remus informed him. Sirius’ eyebrows shot up.

“Did he, now? That explains so much.” He snickered to himself. “Anyway, Harry, the moral of the story is, be careful when you practice, and make sure you’ve got an alibi if you do get stuck with unexpected animal parts. Preferably a better alibi than I apparently did.” He flushed at that, and Harry laughed.

“Noted.” He couldn’t wait to start working on the transformation itself. Saturday couldn’t come soon enough!

....

Severus should’ve known the peace wouldn’t last. When the first week of July passed by without so much as a twitch from his Dark Mark, he thought he’d managed to avoid it, but then it burned when he was in the middle of brewing a potion, and he swore softly.

He took the coward’s way out, telling Ceri to let Remus know where he’d gone. Then he donned his robe and mask, walked to the property line, and disapparated.

It surprised him, how easy it was to fall back into that role. He’d expected difficulty clearing his thoughts, drawing up that darkness within him that had drawn him to Voldemort to begin with. There was so much light in his life these days. But with the knowledge that that light was on the line if he should fail, by the time he walked up the steps to Malfoy Manor he was a perfect loyal Death Eater, and always had been.

Seeing the Dark Lord again was an eye-opening experience. Harry had described his twisted, snake-like appearance, but Severus hadn’t realised it was so grotesque. He didn’t look human anymore.

“I have stayed close to Dumbledore, my Lord. The old fool believes me loyal to him, but I only serve you. I knew when you returned you would need someone at the school, someone in the headmaster’s good graces. I positioned myself where I thought it best to turn young minds to your cause.” The words came easy. The screams came easier. Even when the Dark Lord was pleased with your work, he’d still Crucio you just to remind you of what could happen should that change.

"It's a shame you weren't able to save my loyal servant from the dementors," Voldemort hissed, his red eyes surveying Severus as he kneeled on the floor, shaking. "But he told me how much Dumbledore trusted you. He even began to doubt you himself, but I knew the truth. You have always been one of my most loyal servants, Severus."

"I am honoured to remain so, my Lord."

The meeting was short, and Severus was glad for it. The Dark Lord just wanted to reconnect; assess Severus' loyalty, and instruct him to report back with any information on Dumbledore or Harry Potter. Severus felt he got off rather lightly, all things considered. He could still walk away under his own power, after all, even if he was bleeding from a few places.

Remus was waiting on the lawn when he apparated back to Seren Du, his dressing gown wrapped around him and a worried frown on his tired face. It was dark, but the lights were still on in the house. "Oh, Severus," the Gryffindor murmured, hurrying to wind Severus' arm over his shoulders and help him inside.

"Where's Potter?" Severus didn't want the boy seeing him like this.

"In his room, I sent him to bed. What do you need?"

"Nerve Tonic. Regular strength." The line of Remus' shoulders relaxed slightly; Severus wasn't in need of the extra strength tonic yet.

"Ceri." At Remus' soft call, the house elf appeared. "Run a bath for Severus, please, and fetch a bottle of his Nerve Tonic." Ceri nodded, and moments later small hands were pressing a vial into Severus' empty palm. He checked the label, then downed it, not even flinching at the taste. It had been a while since he'd needed one of those.

They stumbled up the stairs together, Remus using his werewolf strength to keep Severus upright, and by the time they made it to the bathroom the bath was full and steaming. Severus rolled his eyes when Remus' hands began to work at his robe. "I can do it," he insisted, but Remus gently smacked his fingers away.

"Let me take care of you." His voice cracked. Severus' heart clenched. It couldn't be any easier for Remus to watch him go than it was for him to leave himself. "Merlin, I'd hoped we were done with this the first time around."

"Sadly not," Severus bit out, wincing when several of his bleeding wounds were exposed to the open air as Remus unbuttoned his shirt. "Careful."

Remus' nostrils flared, and he sucked in a sharp breath. "Soon," he vowed softly, helping Severus step out of his clothes. When he was naked, the werewolf's eyes roamed over him critically. Severus resisted the urge to cover himself. Remus had seen him nude more times than he could count, but Severus couldn't bear it when it was like this. Shaking and bleeding and still feeling filthy from kneeling at the Dark Lord's feet.

A murmur of spells, and his wounds healed. Remus nudged him towards the bath. "Go on, it'll help."

It did, the hot water soothing Severus' aching muscles, releasing some of the tension that had gathered from the curse. Remus stayed out of the bath, though his hands trailed soothingly over Severus' shoulders. "Oh, my love," he breathed, kissing Severus' cheek. "My brave, brave love."

"It wasn't even a bad one," Severus insisted. Remus shot him a chiding look.

"And I'm grateful. But that doesn't mean I'm happy about letting you go off to *him*. Merlin, Severus, when Ceri came to me... it was like the first war all over again." Severus remembered it well; by the time he and Remus had reconciled, the war was well underway, and Severus was being summoned every few days. Neither of them ever knew what state he'd return in; sometimes, it was a bloodied heap on the doorstep. Every time, Remus picked him up and healed what he could and ran him a bath, just as he was doing now. Every time, he held Severus, loved him, soothed him until he felt human again.

Severus did not deserve Remus Lupin.

Remus reached for the shampoo, and Severus was treated to the sensation of skilled fingers massaging his scalp, washing the blood from his hair. He let his eyes fall shut, his own hands trembling too much to do anything but rest on his thighs and wait for the aftershocks to stop. He was out of practice at taking the Cruciatus. He'd have to build that back up.

Water poured over his head, careful to stay out of his eyes. Remus stood, dropping his dressing gown to reveal his bare chest. He looked healthier these days than he had even when they were in their youth; at peace with his wolf, well-fed by Ceri, reunited with at least some of his pack. The sentimental part of Severus liked to think he was a little responsible, too. Remus was beautiful.

"May I join you?" the werewolf asked. Severus nodded. There were some times, after a meeting, that he couldn't bear to be touched by gentle hands. This wasn't one of them. He needed Remus' skin like he needed air.

Remus unselfconsciously shed his pyjama trousers, stepping into the water. Remus had chosen their room because it was closest to the largest bathroom; the one with the bath big enough for three people, let alone two. The Gryffindor settled down and pulled Severus into his arms, his hands running up and down Severus' chest. Lips pressed against his shoulder. "I love you," Remus murmured, the words so earnest they rattled Severus' soul. "I'm proud of you. You're so, so brave."

Severus couldn't have said how long they sat there in the bath, Remus' hands and words drawing him back to himself again, back to his humanity. He was almost embarrassed; such a minor meeting shouldn't have sent him into such a state. He was about to face far worse in the coming months.

But Remus wasn't the only one who'd thought they were done with all this, for so long.

Severus relaxed into the embrace an inch at a time, letting his hands shift to settle on Remus' knees where they bracketed him. Remus' soothing murmurs paused. "Are you mine again?"

"I am always yours," Severus whispered fiercely. The words came harder to him, they always had, but for as much as Remus Lupin was devoted to Severus Snape, Severus was twice as devoted in return.

Lips pressed against his jaw. "Shall we go to bed?"

"Please."

One spell had the bathtub draining, and another had them both dry. Remus shrugged on his dressing gown and wrapped a towel around Severus' hips, just in case Harry happened to be wandering the halls. Severus left the towel on the floor as he crawled into bed, Remus joining him without bothering with new pyjamas. On nights like this, both of them preferred as much skin as possible.

It had been almost a decade and a half since Severus' last meeting, but the routine was still as familiar as breathing to them both, as automatic as Remus' post-moon rituals. Before the light went out, Severus met Remus' gaze. "I will always come back to you," he vowed, fingers still trembling ever so slightly as he cupped Remus' jaw. "He will not have me."

"Damn right he won't," Remus agreed, eyes flashing gold. "You're mine." Remus' mouth met his, and Severus lost himself for a moment, Remus' body covering his own, his tongue sliding languidly between Severus' lips. They were both too tired to do anything more, but Severus needed to ground himself, and Remus needed reassurance. When they parted, Remus turned off the light. "Sleep," he urged, settling into his preferred sleeping position, sprawled on top of Severus. Severus set a hand low on his partner's back, letting the weight of him anchor him back to reality. The Dark Lord couldn't touch this, couldn't have this part of his life. Voldemort, Dumbledore; neither of them could have Severus, truly. His soul belonged to one man only.

.-.-.-.

Harry awoke with a gasping breath, his chest heaving and his pyjamas damp with sweat. He sat up, reaching for his glasses. His pulse thudded in his ears. When he squeezed his eyes shut, he saw Cedric Diggory's empty grey eyes.

It wasn't the first nightmare. Harry doubted it would be the last. They took various forms, but they all ended the same; Cedric dead, and Harry unable to do anything about it.

At least he'd stopped having the ones where Cedric blamed Harry for his death.

A quick glance at his bedside clock told him it was almost seven; a little early for breakfast, but not by much. He grabbed clean clothes and hurried across to his bathroom to rinse off the sweat and try and make himself feel human again. It only sort-of worked, but he felt a little better.

To his surprise, Remus and Snape were up as well when he entered the kitchen, both with mugs in front of them. Snape's copy of the *Prophet* sat on the table beside him, unopened. Both of them looked weary, too.

Remus glanced up when Harry arrived, his honey eyes quickly taking in the bags under his eyes and his damp hair, the hunch to his shoulders and half-curled fists. The gaze quickly became knowing. “Which one?” he asked, and it took Harry a minute to parse the question.

“Cedric,” he said eventually. He hadn’t had a trip into Voldemort’s head since that one Divination lesson. Remus relaxed a little, though his lips pursed.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not really,” Harry replied honestly. He accepted the arm that wound around his waist for the brief moment he walked past, heading for the teapot. Ceri floated a mug out of the cupboard for him. “Were you expecting it to be the other one?”

“Severus was Called last night,” Remus told him. Harry froze. “I was worried you might have seen it.”

“Are you okay?” Harry asked quickly, turning his gaze on the Potions Master. Now he knew what to look for, he could see Snape’s night had been even worse than Harry’s own.

“I am fine, Harry,” Snape replied. He had to be tired if he was using Harry’s first name.

“Will I train with Remus today?”

“For this morning, yes. We will return to duelling in the afternoon,” Snape said, raising his mug to his lips. His hands didn’t shake.

“Unless you need a break,” Remus added, still watching Harry with concern. “If you need more sleep...”

“No, I’m fine,” Harry insisted. The last thing he needed was more sleep; more of an opportunity to see Cedric’s face.

“If we’re ever pushing too much, just tell us,” Remus said, tone serious. “This is still your summer holiday. The situation might be... escalating, but that doesn’t mean you aren’t allowed to say no.”

“If I was at the Dursleys I’d be shut away with no wand, no contact and no idea what’s going on in the world,” Harry pointed out. “I might as well do something worthwhile since I have that freedom. I’m happy to train; I’m still having fun. This is way better than anything else I could be doing.” He still got to fly and swim some evenings, and had even ridden Buckbeak once, though he’d had to stay inside the tree line. “But it’s not all about me, so if either of you need a break—”

“If we need a break, we will tell you,” Snape cut him off curtly. “But I am fine. I can handle meetings with the Dark Lord; they’re likely to become a regular part of my week, now.” Over his shoulder, Remus grimaced.

“Then nobody needs a break, and everyone’s fine,” Harry surmised, daring Remus to say otherwise. The werewolf snorted.

"I can't tell if you're picking up Severus' habits, or they're habits you both got from Lily," he remarked in amusement, eyes darting between his partner and his godson. Harry stared at Snape. Snape stared back.

If Harry was picking up habits from the Potions Master, the world really had gone mad.

.-.-.

Having seen Severus off to a meeting with Dumbledore — the lesser evil of the two masters he pretended to serve — Remus went back into the house in search of Harry. He found him in the living room, sprawled out on the floor surrounded by parchment, a quill in hand. Remus eyed the scene curiously. Harry seemed to be writing about five different things at once, occasionally humming thoughtfully. "What are you up to, cub?"

Harry startled, glancing over his shoulder at Remus. "Writing letters," he explained, turning back to his parchment. "I want to start reconnecting with people as soon as we can turn the twins' redirect stone off. I've got a letter for Draco, obviously, but I need to write to Neville and Susan and the other heirs, see who I can get away with writing to — I've got a feeling Cassius' uncle might be checking his mail. I really hope he's okay. And I promised Cho I'd write to her. And Fleur and Viktor, though those two can probably wait; Hedwig will be gone for a while with those journeys."

Remus' eyebrows climbed higher with every name. "Well, you'll certainly be keeping the owls busy. Let me know if you need to borrow Horatio, he doesn't get much work these days." He was getting on a bit, but still in fine condition to deliver within Britain.

"Really? Thanks." Harry smiled. "I probably won't keep up with everyone all summer, but I missed my chance to talk to everyone in the last week what with... everything that happened. I need to catch up on some stuff. We need to make plans for next year."

There was one piece of parchment that looked more like a list than a letter, and Remus gestured to it. "What's that?"

"Oh, that's a list of current Wizengamot seats," Harry said. "I'm working out which are currently held by Death Eaters, and more importantly, which of those have kids that I know don't want to follow Voldemort. I'm also trying to figure out who holds the neutral seats, and see where they're likely to fall on matters. I've been reading through the voting records for the last five years or so, and there's a few that really shouldn't be allowed to keep their seats once the war's over. But half of them haven't publicly revealed their heir, so there's not much I can do about it." Harry swung himself into a sitting position. "I thought if I could get the list to Susan, she could start asking around; she's way more connected with this sort of stuff than I am."

"Wow," Remus said, for lack of any other words. "That's a lot of research, I'm impressed." Here Harry was, a few weeks shy of fifteen, and planning a political revolution while he wrote letters to his friends.

Harry shrugged self-consciously. "It's all public information. I'm just compiling it. Susan will know what to do with it all."

"Still, it's no small feat." Remus thought Harry was giving the Bones girl a little more credit than was due. "You're starting your career in politics early, I see."

"Oh, no, I'm just a figurehead," Harry insisted. "I don't really want to go into politics. I mean, I'll take my Wizengamot seats of course, and do what I can there, but it won't be my full-time job."

"Oh? And what will that be, then?" Remus asked, half expecting him to declare he wanted to be Minister for Magic, or Head Auror, or even Headmaster of Hogwarts. Harry's grin turned a little lopsided.

"I'd like to play professional quidditch," he said, just a touch of hesitation to his words. "Viktor said I'm good enough. And I like quidditch. I think it'd be fun. I could get ten or fifteen good years playing once I graduate, then I'll figure out something else to do." His grin faltered. "If I survive the war, at any rate."

"You're going to survive the war," Remus said reflexively, refusing to even contemplate any other options. He thought over Harry's words; having seen him fly, even with dementors in the mix, he had no doubt that Harry could indeed go pro if he wanted to. Perhaps it wouldn't satisfy the wizarding world's ideal as a career for their saviour, but quite honestly they could go fuck themselves. "What team would you want to play for? The Harpies will never sign you." They'd been women-only since their inception.

Harry paused, then brightened up significantly. Remus wondered sadly if he'd expected to be told not to have such frivolous goals. Hell, Remus didn't care if Harry snapped his wand and lived as a muggle, as long as he was happy. "I thought maybe the Magpies, or even Puddlemere, especially if Oliver's still playing with them by then. It'd be great to play with him again. But I'm happy with whoever, really." He bit his lip. "Viktor said I could make the national team if I wanted."

"Viktor knows better than most," Remus agreed. "Though honestly, that's not saying much; the England team is a bit of a joke these days. Maybe if you joined it they'd actually be able to win a match."

Harry laughed. He ran a hand through his hair, looking so much like James for a second Remus' breath caught. "Yeah, maybe. I dunno, it's all a ways off yet. I've got other things to focus on." His face grew so serious, so much older, and it made Remus' chest ache. He wished he could wrap the boy up and smuggle him away, far from Dumbledore and Voldemort and anyone that might harm him, so he could be a normal teenage boy instead of worrying about duelling and politics and whether he might die before he finished school. But he was Harry Potter, and the war would follow him wherever he went.

"Doesn't mean you can't have goals," Remus said, smiling in encouragement. "You need something to fight for, a future to look to. I think becoming a professional quidditch player is a fine idea."

Harry beamed at him. "Thanks." He looked down, fiddling with one of the letters nearby. "I was going to ask Susan to tell her aunt a little about my... situation. About Dumbledore. I think it's time to start building a case."

Remus almost asked if Harry was sure, but he held his tongue. Amelia Bones was a savvy woman, and if anyone could secretly start building a case against Albus Dumbledore, it was her. “Would you want to deal with him before or after Voldemort?”

“Ideally, after,” Harry replied. “As much as I hate him, he’s a useful person to have around in a fight, and so are his connections. But I wouldn’t want it to be long after; I don’t want to risk him getting hold of the Ministry. And there’s a fairly good chance I won’t be able to wait that long — I don’t know how long it’s going to take to get rid of Voldemort, and it’s only a matter of time before Dumbledore realises I’m onto him. I want to be ready, just in case.”

“That’s smart.” Dumbledore no doubt had several backup plans and contingencies in place. You didn’t get to where he was without being very crafty, and very paranoid. “Is there anything I can do to help?” Remus could hardly believe how natural it felt to defer to Harry on matters of politics and war — he was *fourteen*. James and Lily’s boy! But he knew what he was doing, and he was far more capable than Albus Dumbledore had any idea of.

Looking at Harry, working so hard in so many different ways, and still finding time to worry about those he cared about, Remus felt a wave of confidence overtake him, his faith sinking into his bones. They would win this war, and Harry would be the one to do it.

They just had to get him there, first.

Chapter 39

After a full week without owls arriving at Privet Drive, Remus deemed it safe to remove the mail redirection stone. Ceri retrieved it, and Harry spoke the deactivation spell, turning it back into a plain-looking stone once more. He handed it back to Remus; it might be handy for the future. “Can I borrow Horatio, please?” Harry asked, his brain turning to the stack of letters waiting on the desk in his room.

“Yes, just don’t send him overseas,” Remus replied. Harry grinned and nodded, then hurried up to his room.

Snape’s owl Asphodel was already gone when Harry went up to the Owlery, but the other three were there waiting for something to do. Hedwig hooted softly, flying down to land in front of Harry. “Okay, let me get this figured out.” He didn’t want to overload one owl more than the others, but there were some people he couldn’t send Hedwig to.

Letters to Neville, Susan and Cho went with Horatio. Letters to Blaise, Daphne and Draco went with Artemis — to give Draco his last and wait for a reply, as always. Finally, he attached letters to Charlie, Bill, Viktor and Fleur to Hedwig; she was the strongest, and would best handle the international flight.

He watched the trio of owls fly off into the horizon, letting out a long breath. It was a start. He had the whole summer to get his ducks in a row, now — certainly his two opponents would be doing exactly the same thing.

. . .

Much like last summer, Harry’s guardians refused to work him hard on the weekends. Remus let him do his homework, and even practice some more frivolous spells, but there was to be no serious training on weekends.

Luckily, Harry was assured animagus training didn’t count.

“It doesn’t always work on the first try,” Sirius warned him, making sure Harry was comfortably situated in the middle of the mound of cushions on the living room floor. “We can always brew the potion again in a month or so.”

“It’s going to work,” Harry declared confidently. Across the room, he heard Snape snort quietly.

“Ever your father’s confidence,” he muttered, the words sounding less like an insult than they would have a year ago. The Potions Master approached with a large vial in his hands, the potion securely stoppered.

“Are you ready?” Remus asked quietly, and Harry took a deep breath, relaxing his shoulders. Meditation. It was all about following his magic.

“Yeah. Let’s do it.” His hands were steady as he took the vial from Snape, carefully pouring the potion into the bowl in front of him. The three adults stepped far back as the potion began to steam, its faint green vapours twining around Harry. He breathed it in with his eyes closed, lungs filling with the scent of smoke and green wood and magic. He let his mind fall into the meditative state that had become so familiar to him in the last week, and even before that. He let his magic relax, reach out, curl inwards. He followed it, followed the ozone smell to the deep heart of himself. He didn’t dare think, couldn’t let his brain do anything other than follow its instinct. Animals relied on instincts, after all.

Inside his mind, he was in a forest. He was barefoot, the earth soft under his feet, trees towering all around him. It wasn’t a forest he recognised. Something told him to walk deeper, so he did.

It was dusk, the faintest light from the fading sun filtering through the trees, just enough to let Harry see where he was going. He looked down at himself, and saw he was entirely naked. He wasn’t cold, and he couldn’t find it in himself to be embarrassed. He kept walking.

Something was humming. Distant, quiet, tuneless but somehow… comforting. Familiar. His magic, maybe? It pushed him forward, urged him to keep walking. The air smelled like new growth.

The trees parted to reveal a small clearing, tufts of lush green grass sprouting from the forest floor. In the centre of it all, sat staring at Harry with yellow-green eyes, was an animal.

Harry stepped forward. The animal didn’t blink. Its pointed ear twitched, the white tip of its tail dragging to curl around its body.

“Hello,” Harry greeted, bowing to the creature. It rose on four paws and ducked its narrow snout to the ground, its gaze still locked with Harry’s. It cocked its head, and sat down again.

Harry drew closer. When he looked at it, he could see a smattering of lighter-coloured fur on the animal’s forehead, right where his own scar would sit. The rest of its fur was a dark russet-red, fading into white under its belly. “You’re beautiful, aren’t you?” Was that a narcissistic thing to say? Harry didn’t really care. It was a fact.

The animal stood once more, turning a graceful circle so Harry could look at it from all angles. Its footsteps were soundless on the dark earth, and it froze when Harry took one more step towards it. He reached out a hand. The animal jumped closer, butting its head against Harry’s fingers.

And then he woke up.

He blinked his eyes open, staring at the ceiling of the living room. He’d fallen back against the cushions, at some point. The potion in the bowl had stopped steaming. Harry still felt a little lightheaded, but a grin split his face.

“Well?” Sirius asked, still far across the room but looking at Harry with hopeful grey eyes. Harry sat up, a quiet laugh huffing between his lips.

"I'm a fox." He'd gone into the experience with a handful of ideas about what his animagus form might be, and fox wasn't anywhere on the list, but now he couldn't imagine being anything else.

"You found it!" Sirius whooped, diving into the cushion pile to hug Harry tightly, almost knocking over the potion bowl in his enthusiasm. "A fox? Really? Blimey, I thought for sure you'd be a bird! That's brilliant, Harry."

"Cunning yet mischievous, bold yet quick-thinking, seen as both an omen of luck and misfortune depending on the culture and the situation," Remus informed him, because *of course* he had random fox facts tucked up in that brain of his. "I'd say that suits rather well, for a snake in lion's clothing. Congratulations, Harry."

"I'll have to buy some books, won't I?" Harry knew the next step; studying the natural state of his animal form, learning as much about it as possible, and continuing his meditations until he knew his animal skin as confidently as he knew his own. That was the part of the process that tripped up a lot of people; refusal to own up to *all* facets of their personality, to face their flaws and acknowledge them. You couldn't return to your own skin if you didn't fully claim it as yours.

"I don't think we've got anything on foxes in the library, but we can check," Sirius said, shrugging. "If not, you know where the catalogue is, yeah."

Harry's gaze trailed over to Snape — the Slytherin hadn't said anything yet, and part of Harry yearned for his approval as much as Sirius' or Remus'. Finally, his dark eyes softened ever so slightly around the edges. "You're about to become far more trouble than you're worth, aren't you?" he remarked. "An animal known for sneaking about, and native to Britain to boot. I should've known, from the legacy of the Marauders."

"You're part of that legacy now, Snivelly," Sirius declared cheerfully. Snape glared at him.

"Let's head down for lunch," Remus suggested. "We can talk about the next steps while we eat. Then you can get in a bit of duelling practice before we head over for the Order meeting tonight." The meetings were becoming all the more frequent, but Remus and Sirius assured Harry there was rarely anything of note decided during them. Harry privately suspected Dumbledore kept gathering everyone just to make sure he could keep a close eye on them.

.-.-.-.

Harry spent almost the entire hour and a half the adults were at the Order meeting in his room in a meditative state with the aid of his wardstone, studying his fox form. The potion was only required the first time; once you'd already accessed that little corner of your magic, it was easier to find it again. Harry needed to learn exactly what the fox looked like, moved like, sounded like — he needed to know it as well as he knew himself.

Sirius had warned him that the animagus transformation was not the most thrilling bit of magic to learn. There was no flashy spell and bam, you're an animal. There was a lot of meditation, and introspection, and a slow, gruelling process of patience and time that made

Harry wondered how any of the Marauders had managed it, but he supposed they had been properly motivated.

Luckily, Harry often found himself with hours to spare and little else to do, and growing up at the Dursleys had definitely taught him both patience and introspection. If he could spend a week locked in a cupboard with nothing but his own thoughts, he could happily retreat into his own mind to play with the fox version of himself.

Remus and Snape returned, but Remus' ‘no war talk at the table’ rule was still in place, so Harry had to wait until after dinner to get his information. “What are they planning?” he asked eagerly, desperate for any kind of direction with which to build his own plans around. Sadly, he was disappointed.

“Honestly, very little,” Remus remarked. “It’s all a bit frustrating, really. We go, we argue in circles for an hour and come up with nothing, then Albus tells us it’s been a wonderful productive meeting and we can all go home.”

That sounded more like a second year Gryffindor/Slytherin class than a room full of the light’s greatest defence, and Snape’s lips twitched when Harry said as much. “Considering the majority of the Order *are* Gryffindors, we can’t really expect much more,” the Slytherin declared, ignoring the eye-rolls from his Gryffindor companions. “If there were enough Ravenclaws and Slytherins to get a majority and start organising the facts, we might make progress, but it seems rather intentional that Albus is letting the meetings stay chaotic.”

“To direct away from the fact that he isn’t actually doing anything about Voldemort,” Remus supplied. Harry grimaced. “The main topic of contention tonight was you, actually, Harry.”

The teen raised his eyebrows, and Remus smirked. “It’s finally occurred to some of your watchers that it’s not normal for a teenage boy to never leave the house. Albus insists it’s all part of your grieving process about Cedric — even though the twins shared your letter about the Dursleys with their parents and Sirius. The headmaster is quite certain that you’re merely prone to exaggeration in your anguish, and would just rather be left alone.”

Something burned within Harry, right beside the overwhelming gratitude that he wasn’t in fact stuck at the Dursleys like people thought he was. Dumbledore was so quick to throw him aside at the end of every school year, once he’d fulfilled his daring feat and saved lives at great risk to his own. Harry wondered how long it would take his watchers to realise that the supervision was not for Harry’s own safety, but to make sure he wasn’t up to anything suspicious.

“Imagine what state I’d be in if I was *actually* left alone to wallow in grief. I might not have made it back to school,” he mused to himself, missing Remus and Snape sharing a mildly alarmed look.

“There are enough people concerned about your lack of activity that I think it might be good to have you go back every now and then, just for a little bit,” Remus suggested, after a beat of silence. “Sit in the window and look sad for fifteen minutes or so, then have Ceri bring you home. Just to prove you’re still in the house.”

"I can do that," Harry agreed. His aunt and uncle never had to know he was there — fifteen minutes of sitting and looking sad would be good thinking time. He was doing so much thinking, these days. He felt like a Ravenclaw.

They were interrupted by a soft hoot, and then through the open living room window came a large pharaoh eagle owl; Bill Weasley's owl. It had a letter in its talons, which it dropped in Harry's lap. Harry's brows furrowed; that was a much quicker response than he'd expected.

Dear Harry,

Surprise! I'm back in England. With the current political climate, I've taken a job closer to home. Gorrak himself has asked me to head the research team on a rather difficult case he's had on his desk for a little bit. I'm sure you know the one.

I've heard you're being watched, but I've also heard that you're not where you're supposed to be. If that's the case, would you possibly be able to meet me at Gringotts in the morning, at around nine? Bring someone you trust. It's important.

If you can't make it, let me know and I'll figure out some other way to get the information to you. But it's not something that should be mentioned outside of protected walls, and Gringotts isn't just good at keeping gold safe.

Hopefully see you tomorrow,

Bill

"Gorrak's got Bill looking into my scar already?" Harry said, reading the letter a second time in case there were any more subtle hints he might've missed. "Well, Charlie did say he and Bill were looking at moving closer to home to try and take their Wizengamot seats from Mr Weasley." He looked up at his two guardians. "Can I go?"

"It sounds like it's worth the risk. We'll go in disguise," Remus confirmed. "I'm sure the goblins will understand."

If Bill had found a way to remove the magic on Harry's scar, he would've said so in the letter. But maybe he'd at least identified it.

"Well, at least that's one less international letter for Hedwig to deliver," Harry said. He hoped she was doing alright in her voyages to France, Bulgaria and Romania. "Has Bill been at any Order meetings?"

"No, and Molly hasn't mentioned him either. He must've only just got back in the country," Remus said with a frown.

"If he needs to meet with you before his own family, it must be urgent indeed," Snape remarked, also looking grim. Harry shrugged, turning back to the letter. They'd find out in the morning, he supposed.

.-.-.-.

Their identities carefully hidden thanks to Snape's spells, and Harry dressed in one of Remus' casual robes that had been resized to fit him — with a promise to order him some causal wizard-wear at the earliest opportunity because *really*, what young man didn't have a single robe outside his school uniform? — Harry and Remus apparated into Diagon Alley at eight forty-five the next morning. They strolled to Gringotts with the air of a father and son just grabbing a bit of spending money before a fun day out; entirely ordinary in the usual summer crowd of the alley. Harry scanned the goblins at the desks when they entered, and tugged Remus over towards Farlig. He placed his wand on the counter. "Good morning, and good fortune. I believe I have a meeting."

He currently looked nothing like Harry Potter, but that didn't slow Farlig for a second, and the goblin gave him a toothy smile. "This way, please, sirs." He hopped down from his chair and led Harry and Remus into the back rooms, to a door with Gorrak's name on it. He rapped sharply on the door, and it opened.

As the two of them stepped through the doorway, their disguise spells melted off them. That was no worry; Remus had anticipated as much, and they'd reapply spells when they left. Inside the office were Gorrak and Bill, the eldest Weasley son jumping to his feet to grab Harry in a hug. "Good, I'm glad you could make it."

Harry exchanged greetings with Gorrak, then turned back to Bill. "What is it you needed to talk to me about?"

Bill's freckled face turned serious. "You might want to sit down for this. Both of you." Remus took a chair beside Harry, within reach if Harry needed him. Harry appreciated it. Bill leaned against Gorrak's desk, fiddling with the fang in his ear. "You remember when I scanned you, Harry? Before the third task? And I told you the magic in your scar looked familiar." Harry nodded. "I went back to Egypt and did a little digging, and eventually I remembered where I'd seen it before. One of the first tombs I ever cracked, way back when I was still an apprentice. There was this doll, see? It had this *really* weird vibe to it. Darker than anything else in the tomb, and there was some pretty nasty stuff in there — the locals all thought it was haunted, said they heard moaning coming from it sometimes. The owner had been a very rich, very evil wizard. There were a load of scrolls about immortality, and then the doll, which I couldn't figure out."

Bill bit his lip, his hands white-knuckled on the edge of the desk. "I called my supervisor in, and he took one look at the doll and the scrolls and declared an immediate evacuation of the tomb. Lit the whole thing up with Fiendfyre as soon as everyone was out. I asked him why, and he told me the doll had been used for some of the blackest magic this world would ever see, and not a single hint of it could be allowed to make it to the public. I was wet behind the ears, so I didn't question him, but it stuck in my memory. I went to talk to him last week, told him I'd come across that magic again but I couldn't tell him where, and I needed to know what it was so I could deal with it."

"What is it?" Harry asked, wondering what his scar could have in common with a cursed doll in a haunted tomb.

"He told me the doll was something called a horcrux," Bill started slowly. "A very rare, very old, *incredibly* dark piece of magic. Most of the knowledge has been lost these days, but like

anything, you can find it if you know what you're looking for. It basically involves the caster using an act of cold-blooded murder — the worst evil a person can commit — and taking the energy from it to rip a piece of their soul free from the rest. That soul fragment is then stored, usually inside an object, so that even if the caster should die, their soul remains on earth, unable to move on until it is whole. It's the closest to immortality that magic has ever been able to grant."

There was a long, tense silence in the office. Even Gorрак looked deeply troubled.

"Usually inside an object," Harry repeated, a slow sense of dread building within him, "but sometimes inside a person. My scar is one, isn't it?" Part of Voldemort's soul was inside his body. It made sense — his visions, his claim to the Slytherin seat, his parseltongue abilities. If he'd housed part of another wizard's soul for most of his life, that would include some of his magic, too.

Remus reached across to grip Harry's hand tightly, his face pale. "Is that even possible?"

"I haven't found any literature on it," Bill replied. "But like I said, there's not much on horcruxes out there. If someone has used a living being as one before, it's no longer documented."

"How do we get it out?" Harry asked; he didn't much care how it got there, he just wanted it *gone*. Bill's expression told him it wasn't going to be that easy.

"Usually, a horcrux can be destroyed by damaging it beyond all magical repair. Fiendfyre, basilisk venom, some extremely caustic potions, the Killing curse. That's fine when it's housed within an inanimate object."

"Less fine when it's housed within my living body," Harry finished for him, his lips a thin line. Things were slowly starting to make sense. "Dumbledore knows." Both men blinked at him, confused. "He's got to. It's why he's done all this; put the block on my magic, kept me away from anyone who might care about me. He knows that I have to die in order for Voldemort to properly die, so he's leading me into that. Teaching me to sacrifice myself for the greater good. The block was probably a failsafe; if I refused, he could just wait until I turned seventeen and obliterated myself and those around me."

"You are not going to die!" The words were growled from Remus quite unexpectedly, his eyes glowing gold as he stared Harry down. He blinked, the wolf retreating, but there was still fire in his gaze. "Bill, is there any way to move the soul fragment outside of its container? Or from one container to another?" he asked, as if they were talking about repotting a mandrake and not removing soul pieces from Harry's literal body.

"I haven't found anything yet, but I've barely started looking," Bill admitted. "If there's a way, we'll find it."

"Mr Weasley is one of the finest curse-breakers employed by this bank, Mr Potter," Gorрак said, speaking up for the first time since he'd greeted them. "And Gringotts has far more resources than most wizards are aware of. Rest assured, if it is at all possible, we will find a solution."

“What happens if we kill Voldemort before we destroy the horcrux?” Harry asked curiously.

“He’ll go back to being the shade creature that possessed Professor Quirrell,” Bill explained. “With the potential to return again. We’d have peace, but it would be temporary. We’d be constantly on the lookout for his return.”

“And with the number of followers he has, it’d only be a matter of time before someone helped him do it,” Harry said grimly. If Wormtail could manage it, it couldn’t be that difficult. “Well, you can rule out basilisk venom. I got bitten by one when I was twelve, but then again I didn’t actually die from it; Fawkes healed me. So maybe it only works if I die.”

Bill’s blue eyes went wide. “I thought Ginny was joking about that,” he muttered faintly. Remus snorted.

“Never assume anything is a joke when it comes to Harry,” he advised. If the situation weren’t so dire, Harry would’ve grinned.

“Well. At least now we know what we’re up against,” Harry pointed out. As soon as they could figure out how to get the horcrux out of Harry, Voldemort was mortal. And if they couldn’t, well... there were worse ways to go than dying to save the world. “Gorvak, feel free to use the money from any of my vaults to fund whatever’s necessary for this research. I trust you.”

The goblin bowed his head, and the look on Bill’s face made Harry feel like those words weren’t often said from wizard to goblin.

“While I’ve got you here, Harry, can I do some more in-depth scans?” Bill requested. Harry shrugged, assenting; whatever might help.

Once again, Harry found himself lying back on a transfigured medical bed in a back office in Gringotts. Bill pulled out his notebook and pen, and he and Gorvak both spent the next fifteen minutes murmuring spells in all sorts of languages, making lights glow around Harry and strange tingling sensations happen and even at one point a loud noise like a gun going off. Harry stayed still through all of it, though his curiosity burned. He’d never experienced so much raw magic before, it was exhilarating!

“Blimey, Harry. Your core’s a bit massive, isn’t it?” Bill remarked, gesturing for him to sit up. “Happy to report there’s no adverse effects from all the years sitting under the block. If anything, it’s grown extra big to spite that — have you noticed your magic doing anything unusual in the last year or so? More instances of accidental magic, emotional discharges, that sort of thing?”

“I mean, yeah, but doesn’t everyone rattle the windows every now and then?” He’d seen Sirius and Snape do it a couple of times, when they got really angry.

“Not usually,” Remus piped up. Harry blinked.

“Oh. Well that was all happening before, too, so I didn’t really notice. I’m a lot better at spells than I used to be.” Before the block he’d been a fairly average wizard; certainly

nothing to tell tales about. Now, he could do most of his spells non-verbally, and quite a few without a wand as well. It was so much easier when you realised that all the specific pronunciation and wand movements weren't actually necessary, not if you could nudge your magic in the right way. Harry had been wondering all year why more people didn't do it.

Maybe it wasn't quite as easy for everyone else as it was for him.

"Well, you've got a lot to be working with, so I'd recommend you find some productive way of channelling it," Bill said. "You'd be great at warding, that always takes a lot of power. Kinda the inverse of my job. Or maybe spellcrafting. You're not taking Arithmancy, though, are you?"

"I'm doing it independently," Harry told him. "That and Runes. I'll take OWLs in them at the end of the year." He couldn't wait to shock Dumbledore with that one. Bill grinned.

"Good, good. You'll figure something out, then. For now, just make sure you do plenty of magic when you can, or it'll build up and go a bit haywire when you're particularly emotional. It'll all stabilise once you're of age, but a growing wizard's core can be a bit... finnicky, especially one your size."

"Why don't they teach anything like that at Hogwarts?" Harry muttered, shaking his head. Bill shrugged.

"It's mostly a pureblood thing, to be honest, so they probably expect peoples' parents to have warned them. Muggleborns have growing cores too, obviously, but they don't have family magics interacting with theirs so it's not as volatile." He clapped Harry on the shoulder, transfiguring the bed back into a chair. "Anyway, the good news is, the rest of your magic is clear and healthy. Doesn't seem to be any negative effects from having a bit of Voldemort in your head. I'll start working on some theories, and see what I can find." His crystal blue eyes locked onto Harry's. "I'll figure this out, kid, you hear me? You're not sacrificing yourself for this war."

"Okay," Harry agreed, though they both knew he would if it came down to it. "Thanks, Bill."

"No problem." Bill grinned, ruffling his hair, and shook Remus' hand. "I've got to get going, but it was good to meet you properly. I'm sure we'll see plenty more of each other in future."

Bill bowed his head to Gorra and said something in Gobbledygook, then left the office. Gorra turned to Harry. "May Gringotts be of any further assistance to you, Mr Potter?"

A thought drifted into his head, and he bit his lip. "Actually..." He glanced back at Remus. "While I'm here with a guardian present — could I possibly visit the family vaults? The heirloom ones." All four of his family lines had separate vaults for money and items, and while Harry had the itemised lists of everything in the latter, he wanted to see it for himself. There were some books he wanted to grab, too.

"Of course, Mr Potter," Gorra agreed. "If Mr Lupin consents to accompany you."

"I suppose we might as well, while we're here," Remus agreed.

Gorrak stepped out of the office, and Harry was surprised to see Farlig had been stood outside the whole time. “Mr Potter wishes to visit his heirloom vaults,” he told the younger goblin. Farlig nodded.

“Excellent. Follow me, sirs.”

Gorrak did not come with them, so Harry bid him farewell and followed Farlig back to one of the mine carts that would take them down to the vaults.

The vault Harry had been to the last couple of times — first with Hagrid and then with Mrs Weasley — was, he had discovered, his personal trust fund vault. The section of the Potter family money he was allowed to access until he turned seventeen. Harry could look at the other vaults full of gold, but he couldn’t actually take anything from them until he was of age. That was fine; there was more in the trust fund vault than he could possibly spend in the next two years anyway.

The family heirloom vaults, on the other hand, were much deeper in the Gringotts catacombs. Harry couldn’t have said how long they were in the cart, passing rows and rows of vaults that got progressively older and more solid-looking. He was pretty sure he saw a flash of fire, but they were going so fast he couldn’t quite tell. “Do you have a preference on which to visit first, Mr Potter?” Farlig asked, slowing the cart down a little.

“Let’s go Peverell first.” He knew the least about that line, after all.

The Peverell family heirloom vault wasn’t particularly large, and didn’t hold a huge amount inside it. A chest full of silverware stamped with the family crest; a wardrobe full of old robes; a few wands from long-deceased family members. Remus stuck close to Harry as he perused the vault’s contents, just in case anything was cursed.

Behind the wardrobe there was a bookshelf, and Harry’s eyebrows rose at the astonishing number of copies of the same book, all in various editions and reprints. “*The Tales of Beedle the Bard*, Remus, what’s this?”

“It’s a book of children’s stories,” Remus explained, looking equally confused. “Merlin only knows why there’s so many. Perhaps someone in the family was a collector.”

Harry flicked through some of the books, careful with the ones that looked like the bindings might crumble to dust at a strong wind. He was pretty sure he’d seen the title in the library at Seren Du, but he hadn’t thought much of it. He might have to go back and look.

On closer inspection, he found what he was looking for — *The Peverell Family Magics and Traditions*. A leather-bound book in surprisingly good condition, with a sprawling family tree on the first double page. Harry found his own name, tracing it back up through his father’s line. The tree had quite a few offshoots into other pureblood lines that it didn’t elaborate on after the initial marriage, only following the heir’s progression down the line. Right at the top were the earliest recorded Peverells; three brothers by the name of Antioch, Cadmus and Ignotus. To Harry’s surprise, he was descended from the youngest brother — Antioch had no children at all, and Cadmus’ line sprawled as long as Ignotus’, to the point where Harry lost track of it on the complicated chart.

“May I remove this from the vault?” Harry asked Farlig, and the goblin nodded.

“Everything in the vault is yours, Mr Potter,” he informed him. “You may remove whatever you wish.”

It was tempting to grab anything that looked interesting and take it home with him, but Harry figured a lot of it was probably safest where it had been for the last however many years, and he could always come back another time to explore properly. The book was the only thing he removed from the Peverell vault.

Next they went to the Slytherin vault. As expected, there was a truly astonishing amount of green and silver, and snakes made up most of the decor. Harry again wished he could spend hours down there investigating everything — there was far more in this vault than the previous one. Huge cases full of books, glittering jewellery and weapons and housewares, portraits wrapped in canvas, an entire suit of armour with the helmet shaped like a spitting cobra. There was nothing more recent than the mid-19th century, according to Remus.

Harry found the Slytherin family book on a pedestal next to a statue of a bearded man, and he put that in his bag as well. He had to tear himself away from the vault after that, and Remus chuckled. “We can always come back, cub. When there’s more time to spare.” When Harry was older. When he wasn’t being watched. When Voldemort was dead. Harry wouldn’t have anything resembling time to spare until then.

The Black vault filled both of them with trepidation, having heard all sorts of horror stories about the family from Sirius. This vault was huge and full of all manner of things, none of which looked like they were entirely safe to touch. “One day, when the war’s over,” he declared, tiptoeing through the vault with Remus at his shoulder, aiming for the family book sat on a dresser. “We’re going to come back here with Bill and Sirius and Snape, and we’re going to get rid of every cursed, dark or potentially lethal object.”

“A fun activity for all the family,” Remus agreed wryly, ducking when a scarf hanging on the edge of a mirror lunged out and tried to bite him. With its *fangs*.

Harry grabbed the book and hurried back over to Farlig in the doorway, giving the goblin’s amused face a dubious look. “You can help too,” he decided. “Anything we can dismantle the spells from, we can sell it.” The goblins would like that. Harry didn’t care as long as he wasn’t releasing cursed stuff into the general public.

By the time their mine cart slowed to a halt outside the Potter vault, Harry’s palms were clammy and his heart hammered against his ribs. Remus squeezed his shoulder. “We don’t have to do this today, cub,” he said softly. “We can come back another time. Or Farlig can go in and get the book.”

Harry shook his head, climbing out of the cart and placing his hand on the vault door as he had done with the previous three, letting it feel his magic. The door melted away.

Unlike the previous three, the Potter heirloom vault was a riot of colour.

Harry didn't know what to look at first; the gleaming wood chests overflowing with treasure; the huge piles of bright tapestries and rugs and what looked like saris; the beautiful furniture stacked all over the vault; the towering bookshelf in the corner with hundreds of titles nestled safely inside. His breath caught in his throat.

"I went down here once, y'know," Remus told him. "James brought Sirius and I down to come pick out an engagement ring for Lily from the family selection. Not sure where Pete was that day, but he didn't come with us. It wasn't quite as full then — some of the furniture was still at your grandparents' house. But when they went into hiding, they had the Potter elves clear out all the properties of anything that might be valuable, just in case. Lily always said when the war was over they'd come back down and pick some out for their own house, so you'd be able to grow up with your heritage around you." He smiled sadly, crossing over to a beautiful cabinet engraved with elephants and stained various shades of red and orange and gold. "This was in your grandparents' living room. Sirius got stuck in it once when we played hide-and-seek with some of Euphemia's friends' grandkids."

Harry snickered, feeling the emotion well in his chest. These things all belonged to his family, had memories for his father or his grandparents or other relatives. He would never learn those memories.

"I can't claim any of the Potter properties until I'm of age, can I?" he asked sadly. Farlig cleared his throat.

"Not legally. But were you to visit one and ask the wards for access, as the last blood Potter, they are unlikely to deny you," he said shiftily. "We at Gringotts cannot pass on the deed until you are a legal adult, but as none of your properties are under any sort of Fidelius that we know of, there is nothing stopping you from finding them."

A slow smirk crept over Harry's lips. "Huh. Good to know." He was happy at Seren Du, but there was a war coming, and God only knew what might happen. It was nice to know he had options.

This was the hardest vault of them all to walk away from with only the family book. Remus squeezed him around the shoulders, kissing his hair. "We'll come back," he promised. "We'll sit and look at every single item in the vault, if you want to."

He did. He really, really did.

Finally, he asked Farlig to take them back up to the surface so they could head home. It was so different, seeing all those heirlooms in person rather than just a list on a roll of parchment. His entire family history, crammed into a handful of vaults. Remnants from when all four families had had dozens of people within them, multiple lines to inherit and collect and claim items from the vaults, enough to fill all of the family houses. Now it was just Harry. What was he supposed to do with all that stuff?

As the cart flew through the tunnels beneath the bank, Harry let himself dream. He dreamed of a house with a huge garden, with the elephant cabinet in the living room and the bright rugs on the floor, and the Peverell family silverware in the cupboards — Sirius could have the Black family stuff, wherever he was living. He dreamed of several sets of tiny footsteps

running through hallways, and a ring from the Potter vaults sitting on a pale, thin-fingered hand.

He blushed, glad the darkness in the catacombs hid his embarrassment from Remus. Maybe he was getting a little ahead of himself there.

But it was a nice dream.

Chapter 40

Harry and Remus returned home to find Sirius had joined Severus in his waiting — Harry had told him about Bill's letter over the mirror before going to bed the night before.

In all the emotion of visiting his family vaults, Harry had almost forgotten about Bill's revelation. He twisted his fingers in the cuffs of his robes as he sat down on the living room sofa. "Bill knows what the magic in my scar is," he declared, not meeting anyone's eyes. "It's something called a horcrux."

Snape cursed, which startled Harry into looking up incredulously. His usually impassive Potions Master had horror in his dark eyes. "Is he certain?"

"You know what that is, then?" Remus asked in shock. Snape nodded.

"I've heard of them before. Honestly I'd thought them a myth. I certainly never expected they could be made from a living creature."

"Would someone please explain to me what a horcrux is?" Sirius bit out impatiently. Harry found himself lost for words, but luckily Remus wasn't. He filled Sirius in, glancing at Snape every now and then to check their information matched up, forging on when the Slytherin nodded. With every word, Sirius grew paler.

"There's a piece of that monster inside Harry's scar?" he croaked, rushing to Harry's side. "How do we get it out?"

"Bill doesn't know yet," Harry said weakly. "He's going to do some research."

"I will do some research of my own as well," Snape assured. "I'm sure I have some alternate avenues to Mr Weasley." He still looked shaken, leaning against the back of one of the armchairs. "Considering the circumstances, Potter, I believe there is something I should tell you. Something Dumbledore insists you not learn until the time is right."

"Until he's ready for me to die, you mean," Harry realised. Snape nodded sharply.

Harry's stomach was already a mess of knots and anxiety, and he didn't see how things could get much worse. "Tell me."

Snape told him of a job interview. He told him of a scared young man desperate to please his master, eavesdropping on a woman and an old man in the back room of a dirty pub. He told him of a prophecy.

"I only heard the first half. Albus Dumbledore is the only person alive who knows the full extent of the prophecy, and he has not seen fit to share it with me — or with you. I'm not sure what he hopes to gain from keeping you ignorant, but until we learn what the rest of the prophecy says, we may never know."

The one with the power to defeat the Dark Lord approaches. Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies.

Harry felt like he'd been punched in the chest. That was the reason Voldemort had killed his parents? Because of half a prophecy? "But... how? How can I have the power to defeat him? There's got to be more powerful wizards than me." Sure, Bill said his core was strong, but he couldn't be that special!

"For all we know, there's something about you in particular," Remus said. He didn't look surprised by any of this; he'd heard the prophecy before. How long had he known? "Maybe something to do with your family magics. You've got quite a few of them, after all."

"Or maybe it means Harry because only he can get rid of the horcrux and make Voldemort mortal again," Sirius suggested.

"But how can that work? If not for the prophecy he wouldn't have attacked me, and then I wouldn't have been a horcrux in the first place!" Harry argued. There was no way Voldemort would've shoved part of his soul inside a toddler *on purpose*. And if he had, he definitely wouldn't then try to kill said toddler multiple times.

"Prophecy magic is a tricky one to work with," Remus pointed out. "It could've been a self-fulfilling prophecy, or there could be something in the rest of the prophecy that details what the power is."

A thought struck cold in Harry's chest. "What if the power is the release of my magic from the block when I turn seventeen?" he asked in a hollow voice. "What if that's why Dumbledore put the block there? The overload of magic is the only thing that could destroy the horcrux *and* Voldemort."

"It can't be," Sirius said immediately. "I don't care what the bloody prophecy says, there's no way you're going to let yourself die to kill Voldemort. There's got to be another option."

Harry appreciated the sentiment, but he was not that important, and if his death was the only way to get rid of Voldemort then he would happily do so.

Though he would check that there were no other alternatives, first. He wasn't *that* reckless.

When the initial shock of the prophecy itself passed, another aspect of Snape's story drew to the front of Harry's thoughts. He turned to the man. "You were the one who overheard the prophecy. You went to Voldemort about it."

Snape's eyes shuttered. "I did," he confirmed. Harry swallowed.

"Did you know? When you told him, did you know?"

"I had no idea he was going to go after any child, let alone you and your family," Snape whispered harshly. "I believed the approach meant a person coming closer, perhaps from abroad; not the birth of a child. As soon as I realised how he was interpreting the prophecy, I rushed to Dumbledore to turn myself in and beg he protect you, and the Longbottom boy as

well.” Harry hadn’t even realised Neville fit the bill too, his birthday the day before Harry’s. “Believe me, Harry; if I had even the slightest *inkling* of what was to happen, I never would have told him. By that point in my life I was already doubting my choices; that was just what tipped me back onto the right path.”

Part of Harry still didn’t understand how Snape could’ve become a Death Eater to begin with, when he had Remus who loved him so fiercely and Harry’s mother who had been his best friend as a child. But he doubted he would get that story, not until he was much older. It was clearly a long and complicated one. He just hadn’t realised it culminated in Snape indirectly being responsible for the death of Harry’s family.

Remus and Sirius knew, and yet they still thought of Snape as family! How was he supposed to reconcile that?

“I think I’m going to go to my room, if that’s okay.” Harry stood on shaky legs. Had he been looking, he would’ve seen heartbreak flash through Severus Snape’s eyes for just a moment before the usual impassive mask fell into place.

“Harry, please,” Remus started, but Harry shook him off.

“I need to think.” He left the living room, heading to his bedroom on autopilot and shutting the door quietly behind him. He wouldn’t slam it. He wasn’t having a tantrum.

He didn’t even know if he was angry. He should be; he had every right to be. But whether it was the hole in his heart that had formed after Cedric’s death, or something else entirely, Harry couldn’t bring himself to be angry at Snape.

Snape clearly had enough anger at himself for the both of them.

He didn’t know what he was feeling. The day had been full of so many revelations, so many emotions... he was just *tired*. He had the soul of a madman attached to his own, and he was the owner of hundreds of heirlooms he couldn’t possibly be worthy of, and he was prophesised to defeat a *Dark Lord*, and he was still hiding from Dumbledore and he couldn’t even go out in public without a disguise, and his boyfriend’s father was an awful human who worshipped the Dark Lord Harry was supposed to defeat, and *nothing about his life was normal*.

Apparently, nothing had ever been destined to be normal about him. Not since he was born.

There was a knock on Harry’s door, and he didn’t invite them in, but he also didn’t tell them to go away. After a beat, the door opened. “Hey, pup,” Sirius greeted cautiously, slipping into the room. “I have to head back to headquarters, but I didn’t want to leave without saying goodbye.” He edged closer to the bed. “Are you... okay?”

Harry let out a bitter laugh. “Would you be okay, in my position?”

“Merlin, no; I’d be crying in a corner somewhere! But we Blacks have always been a bit on the emotional side,” he replied with a wink. He sat on the edge of the bed, his eyes soft and

sad. “You know Severus isn’t to blame for all this. He’s spent the last fifteen years trying to repent for that one little mistake. He cares about you.”

“I know,” Harry agreed quietly. He wished he had the words to explain the mess inside his head. “I’m not—I’m not mad at him. Voldemort and Dumbledore are the only ones at fault here. Manipulating others for their own gain. I just... today has been a lot.”

“Moony told us you visited the heirloom vaults,” Sirius said. Harry nodded. “I wish I could’ve been with you, pup. One day I will. I’ll tell you everything I can remember about whatever we find in there.” The dog animagus shuffled up the bed to bring Harry into a hug, lips pressing to his hair. “You’re not alone, Harry. Whatever happens next—with the horcrux, the prophecy, everything—we aren’t going to let you face him alone.”

“That was Dumbledore’s plan,” Harry pointed out. Sirius scoffed.

“Dumbledore can go fuck a hippogriff,” he declared vehemently. “His plans are usually terrible for everyone but himself, and I for one am done with going along with them.” Sirius smiled. “We’ll figure this out. From what Severus tells us, Bill Weasley is a smart chap, and Severus himself has more knowledge of the Dark Arts than anyone else I know. There’s got to be a way. You can’t give up hope.” He kissed Harry’s scar, then pulled back. “I’ll see you when I can, alright? I love you.”

“Love you too,” Harry replied automatically, managing a faint half-smile as his godfather left. When he was alone once more, he slumped back against his pillows, squeezing his eyes shut.

Merlin, he needed a nap.

.

Over the next few days, Harry didn’t leave his room much. He appeared for meals but was silent through them, and when he didn’t show up for his training neither Snape nor Remus called him down. Snape seemed to be avoiding him as much as possible, often skipping meals in favour of brewing potions. Remus just looked at Harry like his heart was being torn in two by the silence. Harry wished he could reassure the man, but he didn’t know what to say. All his words dried up in his throat. He didn’t hate Snape, but every time he tried to say it he thought of the piece of Voldemort’s soul lodged in his head and how it was maybe Snape’s fault it was there, and sure, okay, he couldn’t have known that would happen but he had still been in a place in his life where following a man like Voldemort without hesitation had been an option—no, a *joy*—for him, and how the hell was Harry supposed to understand that when Snape had Remus in his life?

Remus, who was classified as a dark creature but who rescued baby birds and helped them back to their nests. Remus, who always had a kind word for everyone, and believed chocolate was the cure for everything. Remus, who had seen Harry so alone and desperate for family, and given him stories of his parents even when it had to be hurting him to think of them.

If Snape could have Remus and still become a Death Eater, what hope did Harry have? He hadn’t known love for most of his life, and now he had it he wasn’t even sure he could keep

it, because he might have to die in order to save them all.

Luckily, he was distracted by an influx of owls, as his friends slowly began to return his letters. Most of the heirs had sent general updates on their summers, wishing Harry well with his and making vague illusions to the things they'd been working on through the school year. Susan sent a letter and a book — he read the letter first, relief flooding him when the Hufflepuff assured that her aunt was on board and ready to start digging discreetly into Dumbledore's history. She also seemed to have started a summer project of her own, and was recruiting the rest of the heirs; hence the book.

There's a lot to get through, and we're going to be too busy to do it when Voldemort falls, so if we're prepared now it'll be easier later, Susan wrote, explaining her plans. She had sent Harry *The Self-Updating Record of Ministry Laws and Regulations: Vol 2*, with the request that he read through chapters 30-39 and make note of any law that needed to be changed, or done away with entirely, and categorise them by urgency. Apparently the best time to make changes to the law was after a particularly large upheaval — like a war — when people were worried about falling back into old habits and positions were changing hands due to death or incapacitation. The last couple of times, Dumbledore had just swept in and taken care of it all, and thus nothing had changed in almost a century. Now, they had a lot of work to do, and Susan wanted to be able to start immediately.

The book was in chronological order, and was spelled to automatically record any change or abolition of laws. Susan had set herself the last ten chapters of volume 3, which were all the most recent laws, as they were often the most contentious. Harry's section was mostly innocuous, though there were some truly bizarre laws that he couldn't believe had to be put in place. What had happened to make it necessary to create a law banning people from transfiguring themselves into owls for the purpose of delivering mail?

Still, Susan had asked, and it gave Harry an excuse to stay in his room but still feel productive.

He also got a letter from Draco; shorter than he would've liked, and with a worrying contents.

H,

Glad to hear you're back where you're supposed to be. I hope it stays that way.

I might not be able to write to you much this summer. My father has invited several old friends to stay at the manor, including one I believe you encountered shortly before the end of term. I plan to stay out of their way, but they might have other ideas. Rest assured, even if I cannot write to you, I will be thinking of you.

I have spoken to mother about coming to visit, and that may still be possible. Keep your fingers crossed.

Yours,

Draco

Voldemort was living at Malfoy Manor. *Voldemort was in Draco's home.* When he'd first read the letter, everything within him had urged for him to go to Malfoy Manor and stage a rescue, but he knew that would be foolish. Draco had given no reason for anyone to believe he wasn't as loyal as his father, and Narcissa would die before she let anything happen to her son. They both knew where Seren Du was, and knew they were always welcome.

That didn't stop Harry from worrying. He kept the letter on his bedside table, picking it up every now and then to re-read the last two words, his heart giving a little skip each time. *Yours, Draco.* It was nothing he hadn't said in person, but... it felt like more.

One quiet dinner, three nights after the prophecy revelation, Remus cleared his throat. "Harry," he started, and Harry immediately knew he wasn't going to like what the man had to say. "Dumbledore has given me a mission. I'm to visit a werewolf pack in the New Forest and try and convince them to side with us instead of Voldemort."

Harry definitely didn't like it. "How long will you be gone?"

"I don't know. Hopefully not more than a week," Remus assured. "The moon and the few days either side of it. But... Sirius won't be able to get away from headquarters all that often. It'll just be you and Severus in the house. And Ceri, of course."

Harry glanced over at the Potions Master, who was keeping his gaze to his plate. Harry hadn't spoken much to him since he'd learned the truth, and it was starting to wear on both of them. Snape's mouth was tight in the corners, and every time he did catch Harry's eyes he looked sad. Remus was worse, but Snape clearly wasn't enjoying the silence either.

Eighteen months ago, Snape would have *begged* to not have to speak to or interact with Harry Potter. Eighteen months ago, Harry never would've thought seeing Snape sad would tear at that hole in his heart.

"That's okay," he said eventually, before taking a deep breath. It was time he tried some words, whether they fell in an orderly fashion or not. "I don't blame you, sir. For my parents. I'm sorry if I made you feel like I did. It was just a lot to take in, and the horcrux, and—there's a prophecy about me, and people died because of it, but you couldn't have known that. I just don't *understand*. Why me. Why you? Why were you even a bloody Death Eater to *begin with*, when Remus loves you so much and I know, *I know* you love him, I can see it, I'm not blind. How could things get so bad that you could still go to *him*? You all just say things were complicated back then, and I get that, and I probably don't have the right to ask for the truth for any of it. I just don't understand how you could go to Voldemort and how Pettigrew could go to Voldemort when both of you had people you loved! People who loved you! He still managed to get you, and his soul is in me and what if he gets me too? He said we were alike, in the diary, when I was younger, and he was right, he was *so right*, I'm just like him and I can feel it sometimes and it *hurts* and I don't want to be like him but what if I am and what if all of this is for nothing and what if his soul and my soul are the same thing now? And what if I hurt people — what if I hurt *you* — what if this power I'm supposed to kill him with actually just makes me worse than he is and Dumbledore was right to bind it all along and I—"

He stopped speaking, mostly due to his inability to breathe. He was hyperventilating, his chest rising in quick gasps, and then there were arms around him pulling him against a wiry chest, a soft voice telling him to breathe and to count with him as the chest beneath his face inflated and deflated slowly, carefully, until Harry was doing the same.

He looked up into Snape's near-black eyes. "You are truly your mother's son," the man declared softly. Somewhere above him, on the other side of the table — when had Harry ended up on the floor? — Remus snorted out a surprised laugh. "I am glad you don't blame me, even when I still blame myself. You have every right to be angry," Snape told him, still keeping that same even tone of voice, like he was talking to a particularly spooked animal. "As for how I became a Death Eater, that is a very long and complicated story that starts with an awful man and ends with several different awful men, and it is not a story for tonight, though perhaps one day I may tell you. Needless to say I regret my choices, and I will do what I can to atone for them. But you are not me, Harry, and you are not Pettigrew. Yes, you have had awful people in your past, and awful things happen to you. And you have several awful things in your future, too. But you have the knowledge gained from watching the rest of us make mistakes. More importantly, you have more compassion in your heart than I have ever seen from anyone except your mother." Snape's lips curved in perhaps the first true smile Harry had ever seen from the man.

"Lily loved openly, and without hesitation. She did not love everyone — and if she hated you, you definitely knew about it — but if she loved you, she would do anything for you. If you threw that love aside, you would regret it. Merlin knows I did. Luckily, she deigned to give me a second chance, eventually."

The Slytherin's arms were still around Harry's back, surprisingly strong for a man so thin. Harry's heart still rabbited against his ribs. "You are like your mother in so many ways, and that is the reason you will never become like the Dark Lord. He was denied love through his childhood, and that made him bitter and angry and determined to see everyone else be denied love as well. You were denied love through your childhood, and it made you all the more determined to make sure no one else suffered the same way. You learned love and you gave it in spades. You made that choice. He made a different one. Having a piece of his soul within you does not change that."

Harry could do nothing but stare. Not only was that the most words he'd ever heard Snape say in one go, but it was the most honesty he'd ever heard from him, the most *humanity*. This was the Severus Snape that perhaps only Remus and Draco ever got to see these days. The Severus Snape that Harry's mother knew, before everything went so horribly wrong.

Snape seemed to realise he'd said quite enough, as his cheeks flushed faintly and he cleared his throat. "And if you think we're going to just let you sit around with a piece of the Dark Lord inside your head, you're even more daft than I thought you were."

"Oh, and he's back," Remus remarked, squatting down beside them with a grin. "That's it, Harry; Severus just used up all his emotions for the next year, no more for the rest of us." Snape glared at him, and Remus' grin widened. He kissed the man on the cheek. "You big softie," he teased. With one hand on each of their backs, Remus hauled them up to standing.

"He's right, Harry. You are so full of love, it's unfathomable to me how you could possibly become like Voldemort. For one thing, we certainly wouldn't let you."

"Promise me that," Harry begged. Snape's words were nice, but Harry still didn't believe him. Not when there was that dark, ugly *thing* inside him, that twisted piece of magic so intertwined with his own.

"We promise we won't let you become a Dark Lord," Remus vowed. "Easiest promise I'll ever keep." He gently tugged Harry out of Snape's arms and into his own, stroking his hair. "Everyone in this house has struggled with darkness at some point or another, Harry. Even Sirius. Look at the family he came from. And there is nothing wrong with acknowledging that darkness within you. Dark does not necessarily mean evil. Severus is still a dark wizard, but he's not an evil man. I'm a dark creature, but I'm not evil. Peter Pettigrew had never successfully cast a dark spell in his life before joining Voldemort, and yet I think we can all agree whatever little bit of good left in him died a long time ago. Now," he said, glancing between Harry and Snape, "I have to leave in the morning, so I would very much like to spend my last night at home for a while in the company of two people I love dearly. Let's have Ceri make some hot chocolate and bring it to the living room, shall we?"

Harry couldn't help but smile; typical Remus Lupin response. Chocolate solved everything.

.....

The house was quiet without Remus around. Not because Harry and Snape were still at odds with each other — after Harry's little breakdown and Snape's uncharacteristic burst of emotion, there was no way they could continue that stalemate — but because neither of them was really prone to conversation for conversation's sake, and without Remus around to nudge them into it, they just... didn't.

But there was an understanding between them. Another barrier had come down. Harry resumed his training, and Snape continued to teach him about dark magic, maintaining that Harry would need to know it, and insisting he was strong enough to know when to stop. In the evenings, Harry read the book from Susan, or worked on his animagus form. He'd owl-ordered a book about foxes and their anatomy, and it was proving very helpful indeed.

"Professor?" he asked one evening, breaking the companionable silence between them. Snape looked up from his own book, raising one eyebrow. "Did you ever try to become an animagus?" It seemed like such a useful piece of magic, Harry couldn't understand why everyone didn't do it. Sure, it was difficult, and not everyone *could*, but why did so many people not even try?

"When I learned what the Marauders had done, I brewed the potion to discover my form," Snape admitted. "It is a crow. The form was not suitable for what I'd hoped to use it for, and I was incredibly busy, so I never continued to learn the transformation. I only seemed to get busier as time went on."

A faint smile tugged at Harry's lips as he interpreted the Snape-speak — a crow couldn't run with a werewolf on the full moon, therefore he had no interest in being an animagus. He was

starting to learn why Remus insisted Snape was a romantic, deep down. “I think it’d be cool to be a crow. Flying without a broom and everything. Do you like flying, sir?”

“I do, though I don’t often fly for pleasure these days.”

“You could come fly with me sometime if you wanted to,” Harry suggested, hardly able to believe his own mouth. Snape paused, then looked back down at his book.

“Perhaps.”

Harry grinned, turning back to the chapter he was reading about the evolution of foxes.

. . .

That night, he had a dream about Voldemort. No, not a dream — a vision. Harry couldn’t remember the details, just that his scar hurt when he woke up, and he felt nauseous, but strangely triumphant. He told Snape about it when he came down to breakfast. “Do you know what he might have been doing?”

“I do not,” Snape replied, lips thinning. “I have not been Called since that first meeting. I suspect I will be soon, though. Especially if the Dark Lord has made progress on whatever he is planning.”

“These dreams won’t stop even if I strengthen my Occlumency shields, will they?” Harry asked dully. Snape shook his head.

“We can assume the connection exists because of the soul fragment inside your scar. That puts him already inside your defences. However, I believe that keeping your shields up keeps the connection one-way — you can be pulled into his mind, but if he were to try and reach into yours himself, he would hit your shields. He can reach your dreams, but not your thoughts — and not your actions.” Harry didn’t ask how Snape knew that was a concern of his, when *he* hadn’t even known he was truly concerned about it until the man brought it up. “I do not believe he can possess you through this connection. Certainly there is no evidence that he has tried.”

“Even though sometimes I feel feelings that aren’t mine?”

“Emotional transference is not possession,” Snape told him. “Now finish your breakfast and get dressed, I’ll meet you in the library.”

Harry was surprised they weren’t in the duelling room, but grateful. He was always tired after a night in Voldemort’s head.

. . .

In all the chaos that had surrounded the visit to Gringotts, Harry had almost forgotten about the other part of the trip; until he picked up his bag while tidying his room and remembered the four books inside. He removed them carefully, setting them side-by-side on the desk. His four family lines. His heritage, on paper.

He picked up the Potter book first. The other three were bound to be fascinating — especially the Slytherin book! — But Potter was the name he'd known for so long, the name he associated with family.

Like with the Peverell book, the first page was the family tree. Harry pored over the names; his grandparents, great-grandparents, people going all the way back to long, long before the colonisation of India. It faded out into a series of question marks around the 10th century, but Harry was still gobsmacked to be able to trace his lineage back that far.

The book opened with several hand-written chapters of family history, detailing their roles in early wizarding culture, and how they had originally come to Britain with a Mongol raid in the early 11th century, members of the family zigzagging all over Europe and India, marrying into all sorts of families before settling mostly in India when it was colonised. They eventually returned to Britain when the Ministry was formed, to take a place on the Wizengamot and have a say in the foundation of Wizarding Britain, but the Indian magic remained strong in the line.

After the history came the Recorded Family Traits — Harry's eyebrows rose when he saw that parseltongue was a trait recorded in at least thirty prior members of the Potter family, though fewer and fewer as time passed. The last one had been back in 1883. Maybe he hadn't got that from the Slytherin side, after all!

There were all sorts of things that popped up in the line, though several of them had notes where they may have appeared from a conflicting family magic or creature inheritance. Harry was amused to see how often his family crossed over with the Blacks over the years.

The rest of the book was all about the traditions and etiquette specific to the house. A few paragraphs in, and it became pretty clear to Harry that he was going to need Sirius' help with all of it. There was *no way* half of that stuff could still be applicable. For one, nobody carried a sword anymore!

He smiled to himself all the same, returning to the family tree, unrolling the seemingly endless scroll of parchment to reach his own name.

The Potters had a long and varied magical history, with a lot of great names and deeds throughout. Harry only hoped to hold up to that legacy.

. . .

Much to Harry's surprise, he was still perfectly happy spending time with just Snape even after Remus had been gone for five days. There had been a few arguments — they hadn't magically had personality transplants, after all — but he was pretty sure they'd reached something maybe close to friendship.

Harry was on the floor of the living room surrounded by parchment and books, as he so often was these days. Snape actually had to step over him to reach the sofa. "Must you?" he sighed, and Harry snickered.

"It's easier this way," he insisted, checking something in a nearby book before crossing out something on one of the parchments.

"Dare I ask what you're doing?" Snape said with raised eyebrows. Harry wriggled into a sitting position.

"I'm trying to figure out the origins of Dumbledore's proxy seats," he explained. "There's got to be heirs for at least some of them, and if not the line should be declared extinct. Obviously he's got mine, and the Founders, but there's these other two and I can't figure out where they came from. Unless one of them is his own? But I didn't think he had a blood claim to any seat — Blaise says that's why he became headmaster."

"Mr Zabini is correct," Snape told him. "The Dumbledore family only goes back four generations, to a muggleborn. Which are the two seats you cannot identify?"

"There's the Ross seat, which I've got some early history for in some of the old Wizengamot books, but nothing particularly recent. And the Prince seat, which I can hardly find anything about," Harry said in frustration. A strange look passed over Snape's face.

"I believe the Ross seat belongs to Minerva McGonagall," the man declared, "and the Prince seat is mine."

Harry gaped at him. "*What?*" How was that possible? "You're— but all this time, you never said! How?"

"My father was a muggle. My mother was Eileen Prince; third child of Octavius Prince, and not expected to inherit a thing. But both her older sisters died childless, so the line passed to me. By the time my mother passed, I was working at Hogwarts. Albus does not allow his teachers to hold Wizengamot seats; he insists it distracts from our teaching duties. He's held my seat in proxy ever since, and Minerva's for long before that." Snape's lips curled in distaste. Harry kept gaping.

"So you're technically Lord Prince?" he asked, astonished.

"If I had ever been given the chance to step foot in the Wizengamot, I would be," Snape replied. "But as that has not happened, I am still only the heir to the line. I believe Minerva is the same; her brother held the title before she did, but his children were both squibs, so when he passed away it moved to her."

"But the rule about teachers not holding seats, that's Dumbledore, right? That's not a school rule?" If the Founders themselves could do both, Harry didn't see how other teachers couldn't.

"Indeed," Snape confirmed darkly. "Albus put the rule in place when he first hired Professor Horace Slughorn. He claims it's to make sure our full attention is on the welfare of the students."

"To make up for the fact that his isn't?" Harry remarked bitterly. Then, he brightened up. "But this is brilliant! All we have to do is get Dumbledore removed as headmaster, and he's

off the Wizengamot for good! I'll change my proxy to someone else, the Founders' seats will go to the new head, and you and Professor McGonagall can have your seats back!"

"Removing Albus Dumbledore from Hogwarts is a feat that many have tried and failed to do," Snape pointed out. Harry shrugged.

"I still think it's doable," he said nonchalantly. "I'll squeeze it in somewhere around killing a Dark Lord."

Snape's dark eyes met his for a long moment, filling with a mix of exasperation and utter resignation. Harry just grinned.

.-.-.

At last, Remus returned home. He'd been gone for just over a week, and Ceri popped in to announce his return while Snape and Harry were duelling. They halted immediately, and Harry beamed. "We can finish early, can't we, Professor?" It was only four, but they'd been working all morning too. And there was no way Snape could deny he'd missed Remus.

"I believe we can end here for the day, yes," Snape agreed. Harry cheered, holstering his wand.

They met Remus in the entrance hall. The werewolf was somewhat ragged, with dark circles under his eyes and a healing scratch along the line of his stubbled jaw, but he was smiling. His eyes lit up when he saw them. "My boys," he breathed fondly. Snape made a face.

"I'm hardly a boy," he pointed out, making Remus chuckle. He leaned in close to Snape, smiling.

"You've been my boy since you were thirteen. Get used to it." His nose brushed across Snape's cheekbone in a very wolfish move, his hand on the nape of the man's neck. When he was satisfied, he bundled Harry in a tight hug. "Oh, I'm so glad to see you haven't killed each other!"

"Oi!" Harry argued playfully. "We wouldn't kill each other. You'd be upset." The greying man barked out a laugh.

"I've missed you, cub," he declared, smoothing down Harry's messy hair. "How have you two been? Be honest. I'll ask Ceri to tell me if you're lying."

"We've been good, actually," Harry insisted. "He hasn't been grouchy or anything. Well, a bit in the last couple days. I think he missed you." He dodged the Tripping jinx Snape sent his way, but wasn't quite fast enough to miss the Stinging hex that immediately followed.
"Rude!"

"He's been grouchy, hmm?" Remus drawled, turning amused eyes on his partner. "Harry, go see what treats Ceri has in the ice box, would you? I'm craving something sweet."

"You could not be any less subtle, oh my God," Harry said flatly, turning on his heel. "Fine, fine, I'm leaving so you two can snog in peace!" That earned him another Stinging hex on the

way out, and he yelped.

There were in fact several home-made eclairs in the ice box, and Harry munched on one while sat on the countertop, trying not to listen to any noises that might come from the hallway. Ceri popped into the room, scowling at him. “Master Harry should be sittings on chairs, not on Ceri’s nice clean counter,” she scolded lightly. Harry jumped down, pulling a chair out.

“Sorry, Ceri. These eclairs are great, though!” The elf’s scowl faded, and with a click her fingers there was a tray on the table with several more eclairs, and some mini chocolate tarts.

“I will be takings these up to the living room for masters,” she told him, then disappeared. Harry eyed the kitchen doorway warily.

“Are you two done yet?” he called dubiously. Remus’ laughter greeted him.

“Yes, it’s safe!” he assured. When Harry returned, the pair were stood close together and Remus’ hair was a little messier than it had been before, but other than that they looked unflustered.

“Ceri’s got eclairs and chocolate tarts in the living room,” he reported. Remus’ face lit up.

“It’s so good to be home!” He started up the stairs, Snape close behind.

“How was your trip? What are the werewolf pack like?” Harry asked as they walked, curious to hear about an actual proper werewolf pack. He’d only heard stories before, and he was pretty sure the stories in most textbooks were wildly inaccurate. He doubted they sacrificed a small muggle child every full moon. Someone would’ve noticed that.

“It was an eye-opener,” Remus declared. When they reached the living room, Ceri had the tea set ready as well. “I’ve been to werewolf packs before — Albus sent me in the first war, and I spent a bit of time with them in between when I was really desperate. I was never comfortable around them before. This time... Merlin, the difference in Moony now I’m no longer under that curse!” He ran a hand through his hair. “I don’t know how Albus ever expected me to be able to negotiate with them while still suffering its effects. They never quite accepted me in the past, and I think that’s why. They could tell my wolf and my self were disjointed, out of harmony. This time... it was much, much easier to fit in with the pack. I still wouldn’t call it comfortable,” he added ruefully. “But it was better. They could actually respect me, this time.”

“Maybe that was Dumbledore’s plan,” Harry suggested. “To have you fail to negotiate because you weren’t in touch with your wolf.”

“It certainly would make it easier for him,” Remus agreed. “Even with me getting along better with them, they aren’t exactly thrilled about the prospect of joining Dumbledore. He’s been promising to overhaul the werewolf legislations for decades, but never actually done anything. They thought it might change when they heard he’d let a werewolf — me — attend Hogwarts, but I think they realised that was a one-off rather than the start of a new trend.” He reached for an eclair, frowning faintly. “Luckily, they don’t really trust Voldemort either. I

think they'd rather stay out of it, to be honest, but they know if war comes that's not going to be an option. If they fight and lose, they'll die; if they fight and win, they might gain a few more rights but they'll still probably die; and if they don't fight at all, they'll surely die as well in the end."

"There's always another option," Harry pointed out. Remus' eyebrows rose. "They fight with me — with us — and when we take back the Wizengamot we give them the rights they deserve." He'd already found several outrageous creature-related laws in his section of the Ministry Regulations book that he was planning on bringing to Susan's attention.

"You really plan to be that open against both Dumbledore and Voldemort?" Remus questioned.

"I think I'll have to be, don't you?" Harry couldn't imagine being able to get any of the things he needed while sticking under Dumbledore's shadow. "I'll keep acting dumb as long as I can, but I'm running out of time. I expect by the end of the year, Dumbledore will be onto me, so I might as well start playing against him now."

"It could come in useful, having the werewolf packs on our side," Snape agreed thoughtfully. "If they're willing to agree to it. A fifteen year-old boy isn't the most inspiring leader, even if he is the Boy-Who-Lived."

"Yeah, okay, fair point," Harry agreed. "But it can't hurt to offer, right? Let them know we'll be working on the legislation regardless, so if they want to stay out of it that's totally fine, but we'd appreciate the help if they want."

Remus was silent while he ate his eclair. "It's worth trying," he agreed eventually. "I'll keep it in mind next time I'm sent out there. I'll have to report to Albus at the next Order meeting that this wasn't exactly a success, so he'll probably ship me back out after a few months. Hell, half the wolves aren't even willing to believe Voldemort's back yet." He took a sip of his tea, eyes darting to one of the chocolate tarts. "Anyway, how have things been here? What have you two been up to?"

Harry grinned, bouncing in his seat a little. "I turned the tip of my nose black the other day while I was meditating!" he announced proudly. It was his first visible sign of the animagus transformation. Remus beamed at him.

"Harry, that's brilliant! Tell me everything." He kicked off his shoes and wedged his feet under Snape's thigh, earning a half-hearted eye roll. Harry happily told the man about the minor transformation, and how it had taken a few hours for him to undo it.

Yes, the house was far too quiet without Remus around.

Chapter 41

It was a good thing Seren Du was in the middle of nowhere, because the number of owls coming for Harry was beginning to get absurd. Now his friends knew it was safe to write to him, they were all more than happy to do so.

“Blimey, Harry,” Sirius remarked when he was over one afternoon, watching another two owls swoop in through the window. “Even I wasn’t this popular in school.”

“You weren’t planning a government coup,” Harry pointed out dryly, scratching Susan’s owl behind the ears. The other owl surprised him; he hadn’t heard from Cassius yet this summer.

“True, but even so. Can’t you pass a lot of this over to Susan, and just get updates from her?” The plan to sort out the Wizengamot was definitely more Susan’s than Harry’s. He was busy with the whole war on two sides situation.

“Nah, I like being in the loop. Besides,” he added, offering both owls a bit of croissant off his plate, “half of these letters aren’t even about that, we just wanted to keep in touch.” It was a novelty to him, having this many people who actually cared what he was up to. He hadn’t heard from Ron and Hermione, after convincing everyone in the Order that the Dursleys wouldn’t let him receive owls, but from what the twins and Ginny were saying the two of them didn’t seem enormously sad about it. The three younger Weasleys he actually liked regularly sent letters to him through Remus.

He opened Cassius’ letter first, eyebrows furrowing at the short missive.

Dear Harry,

Just checking in to let you know I’m alright. Hope your summer is better than mine has been. My family are pretty enthusiastic about the current political situation, if you get what I mean. They want me to be involved as soon as possible. I’ve managed to hold things off for now, but I can’t wait to get back to school.

I’m at a friend’s right now, and will be for the next couple weeks, so you can write me back now but once I’m at home it’s probably best you don’t. Pretty sure my uncle’s reading my mail. Luckily Draco and Pansy are acceptable people to write to, so they’ve been keeping me updated with that fancy ink Draco has. Slightly glad my guardianship situation means I’m not involved in Susan’s law hunting project.

Before you worry your little Gryffindor head about me, I’m unharmed, and should stay that way until school. We Slytherins are good at surviving adverse conditions.

Enjoy your summer,

Cassius

Harry's heart ached for the Slytherin. He was about to start his final year at Hogwarts; after that, he would have no more excuses left for his uncle. He wondered which friend Cassius was staying with, whether it was the secret someone he'd mentioned over Christmas. He hoped so — Cassius needed someone in his corner right now.

Susan's letter didn't surprise him — her reaction to the news that Dumbledore had been forced into stepping down as Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot. It was poorly-hidden gloating, combined with fear now that the position would be held in interim by Minister Fudge. The only thing more dangerous than a political figure with a hidden agenda was a political figure with barely two brain cells to rub together.

"I've got another one for you," Remus announced, walking into the living room and tossing a letter Harry's way. He snatched it out of the air, smiling at the sight of George's handwriting. "Busy mail day?"

"The kid's getting more post than Gilderoy bloody Lockhart," Sirius grumbled, getting to his feet. "If you're here, I'd better scarper. Someone will notice I'm missing soon." He ruffled Harry's hair as he passed. "Stay out of trouble, Little Red."

"We're not calling me that," Harry insisted for the hundredth time. Sirius had declared that as an official Marauder — or soon-to-be one, once he got his animagus form — Harry deserved a proper Marauder nickname. He was testing a few out, and each was worse than the last. Remus said that James had been responsible for all of their nicknames the first time around, and there was a reason for that.

Remus took Sirius' spot on the sofa, and Harry jotted down replies to Susan and Cassius, sending their owls on their way. He thought about opening the letter from the twins, then looked at his watch; he was supposed to be down in the duelling room by now. "That'll have to wait," he murmured, tucking the letter inside his book and leaving them on the armchair. "See you, Moony!"

"Have fun, don't die," Remus called back nonchalantly, already engrossed in a book. Harry snorted.

Snape hadn't nearly killed him in at least a week now. Harry still needed the occasional Healing charm or potion by the end of his lesson, but he was getting a whole lot better. To his surprise, Snape was waiting for him in the entrance hall. "Follow me."

Instead of turning to the duelling room, Snape led him through the kitchen and out onto the back patio, continuing across the expanse of grass. "Most of your battles will not be in duelling rooms, on level ground," Snape told him, striding past the swimming pool. "They will be in corridors, or side-streets, or on grass. There will be trees and potholes and houses and puddles, things that you will trip over or have to work around. Things you may be able to use to your advantage."

Harry's eyes widened a fraction when they hit the tree line and kept going. He'd never actually been into the woods out here yet. He'd never needed to.

Snape seemed to know where they were going, and eventually halted in a small clearing. “We duel here today,” he declared. “Use whatever you can to achieve your goals. Learn to think outside the box — you’re good at duelling, yes, but you’re also good at Transfiguration, and Charms. Winning isn’t about playing fair.”

“It’s about surviving,” Harry finished, familiar with the phrase by now. He flicked his wand into his hand, glancing around the clearing for anything that might be of use. A fallen branch, about ten feet behind Snape. The little muddy spot off to the left that could trip him up if Harry could nudge him in that direction. Trees that would make good coverage. This was much more Harry’s style.

They bowed, and the duel began.

....

It was one of those rare times that Harry was left with only Snape in the house. Remus had been guilted into staying at headquarters for dinner, so the table at Seren Du was much quieter. Harry didn’t mind too much, though. At least until Snape almost dropped his fork. His hand went to his forearm, and Harry’s heart sank. “He’s Calling you now?” Snape nodded.

“It’s stronger than usual; this must be urgent.” The Slytherin got to his feet, abandoning his half-eaten dinner. “I’ll be back when I can. Hopefully Remus will be home soon; if you need him sooner, send Ceri. Don’t practice any magic you can’t reverse.” A new warning, after Harry had accidentally stuck himself to the ceiling while practicing some of the spells he’d learnt from a lesson with Remus, and had waited there for an hour until Snape and Remus returned from their Order meeting.

“Be safe,” Harry said in return. Snape nodded sharply, then swept out of the room to retrieve his mask and robe. Harry didn’t watch him go; seeing the man dressed in Death Eater regalia made his stomach turn.

Harry finished his dinner morosely, though he perked up a little when Ceri offered him brownies and ice cream for dessert. It was a miracle they weren’t all Dudley-sized, honestly. When he was finished, he took himself up to his room. The living room always felt too quiet when he was the only one in it.

Unfortunately, no non-reversible magic counted out his animagus practice. He was starting to get partial transformations now, just a little bit at a time, but Remus was worried he’d transform in some horrible way when there was no one home to help him, so he’d made Harry promise he wouldn’t try if no one was in the house.

That left him with only a few options, but Harry was happy to take one of them. It had been a while since he’d worked on his wandless magic. He sat cross-legged in the centre of his bed, letting the tension flow out of his shoulders.

It was getting easier, the more he worked on his animagus transformation. Sirius said it was because he was getting used to accessing his core without a focus — the transformation was

technically just very advanced wandless magic. Harry just thought he was finally getting used to having *all* of his core available to him.

He started going through everything he could remember from second year Charms — he'd already nailed all his first year spells. The Freezing charm and the Engorgement charm came easy, but the Shrinking charm stuck a little bit for some reason. He glared at the rubber chicken (a remnant fake wand) that was currently the size of a small dog, lying on his bed. He nudged at his magic. The chicken began to shrink.

He was distracted by the sound of the front door opening, and leapt off the bed, hurrying down to see Remus in the hall. He deflated. "Harry, is everything alright?" Remus asked, not used to such an eager greeting. "Where's Severus?"

"He got Called," Harry explained. "I was hoping you were him."

Remus' smile faltered, and he cursed softly. "How long has he been gone?"

Harry checked his watch. "About an hour and a half," he replied. Remus relaxed a little.

"Good. We're not allowed to worry until it's been at least four hours, that's the rule," he insisted. Harry wondered how many times Remus had panicked before they'd had to implement that rule. How often he still worried, regardless.

"How was the Order meeting? And dinner? How is everyone?"

Remus hung his cloak up on the hook, walking with Harry up to the living room. Ceri had hot chocolate waiting when they arrived. "The meeting was fine; Arthur and Kingsley are a little worried about the movement of some of the known Voldemort supporters within the Ministry, but they haven't done anything overt yet. Dinner was as it always is."

"Loud and chaotic?" Harry said knowingly, earning a brief grin.

"Quite that, yes. Tonks sent a whole block of knives flying, it was just Kingsley's quick reflexes that saved it all. Bill nearly lost an eye in the process," Remus added, making Harry snort. He was so curious about the other members of the Order, the ones he didn't know. As much as he loved being at Seren Du and never wanted to leave, part of him wanted Dumbledore to make the decision to move him to headquarters, just so he could meet all these people. And see the Weasleys again, of course.

As they drank their hot chocolate, Remus told him about some new products the twins were working on, and how furious Mrs Weasley was about it all. Harry let him talk; it was better than sitting waiting in anxious silence for Snape to come home.

Harry scar began to ache a little bit, but in the way it did when Voldemort was happy. A few moments later, the front door opened. Remus spilled a little of his hot chocolate. They both jumped up and headed for the stairs.

Snape didn't look hurt, and Harry let out a quiet sigh of relief, watching Remus run towards the man and run hands over his shoulders. His nostrils flared, trying to sniff out any hidden

injuries with his werewolf senses. “I’m fine,” Snape insisted softly, his voice gentle in the way it only ever was with Remus, and only sometimes; when he thought they were alone, or when Remus seemed particularly vulnerable.

“He’s happy,” Harry commented, grimacing against the pain in his forehead. “What happened?”

“He’s discovered that the full prophecy about you was recorded and put in the Department of Mysteries,” Snape answered, eyes dull. “He’s going to start going after it.”

“The Department of Mysteries? Isn’t that, like, impossible to get in?”

“Not to get into, but to navigate, yes. Unless you’re an Unspeakable, you’ll be hard pressed to find your way around,” Snape confirmed. Harry was glad to see the man’s hands weren’t trembling around his discarded mask; he hadn’t been Crucio’ed tonight, then. “I’ll go see Dumbledore in the morning, but this doesn’t bode well.” His eyes were fixed on Harry as he said that, and Harry raised an eyebrow. “Only those who are the subject of a prophecy can touch a recorded version of it.”

And the prophecy Voldemort wanted... “Shit,” Harry said. Snape nodded. “Well, at least I have a warning, now. Stay away from the Ministry.” If Harry didn’t go there to take it, then Voldemort himself would have to go into the Ministry to get it, and that was unlikely to happen.

He could see Snape begin to lean heavier on Remus, and cleared his throat. “I’m going to bed. I’ll see you both in the morning.” He knew they had some sort of routine for nights like this, just like they had routines for before and after the full moon. Harry didn’t want to intrude on any of their private stuff. He hurried back up the stairs, briefly ducking into the living room to retrieve his abandoned hot chocolate before heading to his room.

So Voldemort finally had a plan. Harry wondered if Dumbledore would tell him the prophecy now that they knew Voldemort wanted it. Or, indeed, if he would tell Harry anything at all about what Voldemort was up to. As far as they were all concerned, Harry was stuck in Privet Drive with zero information and zero contact with the wizarding world.

Knowledge was power, and Harry had more knowledge than Dumbledore would ever be able to guess.

.-.-.-.

Harry’s fifteenth birthday crept up on him. It was the first time he’d almost forgotten to stay up until midnight; he’d been so busy training, and then he’d managed to turn his hair red while working on his animagus transformation, and he’d just lost track of the day. It was only when he was getting ready for bed that he saw the date on his alarm clock and remembered.

Nevertheless, he woke up early and surrounded by owls, all jostling for space as they offered their burdens to him. Harry laughed, setting about releasing the packages one by one. Sweets and books and a new passworded journal, a Tutshill Tornadoes pennant from Cho — forever trying to lure him away from the Harpies — and even Fleur and Viktor had sent him presents!

It was by far the most Harry had ever been given on his birthday, and he wasn't even done yet!

Full of excitement, he bounded down the stairs and beamed when he saw Sirius at the breakfast table. "I figured if there's ever a time I can get away with sulking in my room the whole day, it's your birthday," the animagus teased, opening his arms for a hug. "Happy birthday, kiddo!"

Instead of waiting his turn for a hug, Remus merely wrapped his arms around both of them, kissing Harry's hair. "Happy birthday." He let go, nudging Harry to sit down in front of his plate of pancakes, overloaded with cream and fruit. "What do you want to do today, Harry?"

Harry bit his lip; he'd been hoping one of them might tell him about a surprise, like last year. "What are my options?"

"Same as usual," Remus replied, shrugging. "Flying, swimming, playing with Buckbeak. Maybe a trip to the cinema, if we're careful." Harry tried not to let his face fall.

"Or you could stay here and wait for your visitors to arrive," Snape drawled from behind his copy of the *Prophet*, eyes glittering.

Harry lit up, practically bouncing in his seat. There were only two people who would visit Seren Du. Sirius laughed. "I think that's decided it," he teased, making Harry blush. "It's fine, it's fine — you'd rather spend your birthday with your *boyfriend*, we get it."

Suddenly, Harry wondered if it was a good idea to have Draco over, with Sirius and Remus around. The teasing was bad enough when it was just Harry talking to them about the Slytherin.

Pretending his cheeks weren't as red as the strawberries on his plate, he wolfed down his breakfast. "They should be here in half an hour or so," Sirius declared, a wave of his wand summoning a stack of wrapped presents as soon as Ceri cleared the table. "Just enough time to give you these."

Opening presents in front of the three men was slightly less awkward than last year, now he was a little more used to them spoiling him. Defence books, some prank items, and a set of duelling robes that had to have cost a pretty penny. "This is brilliant, thank you guys," Harry gushed, beaming when Sirius ruffled his hair.

"Only the best for our pup turning fifteen! Love you, kiddo. Let Ceri put those away, let's go wait outside for your *boyfriend*." The dog animagus laughed, dodging the elbow Harry aimed at his ribs. Nonetheless, Harry followed him outside to the front drive, wandlessly summoning a bright red rubber bone from a few feet away. He'd bought it as a joke present for Sirius' last birthday, only for the man to become surprisingly attached to the thing. Harry flung it across the grass, watching his godfather transform mid-stride and go bounding after it.

Padfoot's inky fur gleamed in the summer sunlight; even as a dog, his improvement in the last year was obvious. Sirius hardly even looked like a man who had seen Azkaban anymore

— if not for the shadows in his eyes and the tension in his shoulders, you'd never guess.

Indeed, all four of them were looking miles healthier than they had this time last year. Harry had caught Snape grumbling about needing to buy new trousers thanks to Ceri's cooking, and Remus teasing him that he was no longer two-dimensional. As for the werewolf himself, between his peace with his inner wolf and the training he was helping Harry with, he was broader in the shoulders and hiding some impressive muscles beneath his cardigans and mild-mannered smile.

Harry was just glad Snape had stopped leaving Nutrient potions in pointedly innocent places for him to find. He knew he would never be as tall or stocky as his father, not after his childhood, but the Potions Master's expertise had corrected far more than Harry had ever thought possible. He actually looked his age, now!

So caught up in his introspection of how far they'd come in a year, Harry almost missed the crack of apparition signalling the arrival of their guests. He and Padfoot both turned their heads towards the noise, the dog dropping his toy and transforming back to a man in an instant — not quite quick enough to hide what he'd been doing from his smirking cousin.

"I always wanted a dog when we were children," she teased by way of greeting, leaning in to kiss Sirius' cheek. "Seren Du is treating you well, cousin. I'm glad to see it."

"You're always welcome to come share the benefits," Sirius replied, grey eyes scanning the woman in concern. "Pardon my saying so, but you look like you could use it." Indeed, Narcissa Malfoy was as perfectly presented as always, but she hadn't bothered to glamour over the dark circles below her eyes, and she seemed a little thinner in the cheeks. Harry felt a small spark of pride to see the dragon necklace he'd bought her sitting at her throat.

"My lord husband is putting my hosting skills to the test this summer," she said primly. "I can't say I approve of his choice of houseguests."

Beside her, Draco flinched minutely. Harry reached for him, not even hesitating to pull him into a chaste kiss despite their audience. "I'm glad you're okay," he murmured, hugging the blond tightly. He felt Draco's shoulders slump, the taller boy relaxing against him for just a second.

"You, too. Happy birthday."

Narcissa squeezed Harry's shoulder, smiling fondly at the pair. "Many happy returns, Harry, darling. I'm glad we were able to get away for the day — though I think Draco might've run away and come here by himself regardless."

Her son blushed, and Harry grinned.

"Why don't you boys go hit the quidditch pitch for a little while?" Sirius suggested. His gaze kept returning to Narcissa, his worry obvious. Harry figured he probably wanted to talk to her privately.

"Yeah, okay." Slipping his hand into Draco's, Harry turned towards the pitch, while the pair of Blacks strolled back to the front door. Draco's shoulder bumped against his.

"It's good to see you," he said softly. "You look good."

Harry would've blushed, if he wasn't reminded of the last time Draco had seen him; on the train home from Hogwarts, still raw from Cedric's death and terrified Sirius wouldn't be able to find a way to get him safely away from the Dursleys'. "I've been able to get some rest," he said eventually.

Draco snorted. "I could do with a bit of that." He did look like he hadn't been sleeping well. Harry squeezed his hand.

"We don't have to fly. We can just sit, if you want."

"No, no." Draco untangled their fingers, drawing his wand and his shrunken broom from his pocket, resizing it in one fluid motion. "I've hardly been able to fly all summer. It's... not always safe, to be outside the house." His lips twisted in a sneer. "Not always safe to be inside, either."

Harry's heart clenched painfully. Here he'd been enjoying his freedom, and poor Draco had been dealing with a nightmare made reality. "Come here for a second." He nudged the broom from Draco's hand, winding his arms around the blond's lithe hips. Automatically, Draco's arms came around Harry's shoulders, holding him close. He was tense, up until the moment Harry tucked his chin into the hollow of Draco's neck. A beat, two, then the Slytherin finally let go of his rigid posture, slumping into Harry with the quietest of sighs.

"It's good to see you," Draco repeated, barely louder than a whisper. "I've missed you."

"Me too," Harry breathed, closing his eyes to take in Draco's heartbeat against his cheek. Merlin, he'd needed this. He wished Draco could stay all summer; even when Harry had to leave Seren Du to go play Gryffindor Golden Boy, at least his boyfriend would be safe from the monster in his home. But it would raise too many questions. Draw too many lines they weren't ready to draw yet.

The two boys stood there for a while, just taking each other in, until Draco finally drew in a deep breath and dropped his arms. Harry kissed him, and when he pulled back they were both smiling.

"Let's chase the snitch for a bit, shall we?" Draco suggested. "We can talk after lunch."

They had so much to talk about, but Draco didn't look like he was ready for that, and quite honestly Harry wasn't either. He'd much rather just fly with his boyfriend on his birthday, and pretend they were normal, just for a little while.

.-. .

Lunch was timed perfectly; just as the bell rang, the clouds that had been gathering all morning began to let loose their burden — Harry and Draco were both a little waterlogged by

the time they made it inside. Snape made quick work of that with a couple of Drying charms, squeezing Draco's shoulder. "It's good to see you well, Draco," he murmured, his tone warm in that way only Remus and Draco warranted. Draco looked a little brighter for seeing the man, and a curl of guilt rose within Harry; here he'd been monopolising Draco's godfather, too. He was the worst boyfriend!

Ceri had prepared a feast fit for royalty, with another masterpiece of a cake; this one covered in small fondant foxes, which prompted an explanation for the two Malfoys.

"Corrupting him further, are you?" Narcissa remarked to Sirius, who grinned unrepentantly.

"That's so *cool*," Draco said, envy in his eyes. "Uncle Severus, can I—"

"I planned to brew the potion for you once you had returned to school," Snape cut him off smoothly. 'When it's safer' went unsaid, but the delay didn't bother Draco. He beamed, ignoring his mother's eye-roll.

"If I had known you'd start taking godparenting advice from this cretin, I might have protested more at your choice in companion," the Malfoy matriarch grumbled. It was all for show; Harry knew if she really didn't want Draco learning, Snape never would have mentioned it. Quite frankly, any advantage Draco could have would be worth it.

"And here I thought I was your favourite family member," Sirius mock-gasped.

"Andromeda remains my favourite, as you well know," Narcissa replied. "Regardless of whether or not we're on speaking terms." Her grey eyes were sad. Sirius cleared his throat.

"About that. Recent events have put me back in touch with her daughter; she's an auror, you know." From the look on her face, Harry didn't doubt Narcissa knew exactly what her niece was doing with her life. "Obviously we've had to be fairly careful how we talk, with certain manipulative old windbags floating about." Remus snorted. "She helped me get in touch with Andi again. Explain my innocence and all."

Almost imperceptibly, Narcissa's grip tightened around her cutlery. "Sirius, I can't—"

"I'm not saying you have to," Sirius continued. "I'm just letting you know I'm working on sorting out how close to Dumbledore that side of the family is. I never could tell how much of a hand he had in her running off with Ted — not that I begrudge her that, he's a top bloke. But if you want me to pass on a message once I'm certain she can be trusted, I'd be happy to."

"I'll think about it," Narcissa said eventually, lips pursed. "Let's not do anything reckless, though. There's far too much at stake."

"Andi would rip the world in half for her littlest sister and you know it," Sirius argued gently, softening in the barest smile. "You need an out that can't be traced back to me, Cissa. Just in case the boys end up public; I'd be the first place your husband would look."

"We're being careful," Harry piped up indignantly.

“I know, pup, but things happen. You always need a back-up plan.”

“I appreciate your concern, but I have it handled,” Narcissa declared. “I’m worth far more at my husband’s side than I would be cowering behind my sister’s skirts.” Her smirk was cold, and every inch a Slytherin. “I’ve always been a better dueller than Lucius, at any rate.”

That drew a short laugh from Sirius. “And he knows it,” he muttered proudly. “I know you want to help, but all the same... I think it would be worth getting back in touch.”

“Andromeda would be pleased to hear you weren’t as lost as she feared,” Snape said, quiet voice cutting through the tension between the cousins. Narcissa’s expression faltered.

“...I suppose,” she said eventually. All of a sudden, she cleared her throat, and was smiling once more. “How rude of us, carrying on this dreadful conversation over Harry’s birthday meal. I do apologise. Though I feel you’ve hardly noticed, with those moon-eyes you’re giving my son.” This smirk was equally Slytherin as the last, but much warmer, a playful glint in her eyes. Harry ducked his head.

“Mother!” Draco complained, his pale cheeks turning crimson. “Leave him alone.”

“And miss my one chance of the year to watch my darling boy and his beau be so smitten?” she teased, smoothing her son’s hair down with a saccharine smile. “I believe it’s my right as a mother, after watching the pair of you be so utterly oblivious last year.”

Harry wondered if it was possible to explode from too much blood to the face. He looked to his godfathers for help, but knew they would be useless. Sirius’ grin spelled danger.

“Does my bitter old heart good to see young love,” he sighed dramatically. “Harry’s been positively heartbroken, unable to write to his boyfriend all summer. It’s torture, watching him sigh away at the window, yearning for his paramour.”

“Sirius!” Harry let out a strangled yelp, eyes wide. He didn’t dare look Draco — or anyone — in the eye. “None of that is true!” Sure, he’d hated not being able to write to Draco. And maybe he’d spent more time than he should have worrying about how Draco was faring with Voldemort in his house. But there had been no *sighing at windows*.

“I do hope Draco has been a little more discreet in his pining, considering your company,” Snape drawled, dark eyes alight with amusement. Great, now even *Snape* was getting in on the teasing!

“I haven’t been pining!” Draco protested. “And I bet you were worse when you were my age. You’re with a Gryffindor too, you know.”

“But my Gryffindor knew where I lived in the summer, and knew that my parents hardly cared where I was,” came Snape’s easy retort. Remus’ smile widened at the possessive, going starry-eyed like he always did when reminiscing about the good parts of his teenage years. Harry could hardly imagine it; Remus coming to visit Snape in his muggle town, sneaking away together for privacy over the summer. He grimaced — he didn’t *want* to imagine it.

“We’re just glad you’re happy, pup,” Sirius said, eyes wide with feigned innocence. “After all those nights you spent gushing about Draco to me before you got together, pretending you only liked him as a friend, wondering if he would ever like you back—“ He stopped talking abruptly; mostly due to his nose turning into a bright green teapot. “Oi! Little blighter!”

“Excellent wandless transfiguration, Harry. Well done,” Remus complimented. “Though if you think it’s going to stop him talking, you’ll have to try a lot harder, I’m afraid.”

“Narcissa, did I ever tell you about when Harry told me of his first kiss?” Sirius continued loudly, voice a little nasal thanks to the crockery on his face.

“We’re leaving!” Harry declared, jumping to his feet. With a wide-eyed look at Draco, he grabbed the blond’s hand.

“Oh, but you haven’t finished your cake!” Narcissa protested, admirably stifling her laughter. Harry reached to snatch his plate, Draco’s half-eaten cake levitating over to rest next to his.

“We’re going upstairs.” Cake in one hand and boyfriend in the other, Harry made for the door, his blush starting to feel permanent.

“Keep the door open!” Sirius called in their wake, cackling gleefully. Harry groaned, picking up his pace. Why had he thought it was a good idea to have Draco over with Sirius around??

He couldn’t bear to look the Slytherin in the eye until they were far away from the kitchen, almost to Harry’s room. Then he was blushing for an entirely different reason, Sirius’ parting words echoing in his head. What would Draco think, Harry dragging him up to his bedroom?

“I’m sorry,” he stuttered, skidding to a halt. “We can go to the other sitting room, or somewhere — we can’t eat cake in the library, but I—“ He was cut off by a kiss, Draco smiling against his mouth. They were both still blushing when they parted.

“It’s fine.” Draco pushed the door to Harry’s room open, taking the cake from the Gryffindor’s grasp. “You couldn’t have picked up some forks on your way out?”

Harry rolled his eyes, transfiguring a pair of forks from a couple of quills on his desk. “I was a little busy trying to escape before Sirius said something that made me want to crawl in a hole and die.”

The two boys made themselves comfortable on the bed, plate of cake between them. “I should’ve known he would pull something like that. He’s been teasing me about you for ages,” Harry groused.

“You can’t help it that you’re blinded by my good looks,” Draco reassured airily. “You’re only human.”

“Oh, don’t you start,” the Gryffindor muttered. “You’re just as bad as I am.” He refused to be embarrassed about fancying his boyfriend, but Sirius’ teasing was on a whole other level.

Draco grinned, shuffling over, careful to avoid knocking the empty cake plate. “I am,” he agreed shamelessly. “I’m absolutely awful about how much I’ve missed you this summer.

Positively Gryffindor about it. You've ruined my reputation."

Harry rolled his eyes, grinning as he let Draco crowd his space. "Your reputation is doing just fine," he argued, sliding a hand into the soft blond strands at the nape of his neck. "But it's nice to hear I'm not the only sappy Gryffindor here."

Draco hummed, kissing him in lieu of a reply. Harry shifted them to get more comfortable, pulling Draco half on top of him. He sighed into the kiss, hand moving to cradle Draco's waist, their legs tangling together. All of a sudden, Draco froze, pulling back. Harry frowned. "What's wrong?"

"Harry, I— about what your godfather said."

Harry almost groaned at the reminder of Sirius' embarrassing words, wondering which part Draco objected to most. Then he saw the look in the blond's eyes, hesitant and shy, and comprehension slammed into him.

They were in his bedroom. On his bed. Alone.

His pulse ticked up a notch— was Draco suggesting... what was he suggesting? They'd never been alone together like this before. Somewhere that wasn't a classroom, or a hidden corner of the school where they might be found at any minute. Somewhere with a bed.

"Everything we've done has been great, truly—" Oh, Draco was talking again, Harry should probably pay attention. "— I just don't know if I—I mean, things are going— maybe we shouldn't—"

"Draco," Harry interrupted, brows furrowing. Draco was getting more frustrated with every word he tripped over, his body tense and uncomfortable. "Talk to me."

"Can we maybe just slow it down a bit?" the Slytherin blurted all at once, then bit his lip. "Fuck. I mean, just because we're up here in your room, doesn't mean we have to, y'know. Do anything." He wouldn't meet Harry's gaze now. The Gryffindor frowned.

"Do you not want me to kiss you?" he asked, suddenly worried. He tried to untangle them, but Draco held tight.

"No!" he blurted. "No, no, this is good. I just... oh, bugger it all," he muttered under his breath. "I know you've had that book, from George, and it's got all sorts of... *stuff* in it. But I—I don't think I'm ready to go any further than we have just yet. Even if now would be perfect for it, because we're here and alone and even though Sirius was teasing I bet he wouldn't even care if we did shut the door, and my mother just wants me to be happy, but all the same I can't—I don't—Merlin, I can't *think* when I'm looking at you like this."

Harry might be an idiot Gryffindor with blood flowing to lots of places other than his brain right now, but even he could put those pieces together. He frowned, stroking the back of Draco's neck. "Draco, breathe," he soothed. "We don't have to do anything. I'm sorry if you thought—if I was pushing, or something, I didn't mean to. I don't think I'm ready either," he admitted. He'd read the book cover to cover at this point, and maybe in the privacy of his bed

at night he liked to *imagine* doing some of those things with Draco, but they hadn't done more than take their shirts off and rub off against each other so far, and the thought of getting naked together was... overwhelming, to say the least.

"Oh," Draco said softly, the wind taken from his sails. "You don't want to?"

"At some point, yeah," Harry murmured. "But not right now. I swear, I wasn't thinking anything like that when I brought you up here. I just really wanted to be with you, without all the teasing and stuff."

Little by little, Draco began to relax. His body pressed against Harry's, but it wasn't done to arouse. Harry adjusted them until he was on his back, Draco curled up under his arm. "You know you're always allowed to say no, right?" he said, tracing gentle patterns on the Slytherin's arm. Draco made a quiet, noncommittal noise, but didn't say anything.

Harry had once had a conversation with George, after he'd admitted he and Draco were together. It had started out embarrassing, as those sorts of conversations often did, but George had talked to him about consent and boundaries, and how it was only worth doing things if all parties were equally into it and involved. The older boy had insisted Harry should never feel pressured into anything, and he'd prank Draco for a week if the Slytherin ever tried.

He didn't think Draco had anyone like that, to have that conversation with him. Snape, maybe. But Harry didn't see that happening; certainly not in the same way George had done things. And Slytherins were a little weird about relationships and stuff; it was always a power play, to some degree. Maybe they didn't have chats about consent at all.

His heart ached, and he held Draco tighter, kissing his hair. "I swear, I'll never make you do anything you don't want to," he promised. "Even if we're in the middle of something and you change your mind, just tell me and I'll stop, okay? We can do something different, or hell, I'll go take a cold shower or something." He tried to get a laugh from his boyfriend, but barely managed a smile and an eye roll. "There's no rush to do things. I don't care if the other boys act like it's some sort of competition or whatever." The Slytherins were probably even worse than the Gryffindor boys for bragging about 'how far they'd been'. "They're all going so quickly, I doubt they really know what they're doing, anyway," he joked, and *that* got a quiet chuckle. Finally, Draco's stormy grey gaze met his. Harry smiled. "I just like being with you. Even if we just cuddle. Though I really, really like kissing you," he admitted, a little bashful.

"Kissing is good," Draco agreed, his fingers curling in the hem of Harry's t-shirt.

"We've got plenty of time to get to everything else," Harry insisted. He resolutely ignored the little voice in the back of his head telling him he'd die before graduation, that the war would get to him quicker than he'd like. That was no reason to push things. He'd rather die a virgin than make Draco uncomfortable. "Right?"

Abruptly, he thought that maybe Draco wasn't thinking as long-term as Harry foolishly was; sure, he made comments sometimes, but he'd never *really* said that he expected anything like that.

"I can see you panicking," Draco declared with amusement, kissing Harry firmly. "I wouldn't go into something as reckless and idiotic as dating the bloody Boy-Who-Lived if I wasn't in it for the long haul. You're stuck with me, Potter." There was a soft expression on his face as he spoke, one that made Harry's heart *ache* with words he hadn't said, words he desperately hoped Draco thought too, words he wasn't brave enough to voice between them yet.

"Then we can go as slow as we want," he said instead. "It'll be worth the journey, when we get there, and we know each other better." Every time things got more heated between them, he discovered a new part of Draco that made the blond moan, a sensitive spot or a way to touch him *just* right. The longer they took with that, the better it would be when things... progressed.

Draco's eyes darkened, and he tilted his head up, capturing Harry's lips with a ferocity that put a firm end to the talking part of that conversation.

For the first time all summer, Harry felt like he could truly breathe. Sure, it had been great having Remus and Sirius to talk to about Cedric and Voldemort and his fears, and they had gone a long way to helping him work through his grief. But lying there with Draco, first kissing and then talking quietly, cuddled together on his bed, Harry could feel the ragged edges of that hole in his chest begin to knit themselves together again.

Eventually the conversation faded out — Harry losing the words to talk about his emotions regarding what had happened in the graveyard; Draco not wanting to taint a nice day with discussion of the Dark Lord invading his home. Neither of them was truly *okay*, but there was nothing they could do to change that. Not yet. Summer would be over in a month, and then they'd have a whole other set of problems to deal with. They could worry about them together then; this was the last time they'd see each other for a while.

"Do you think the Defence teacher will be any good this year?" Draco asked absently, shifting up to look Harry in the eye without getting a crick in his neck. Harry scoffed.

"With the current track record? Unlikely," he muttered. "Merlin knows how half our year will pass their OWLs."

"Don't say that word," Draco protested. "It's all Father's been able to talk about this summer. Exams this, OWLs that, I'd better do the Malfoy name proud with my results." He grimaced. "I can't wait until it's all over. Exams, school, this bloody war. Then maybe I'll be able to live my own damned life."

Harry pursed his lips. He didn't often dare think about all that. What came after.

"Maybe I'll join you in professional quidditch," Draco continued. "Just to piss off father. We'd have to play on the same team, though; I've heard the schedules are a nightmare."

A warmth settled in Harry's chest. There was no doubt in Draco's voice about them staying together, after everything. No hint that Harry might not make it through.

"We can't both be seekers on the same team, though," he pointed out, deciding to go with Draco's fantasy; they could pretend they were normal teenage wizards, with no war and no

prophecies and just their schooling to get through. They could dream.

“Don’t be daft; I’d be a chaser,” Draco retorted without missing a beat. “I know better than to think I can beat you to the snitch; you beat Viktor Krum, for Salazar’s sake. The only reason I’m seeker for Slytherin is that there were no openings for chaser in our second year. Plus I was a little idiot who foolishly thought I could beat you with a faster broom.”

“Then why didn’t you switch in third year?” Harry asked, sure that one of the Slytherin chasers had graduated at the end of their second. Draco’s gaze turned sheepish.

“Riling you up was fun,” he admitted. “I didn’t want to let anyone else have that pleasure.”

Harry smirked. “Possessive little git,” he teased fondly. “Staking your claim before you even realised you fancied me.”

“You’ve always been mine, Potter,” Draco agreed. Harry’s throat tightened — how very true that was.

Pushing past the wave of unexpected emotion, Harry rolled on top of Draco, grinning smugly. “Maybe you’ll get lucky in this year’s match against me,” he teased.

“Maybe you’ll get distracted looking at my arse,” Draco retorted, even as his hands moved to cup Harry’s.

“Draco, darling, I have a Firebolt,” came Harry’s swift reply. “You’ll be the one looking at *my* arse. And remembering exactly what happened after I beat Viktor Krum to the snitch.” That brief moment behind the greenhouse was still one of Harry’s fondest memories — and the beginning of many a late-night fantasy.

“Then if you do win, you’ll know it was because I was too busy imagining getting you out of your quidditch robes.” They weren’t trying to rile each other up again, but Harry couldn’t help but grin against Draco’s jawbone.

“Excuses, excuses,” he whispered, kissing the soft spot beneath Draco’s earlobe.

“Maybe I won’t go professional,” Draco continued, fingers tracing the ridges of Harry’s spine. “Healer training is best done straight out of school, after all. I’ll let you go chasing the snitch, and I’ll be waiting to heal all the bruises when you get whacked by bludgers.”

Harry closed his eyes, the picture forming in his head; coming home after a long day of training, kissing Draco hello and letting the blond fuss over his minor injuries. Maybe they’d cook dinner together — or rather, Draco would watch Harry cook, because Merlin knew the spoiled little pureblood had never stood at a stove in his *life*. But Harry would teach him. They’d figure it out.

“That sounds really good,” he confessed, voice going somewhat hoarse with the power of the emotion welling in his chest. “We’ll get a house, somewhere in London, because you’ll be working longer days than I will and I can apparate or floo to wherever I’m training. We’ll ward it so your mum and our godfathers can’t come over unless we invite them, or Sirius will

be a nosy bugger. Maybe on the days I'm not training, and you're not too busy, I can bring you lunch and we can eat it together outside the hospital."

Harry hadn't been to St Mungo's, but there had to be a park nearby or something. A tree they could sit under, sharing sandwiches on warm summer days, before Draco had to get back to another endless shift of healer training.

In his head, the dream went further — Draco would become a fully qualified healer, one of the best young healers St Mungo's had seen in decades. Harry would play for England, and take them all the way to the World Cup Final at least once. And when he was done with quidditch, either through injury or boredom, maybe he'd get a Defence mastery. He could write textbooks; something that would allow him to be at home with their kids. However many they had. Hell, maybe he'd even teach, once they were all old enough to be at Hogwarts.

Did Draco even want kids?

He wasn't brave enough to ask.

"Sounds like a solid plan to me," Draco murmured. "We've got it all figured out." He sighed, breath tickling Harry's cheek. "Just got to get a sodding Dark Lord out of the way, first. And my father."

"If your father tries to stop us, I'll hex him," Harry assured, not wanting to touch on the whole Dark Lord matter. He felt Draco frown.

"That's not what I'm worried about," the blond dismissed. Harry caught his eye with a quizzical look, and Draco's expression darkened. "He raised me, Harry. I know I've had mother, but... you remember what I was like, before. I wanted to be just like him." His face twisted in a grimace. "Part of me thinks I always will be, in the end."

"You were twelve, Draco. We're all idiots at twelve."

"But that's twelve years of idolising a monster. Twelve years of him shaping me into the perfect little pureblood heir. The perfect soldier for his *master*. You think I'm better, but I'm not, deep down. I'm exactly what he raised me to be. I'll always be a Malfoy."

"You're a Black, and you know it," Harry argued without hesitation. "Don't pretend your mum hasn't raised you, too. You're a Slytherin, Draco, that doesn't make you your father. Hell, Snape's more your dad than Lucius Malfoy, in the ways that matter. And look at him — he's certainly not the picture of a light wizard, but he's still a good man. He still has the love of a good man, and a family."

"He just had to do awful things to get there."

"And he'll be damned if he lets you follow in his footsteps," Harry pointed out. He refused to let Draco believe, even for a second, that he might have anything but blood in common with Lucius Malfoy. "Don't think like that, Draco. You're a good person."

Draco sighed, pushing Harry's fringe back off his forehead. "I wish I could have your optimism, Scarhead."

Harry grinned, leaning up to steal a kiss. "I'm a Gryffindor, it's what we do," he joked. "Just trust me. Do you really think I'd let you end up like your dad?" *Do you really think I'd love you if I thought you could be?*

The words were on the tip of his tongue, but he held them in. He didn't want the first time he said it to be during such a grim conversation.

Besides, he felt like Draco knew anyway.

The blond settled under Harry's body. "Promise me you won't," he pleaded. "Promise me you'll stop me becoming like him."

In the back of his mind, Harry's memory flashed back to earlier in the summer, sitting distraught on the kitchen floor and looking up at Remus and Snape. *Promise me you won't let me become like him.*

"Easiest promise I'll ever keep," he rasped, echoing Remus' words with his heart thudding against his ribs.

Maybe between the lot of them, all those promises would be kept.

Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

CW for non-graphic discussions of a medical emergency/hospitalisation, discussion of death of a teenager.

It tore at Harry's heart to watch Draco and his mother leave — the only bright spot was that Harry had convinced Sirius to lend Draco his two-way mirror, just for the rest of the summer. He saw Sirius regularly, and always had Remus or Ceri to get him if he needed him. Harry couldn't bear to send Draco back home, knowing who was there, if he didn't have a way to communicate.

With his birthday a fond memory, and a new determination burning in his chest — a new fantasy in his mind, of life with Draco after the war was over — Harry threw himself into his training, unsure how much longer he'd have before Dumbledore deigned to *allow* him to leave his relatives', and his peace would be broken.

Unfortunately, Harry had no idea how quickly that day would come.

Only a few days after his birthday, Harry was training with Remus; Snape had been summoned by Dumbledore for the day. Duelling with Remus was always an interesting experience; he had a totally different style to Snape, but was clearly just as knowledgable, and now he'd stopped worrying about hurting Harry he was quite the challenging opponent. Harry knew the man was still holding back, but it was less than before. There was progress.

Suddenly, the door slammed open — both of them turned their wands instinctively towards the noise, lowering them at the sight of Snape. He looked grave, his lips in a thin line.
“Potter, you need to go to your relatives, immediately.”

Harry's heart sank. “Do they know I'm missing?” Had someone finally decided to investigate the fact that he never left his room?

“Not yet, but they will soon. The Ministry will be there any minute.”

Staring up at Snape's dark eyes, Harry felt his pulse begin to race. “The Ministry?” Had there been an attack on the house?

“There's no easy way to say this. Someone set a dementor loose near your relatives' home, no doubt hoping it would find you. Instead it found your cousin.”

The words echoed in Harry's mind like he was underwater. He barely registered Remus swearing quietly, placing a hand on Harry's shoulder. A dementor, in Little Whinging?

“Dudley? Is he...?” He didn’t need to finish. Snape’s face said it all. “He’s been kissed, hasn’t he?” His stomach lurched.

“I’m afraid so. I wish there was time to explain, but you need to be back in your bedroom before anyone comes to find you.”

“We won’t leave you there long, cub,” Remus assured, wrapping an unresponsive Harry in a tight hug. “I promise.”

Harry couldn’t do anything more than splutter out a few weak agreements, before Ceri appeared with huge worried eyes and took him by the hand. In an instant, the duelling room of Seren Du was replaced by his old bedroom at Privet Drive.

He’d been back a few times, to sit at the window so that his watchers didn’t worry he was dead. The Dursleys had no idea about any of it.

Faintly, he could hear the TV on downstairs; some singing competition show that Petunia liked to watch. His heart thudded in his ears. Did they know yet? Were they even there?

A moment later, Ceri reappeared with his school trunk, and a few other things she settled around the room to make it look like he’d been living there. Harry almost laughed; no one who looked at this room could imagine he was comfortable there, regardless of how much of his stuff was lying about.

“The door is being unlocked, Master Harry,” she assured quietly, wringing her hands. “Call for Ceri if yous be needing anythings.” With a short bow, she disappeared, and Harry was alone.

He stood, in the middle of the room, feeling utterly bereft.

What had just happened??

He didn’t have time to think for long. The doorbell rang through the house, and he swallowed as his throat suddenly grew dry. Carefully, he crept towards the door, cracking open the cat flap at the bottom and crouching to press his ear to the gap.

“Hello, Officer. Is everything alright?” Petunia had answered the door. She had the tone she used when anticipating a juicy bit of gossip. Harry almost gagged.

“Are you Petunia Dursley?” It was a female voice, barely audible over the TV from the living room. “I’m sorry, is your husband home?”

“What’s this all about? Vernon! Vernon, it’s the police!” Petunia’s shrill call rang out. Harry heard the creak and grunt of Vernon levering himself off the sofa, and the TV suddenly went silent.

“What?” Heavy footsteps; Vernon joining Petunia in the hall. “What do you want at this time of night?”

“My apologies, Mr Dursley. I’m afraid it’s about your son.”

"Is my Dudders in trouble? He's a good boy, Officer; if he's done anything, it's those awful friends of his, leading my poor boy astray," Petunia insisted immediately. The officer must have had a look on her face that gave away something, because Petunia let out a quiet whimper.

"I'm so sorry to tell you this, Mr and Mrs Dursley — your son was found in the underpass off Wisteria Walk, he seems to have had some sort of brain bleed. He's... he's unresponsive."

Petunia gasped in horror. Harry was utterly still, fingers clenched around the edge of the cat flap. If this was the muggle police, did the Ministry even know?? Snape seemed sure they did. Were they busy rounding up the dementor? Or was this police officer just an auror in disguise?

Through his aunt's sobbing, Harry heard snippets of the rest of the conversation; Vernon insisting they would head straight to the hospital, demanding to talk to a superior, asking who found Dudley. Just as Harry was about to sit up in case either of them came upstairs for something, he saw a flash of feathers by the window. Wide eyed, he scrambled across the room, opening the window quietly just in time for a medium-sized brown owl to swoop in and drop a letter on the bed.

It was just a scrap of parchment, a short missive in messy, rushed handwriting.

Harry,

Don't go anywhere. We're trying to figure out what happened. Whatever you do, don't leave the house.

Arthur

He couldn't help the derisive snort that left his lips. Don't leave the house? Was Mr Weasley not aware that, as far as the Order was concerned, Harry hadn't left the house all summer??

If he had been out of the house, maybe the dementor would've found him instead of Dudley. His stomach lurched again.

The owl left as soon as it delivered its letter, not waiting for a response. Harry sank onto the bed with shaking knees, curling his fingers around the ragged duvet.

Dudley had been Kissed by a dementor. He was... if not dead yet, then as good as.

All because Harry had been tucked away safe at Seren Du, where nobody could find him.

Part of him was relieved. If he'd been here, if it had been an ordinary summer like Dumbledore and the Order believed... he no doubt would have been right in the dementor's path. He could cast a Patronus, sure, but he wasn't allowed to do magic outside of school. He would've been expelled, or worse — the Dursleys hadn't always let him keep his wand in the summer.

Was that what whoever had sent the dementor had hoped would happen? They had to know he could defend himself against them; everyone at Hogwarts knew he could cast a Patronus

after the rumours floating around from third year, and he was sure they must have seen him use it against the boggart dementor in the maze during the Third Task. Had his attacker been hoping to get him expelled? His wand snapped, banned from Hogwarts — an easy target for Voldemort?

He looked up when another owl flew in through the still open window. This one was larger, and had a longer letter, though it too didn't stay for a reply.

Harry,

I'm so very sorry about what happened to your cousin. This is a truly terrible event, and rest assured I have people investigating the matter as we speak.

I have spoken to members of the Ministry who deal in covering up instances of magic use in front of muggles; due to the nature of the way Dudley was found, they have told the muggle officials the boy died of natural causes. The Ministry is also trying to bury this information amongst its people; I'm afraid Minister Fudge is still unwilling to see the truth of Voldemort's return, and refuses to believe someone other than the Ministry might have control over the dementors. It is being treated as an outlying incident, and no doubt will have vanished from record by the morning.

Stay inside the house, and don't do anything rash. A Ministry official will likely be by shortly to discuss your whereabouts and explain the truth to your aunt and uncle. Answer any questions they may have — you did nothing wrong here, Harry. This is all just a cruel and unfortunate case of poor timing.

I will keep you updated as the case progresses. Stay safe, and stay alert.

Sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore

Harry had to read the missive several times over, staring incredulously at the elaborate cursive.

A cruel and unfortunate case of poor timing?? His cousin was *soulless*. Someone had purposely tried to endanger Harry, and Dudley was dead as a result. Here Dumbledore was acting as if it was just a bit of a mix-up!

He snorted in disgust, shaking his head and tossing the letter aside. He wasn't remotely surprised the Ministry was trying to cover it all up. It wouldn't be great for Fudge's reputation if it got out that not only had a dementor gone on a jaunt far from Azkaban, but it had hunted down the Boy-Who-Lived and kissed a muggle in the process.

Abruptly, Harry realised that his hands were trembling, his breath coming short and fast. He tucked his knees up to his chest, trying to steady himself. He was fine, why was he panicking? The danger had passed — he'd never been in any danger to begin with! Only Dudley had.

Without even thinking about it, he fumbled a hand into his pocket, closing his fingers around the cold surface of the two-way mirror. He could call Sirius, see what was going on.

Wait, no. Sirius was no longer holding the mirror's partner.

He swallowed thickly. Usually he let Draco call him; it was safer that way. But... it was late, Draco would likely be in his room. Surely he could risk it? If he wasn't alone, he just wouldn't answer.

"Draco Malfoy," he whispered, bringing the mirror up to stare at it. He held his breath, not daring to blink, until staring back at him were worried grey eyes and a faint frown.

"Harry? I wasn't expecting your call, is everything alright? Where are you?" Draco's blond brows furrowed, and he tried to peer past Harry's head to figure out his surroundings.

"Draco," Harry choked out, watching his boyfriend grow alarmed.

"What's wrong?"

"My cousin. There was—he's—" Harry sucked in a sharp breath, and when he exhaled the whole story came spilling out. Draco listened, eyes getting wider and wider in horror.

"Sweet Salazar," he swore when Harry was finished. "Well. Thank fuck you weren't there."

"But if I had been, I could've saved him! I could've cast a Patronus!" Harry argued, the guilt welling within him.

"And been expelled for underage magic!" Draco retorted sharply. "If someone has enough clout in the Ministry to send a *dementor* after you, I bet they could easily make sure you were punished for defending yourself." A strange look flashed across his face. "I bet it was my father. He's got Fudge in his pocket, he could arrange something like this easily."

"Draco, no," Harry insisted. "Don't go down that road. There's plenty of people who want me dead, not just your dad." But he couldn't help the part of him that agreed; it would be very easy for Lucius Malfoy to have done this.

"I'll keep an ear out for any mention of it. If it was him, or one of his *friends*, no doubt they'll be upset to hear you're okay." Draco's face softened. "You are okay, aren't you? I mean, it's awful, but... your cousin was a terrible person. You weren't exactly close."

"Doesn't mean I wanted him dead," Harry spat.

"Of course not!" Draco agreed quickly. "I'm just saying, I'd rather him than you. And for all he's your blood family, it's not like it was Longbottom or the twins or anything."

Harry's heart twisted at the thought of any of his friends being in Dudley's position. No, Draco was right — while he wouldn't wish the dementor's kiss on his worst enemy, let alone his brute of a cousin, part of him was selfishly glad that no one he truly cared about had been harmed.

He couldn't take another Cedric, not so soon.

"Yeah. Yeah, I just... I was supposed to be here. Someone who wants me dead knows where I live." Clearly Dumbledore's fabled protections weren't all they were cracked up to be. How had none of his guard not noticed what was going on? A dementor was pretty easy to identify!

He opened his mouth to say something, but was cut off by the doorbell ringing once more. His heart dropped to his stomach. "That might be the Ministry. I need to go."

"Be careful," Draco urged. "Call me back when you can."

Harry cut the connection, slipping the mirror back in his pocket and keeping his wrist poised to remove his wand from his holster. He hurried downstairs, peeking through the window to see two men in robes. One was an auror, with the crest displayed on his chest; the other had plain black robes, and was stocky and narrow-eyed. Harry hoped for the neighbours' sake they had Notice-Me-Not charms up; the gossip hounds of Privet Drive would have *definitely* noticed the police presence at Number 4.

Harry opened the door, warily eyeing the two wizards in front of him.

"Mr Potter," the auror greeted with a nod. Harry realised it was the same man who had come to help arrest Rita Skeeter. Shacklebolt, wasn't it? He was an Order member! Sirius and the others had talked about him, he was sure of it. "I'm Auror Shacklebolt, and this is Mr Runcorn from the Misuse of Magic Department. May we come in?"

"I haven't used any magic," Harry blurted. Shacklebolt cracked a half-smile.

"We know, Mr Potter."

Harry stepped aside to let them in. Runcorn was scowling, a look of distaste on his face as he eyed the blatantly muggle hallway, the pictures of the Dursleys on the walls. "We won't be long," he said curtly, looking like he'd rather be anywhere else. "We simply need to know your whereabouts this evening."

"I've been home all day," Harry replied. It hit him suddenly that he probably wasn't supposed to know about what happened to Dudley. "What's going on? The police were here, they said my cousin was in hospital or something. Was... was it magic related?"

He watched Shacklebolt's face grow grim. "It was, I'm sorry to say. I don't know how to tell you this, Mr Potter, but earlier this evening a dementor found its way to Wisteria Walk, and attacked your cousin on his way home. He... he was Kissed. I'm sorry."

"*Found its way?*" Harry repeated, unable to help himself. "Like it was just *wandering* about? I thought dementors were supposed to stay in Azkaban!"

"It's none of your business what the dementors are doing," Runcorn snapped.

"It is if they're sucking the soul out of my cousin!" Harry argued. Shacklebolt held out a placating hand.

"I know this must be upsetting," he said, his voice calm and even. "I promise you, the Ministry is doing everything it can to get to the bottom of this situation." Harry doubted that. "We merely need to ask you some routine questions. You say you stayed home all day?"

"All day, every day," Harry confirmed, trying to keep most of the bite out of his tone. From what he knew, Shacklebolt was part of his guard; he would know that already. An unreadable look crossed the bald wizard's face.

"Right. You didn't notice anything unusual? A cold spell, flickering lights?"

"I didn't notice any of the usual signs of dementors, no." Harry folded his arms over his chest. "I had the lights off, anyway. I was trying to get an early night." An easy lie. The lightbulb in his room hadn't worked in years. The lights were always off.

"An *early night*, on a Saturday in the middle of summer?" Runcorn sneered.

"I don't sleep well, these days," Harry snapped in reply. "Nightmares." He thought he saw a smirk cross the man's face for the barest of moments. Shacklebolt, on the other hand, looked sympathetic.

"Understandable, after... what happened. Your aunt and uncle didn't notice anything?"

"Not that I know of. But I haven't spoken to them much this evening." If Shacklebolt *was* part of the Order — part of Harry's guard — then he likely knew about the difficult relationship between Harry and his relatives. But Harry refused to give Runcorn the satisfaction of any kind of insight into his home life. There was something about the man that put his back up, his magic itching in disgust. "What are they being told?"

"At the moment, the muggle doctors are telling them what they believe to be true; that your cousin suffered a spontaneous brain bleed that has caused him to go catatonic, and left him in a vegetative state. Mr Runcorn and I will wait here with you for them to return, and explain things properly to them."

Harry grimaced. "I would really rather you didn't."

"We won't be an imposition—" Shacklebolt started, but Harry shook his head.

"Not that. Telling them about the dementor. My aunt and uncle... they aren't fond of magic." He flicked his gaze to Runcorn, unsure how best to word things. "It confuses them. Scares them a bit, I think. All my aunt really knows of magic is that it killed my parents. If she knows it killed her son, too... it would devastate them." And they would murder him, because they would assume it was his fault. Which it sort-of was; the dementor certainly wasn't there randomly.

"That is highly unusual, Mr Potter," Runcorn began.

"I'd say it's an unusual situation, Mr Runcorn," Harry retorted waspishly. "Please, if you've any decency, let my aunt and uncle believe their son suffered a tragic and unexpected natural death. Let them mourn their son without adding the confusion of magical creatures to the

mix. It'll be hard enough explaining what a dementor is to them, let alone what one was doing all the way out here by itself. I don't want to scare them."

Shacklebolt pursed his lips. "Perhaps you're right. It can't do any harm to let them believe what the doctors said. It's not like it changes the poor boy's outcome at all."

"Tell them, don't tell them, it makes no difference to me — if they don't know, they can't go screaming about dementors through half of Surrey and cause the Obliviation team the stress," Runcorn remarked with a roll of his eyes. God, Harry wanted to hex the man. Did he not care even a little bit that a teenage boy was all but dead? Just because the boy was a muggle.

"Very well; I'll go with your wishes, Mr Potter. And once again, I'm terribly sorry for your loss, and the Ministry will do whatever we can to find the truth of the situation. If there's anything we can do to help, please do let us know." Shacklebolt seemed sincere, but it just made Harry angrier. They both knew the Ministry wasn't going to do a damned thing.

"Thank you. I think I'd just like to go to bed, if you don't mind." Harry sent a pointed glance to the door.

"Of course. Send an owl if you have any questions or concerns, or you change your mind about telling your family and they wish to speak to an official," Shacklebolt said. Harry knew he would be doing neither of those things, but he nodded all the same, managing a tight attempt at a smile. The two wizards didn't bother going back out the door, merely apparating straight out of the hallway. Once they were gone, Harry let out a long breath, running a hand through his hair. Merlin, this was a clusterfuck of a situation.

. . .

The Dursleys weren't back until early the next morning. Harry was awake as soon as he heard the front door open — he'd barely been asleep, uncomfortable in the room after getting used to his bed in Seren Du, his dreams full of cloaked amorphous figures and sucking, rattling breaths.

Petunia was sobbing quietly. Harry wondered if she'd been crying the entire night. He heard Vernon murmuring to her, his voice surprisingly soft. Of course, the only things the man seemed to actually care about were his reputation and his son.

"I'll put the kettle on," Petunia declared shakily.

"No, Pet, let's just go to bed. We had enough tea at the bloody hospital," Vernon sighed. If Petunia protested, Harry couldn't hear it. He listened silently to the stairs creaking under Vernon's weight, and their bedroom door shut with a click. His heart was in his throat.

He couldn't stay here. So far, his aunt and uncle had no idea he'd returned — if Vernon saw his face now, so soon after losing his son... Harry probably wouldn't have much of a face left by the end of it. Even if Ceri brought him food, he'd still need to use the bathroom. If he stayed, they'd notice him eventually.

He couldn't stay here.

Waiting a while, until Vernon's loud snores drifted from the master bedroom, Harry sat up in bed. "Ceri," he called quietly. The house elf appeared immediately. She had a tea tray in her hands; a cup of tea, two of his favourite chocolate biscuits, and a plate of toast with the cherry jam he liked.

"If Master Harry is wanting a bigger breakfast, Ceri can cook," she began, but Harry waved her off with a smile.

"This is perfect, thanks, Ceri." He doubted he could stomach much more. Guilt coiled in him like acid, making him nauseous every time he thought about Dudley. "Is anyone home, Ceri? Or are they all with the Order?"

"Seren Du is being empty — everyone is at the other house, sir. Mister Remus gave Ceri this to give to Master Harry." She pulled a folded piece of parchment from the pocket of her pinafore dress.

Cub,

The Order is a bit blindsided with this whole mess. Currently trying to figure out the next step. With any luck, they'll agree to move you here soon. Sit tight, I'll be in touch when we know more. We love you.

Moony

He sighed, letting the note flutter to the mattress. More waiting, then. "Thanks, Ceri."

Ceri bowed, then disappeared, leaving Harry alone with his breakfast. He dunked a biscuit in his tea, careful not to let it break.

Hopefully he would be saved soon, whichever way it happened. He couldn't stand being in Privet Drive for long.

.-.

Luckily, Harry only had to wait until early that afternoon — he was just debating with himself whether to risk a bathroom run, when Ceri appeared in his room, bringing Remus with her. The werewolf immediately strode to Harry's side, wrapping him up in a tight hug. "I'm so sorry, cub," he murmured. Harry leaned into the embrace.

"I didn't even like Dudley," he argued feebly. Remus pulled back just enough to shoot him a knowing look.

"That doesn't mean his death doesn't hurt," he replied. Dropping a kiss on Harry's hair, he straightened up. "The Order has been trying to push the Ministry into properly investigating, but it seems to be a lost cause. Since no one magical was harmed, and the dementor has been returned to Azkaban, they seem to be done with the matter." His opinion of that was clear on his face.

"I expected as much. Do we know who did it yet?" He couldn't shake Draco's worry that Lucius was responsible. He'd spoken to his boyfriend again before going to sleep, just to

assure him he was okay. The Slytherin seemed convinced his father was at least partly to blame.

“Not yet. It’s likely we never will, with the investigation being closed up. Kingsley said you asked for your aunt and uncle to be left unaware.” There was curiosity in his tone. Harry grimaced.

“If they knew it was magic-related, they’d blame me. I can’t risk them thinking that... especially if I have to stay here until Dumbledore sends someone to get me.”

Remus’ eyes flashed gold for a moment. “I won’t let them hurt you ever again,” he vowed fiercely. Harry’s jaw clenched, but he stayed silent. He didn’t want to have that conversation — not now, preferably not ever. “The good news is, Dumbledore has decided to have the Order retrieve you during your cousin’s funeral. A few people seemed quite surprised and upset that you wouldn’t be able to go and say your goodbyes, but he insisted it was the safest time to extract you.”

“I wouldn’t be welcome there anyway,” Harry pointed out ruefully. He wasn’t sure if he’d want to go even if he could. “Funerals take a while though, right?” He’d never been to one, wizarding or muggle. Cedric’s funeral was too small. It had been almost two weeks after his death, though — Harry wasn’t sure he could last that long at Privet Drive.

“It’s on Thursday. I suppose your aunt and uncle wanted to get things done quickly,” Remus told him. “They’ll be sending someone to collect you on Thursday at two.”

“Can I come home?” Harry blurted, unable to help himself. “The Dursleys don’t know I’m here. If I’ve got a few days... the Order won’t find out, right, if I’m not here? The guard hasn’t changed?”

“No, the guard is still the same. Dumbledore thinks it unlikely that a second attack will come so soon after the first, if at all.”

“Then can I come home? Please?” He hated how his voice cracked. “I don’t want to stay here by myself, not even until Thursday.”

Remus sighed, pulling him closer again. “Oh, cub.” He nosed Harry’s temple wolfishly. “Of course. Of course you can come home, love.”

Harry practically melted in relief.

.-. .

Unlike last summer, when Harry had been determined to fit as much fun and freedom as possible into his last days at Seren Du, he was subdued in the few days before Dudley’s funeral. The whole household was — even though Harry hadn’t been anywhere near the attack, the knowledge of how close he *could’ve* been weighed heavily on all of them.

Harry made sure to tie up all his loose ends, writing letters to all those he’d no longer be able to talk to until school started up again. He promised Susan he’d keep going through the laws

the best he could; between all of them they were making good headway into the project, and she was attacking it with true Hufflepuff determination. The only person he told about what happened to his cousin was Neville, promising to give his friend the whole story when they were back at school. He spent a little time with Buckbeak, went for one last fly by himself, and made cookies with Ceri to try and cheer himself up.

By Wednesday evening, all he had left to do was repack his trunk for school. The decision of which books to bring with him seemed even harder this year; not only because his exams were approaching, but because he had so many things he wanted to learn before he was thrown into his next near-death experience.

“Severus has copies of most of those in his quarters.” Harry whipped around, seeing Remus in the doorway. The werewolf was the only other adult who had been around since the dementor attack; the Order were around too much for Sirius to get away, and Dumbledore had errands for Snape to run. Most of the time, Harry had been alone. “If there’s anything you need in them, I’m sure he’ll let you borrow them.”

Harry looked down at the set of Defence texts in his lap. “That’s good to know.” He eased them back on the shelf, looking at the rest of his pile. “Do you know if I’ll be able to train during school time?”

“Harry, it’s your OWL year, you’ll be busy,” Remus started, but Harry rolled his eyes.

“I think training is a bit more important than some exams, Moony,” he reasoned. “Besides, you’ve all said I know enough to do well. I’m not worried about my exams.” That was the truth. He’d come on in leaps and bounds since having his magic unblocked, and was at least a year ahead of himself in most subjects.

“You’ll still have lots of homework, though, and quidditch.”

Harry levelled the werewolf with a determined expression. After a few moments, Remus sighed. “If you insist, I’m sure Severus will find the time. As long as you’re able to keep Dumbledore oblivious. It might not be safe.”

Harry hadn’t thought about it like that. The last thing he wanted was for Dumbledore to get suspicious of any interactions between Harry and the Potions Master. “Okay. But I can still work on things alone.” He was making good progress with his animagus transformation, and he didn’t want to let his duelling skills get rusty. It could cost lives otherwise.

“Just remember, you’re still only fifteen,” Remus reminded, carding a hand through Harry’s messy hair. “A powerful fifteen, but fifteen all the same. Let the adults do their jobs in protecting you, the best we can.”

“That doesn’t always work out too well in practice,” Harry pointed out. Still, he leant into the touch. “I’ll try, Moony.”

“You’ve got a lot on your plate this year, cub.” Remus cracked a faint smile. “Just focus on your classwork and your government takeover, let us work on the rest, alright?”

Harry laughed. “Yeah, okay.” The government takeover was mostly Susan’s brainchild, but Harry was a big part of the driving force. He was the figurehead needed to push for change — and to eventually knock Dumbledore off his pedestal, when they were ready. It wouldn’t be for a while yet, but the heirs wanted to make sure everything was in place and ready as soon as they could strike. The Ministry and the Wizengamot had been left to languish and grow corrupt for far too long.

“Are you about ready for tomorrow?”

Harry knew Remus wasn’t asking about the state of his packing. His chest tightened, anxiety clawing its way up as he thought about being surrounded by people again. Having to slip back into his Golden Boy persona. Having to face Ron and Hermione and Dumbledore, and a bunch of strangers — worse, having them offer their condolences for Dudley like they had any idea how Harry felt about the matter.

Even *Harry* didn’t know how he felt about the matter.

“I think so. As ready as I’ll ever be.” He drew a steady breath, glancing up at Remus. “I just... What happened to Dudley is my fault. I know, I know — I couldn’t have done anything, blame it on whoever sent the dementor, whatever,” he added before Remus could argue. “But the fact of the matter is, he’s dead because someone wanted me dead. Just like Cedric. And I... I hate that he’s dead, and I hate that I feel responsible. I hate that I feel *sorry* for them, when they were so awful to me for so long, but — they didn’t deserve this. No one deserves this. My aunt and uncle hate me, but they loved Dudley, and I— he was just a kid, y’know? He was only fifteen.”

To his horror, there were tears welling in his eyes. All of a sudden, he was wrapped in Remus’ embrace, head pillowed against the man’s broad chest. “It’s okay, cub,” he soothed. “It’s a complicated situation; you feel whatever you need to feel. Your family are terrible people, but you’re right — they didn’t deserve to lose their son so young, no matter what they’ve done. Dudley didn’t deserve what happened to him. But you are in no way responsible, Harry. You don’t deserve any of what’s happened to you either. And their tragedy doesn’t detract from how they’ve treated you for so long. It doesn’t redeem them.”

“I can’t face them again, Moony,” Harry whispered through his tears. “They might not know what happened, but I do, and this— this will have broken them. I don’t know what they’ll do to me if I see them again.” Even if they had no idea of the truth of Dudley’s death, it wouldn’t stop them from blaming their misfortune on Harry. They’d been doing it his whole life; everything from a bad day at work to an unfortunate turn in the weather was Harry’s fault, and he’d been punished for it.

“I don’t know what’s going to happen in future. I can’t know that,” Remus said, his voice soft. “But I know that Sirius and I would die before we allowed you to be alone with those monsters again. I don’t know what they’ve done to you, cub — I hope one day, you might feel comfortable enough to tell us — but I swear to you, they won’t lay a finger on you again as long as I live. Even if you’re forced to spend time under their roof.”

There was a hint of a growl, a touch of the wolf to his promise, and it settled something deep within Harry’s chest. A promise like that, coming from Remus — Harry believed it.

.--.

Ceri dropped Harry off at the Dursleys' at half past one on Thursday. With his trunk at his side, he didn't have to bother trying to make the room look lived-in. His door was locked from the outside, he knew; all eight latches. This had to be believable, and there was no way the Dursleys would have left him home alone with the door unlocked, regardless of how long they might be. They'd let him piss on the floor before they gave him free access to their house.

Harry sat on the edge of the bed, stroking Hedwig's feathers through the bars of her cage. She seemed unimpressed by the change of scenery, but they had to keep up appearances.

His knee bounced as he waited. He forced himself not to think about his aunt and uncle, what they might be doing — had the service started yet? Were they carrying the coffin to the cemetery?

He was torn from his thoughts by the sound of apparition; multiple people, downstairs. Even though he'd been expecting them, he still jumped up, wand in hand and pointed at the door. He heard muffled voices; some familiar, some not.

The footsteps on the stairs were strange; a rhythmic shuffle-thud, almost like someone had a limp, or walked with a heavy cane. "Potter!" The bark sent a shiver down his spine. He shook it off, reminding himself that this was not Barty Crouch Jr — this had to be the real Alastor Moody. "Merlin's balls, have you got enough locks on there?"

"Locks?" A female voice, again familiar, though Harry couldn't quite place it. "What, on the outside?" Someone jogged up the stairs. Harry felt his cheeks burn — how many people had come, to gawp at the truth of the home life of the Boy-Who-Lived? How many members of the Order had decided to see why he hadn't left the house all summer?

"Give us a moment, Harry." He relaxed; that was Remus. He heard several clicks in quick succession, and the door swung open.

Squeezed together on the small landing outside his room stood Moody, Remus, and the bright-haired auror who was friends with Charlie. This time, her hair was bubblegum pink. She grinned at him, waving. "Wotcher, Harry!"

Her name was Tonks, Harry remembered. Nymphadora Tonks — Andromeda's daughter. She was Sirius' cousin.

Harry didn't lower his wand. "Moony," he greeted neutrally. "What creature was in the tank in your office the first time we had tea together?" The only one of the three he actually knew; he wasn't taking any chances. Even though he could *feel* with his magic that it truly was his pseudo-godfather, it didn't hurt to check.

"A grindylow," Remus replied promptly. Harry lowered his wand, sliding it back into his holster.

"Constant vigilance!" Moody barked, a smile twisting his scarred face. "Good lad, Potter."

“It’s nice to meet you, Professor Moody.”

“Bah!” Moody’s fake eye whizzed around in its socket. “Didn’t do much teaching, now, did I? Just Moody to you. This is Tonks. Dumbledore sent us to get you out of here.”

“That’s why you couldn’t go to the funeral,” Tonks piped up, her hair colour dimming sadly for a brief moment. “We’re really sorry you can’t say goodbye to your cousin properly, Harry.”

“That’s not why I’m not at the funeral,” Harry told her bluntly, watching her nose wrinkle in confusion. “But I’m glad you came while my relatives were out.”

“You all packed?” Moody asked gruffly, limping forward, eye still whirring. It prickled at Harry’s skin uncomfortably; exactly how much could he see with that thing? Harry still wasn’t sure.

“Just about.” He made a show of grabbing some quills and parchment off his desk and tucking them into his trunk — he wasn’t supposed to know he was being rescued, so he hadn’t wanted to be completely ready for them. Stuffing some clothes in haphazardly, he shut the lid, pretending to look around for one last check. “I’m ready.”

“Is the cat yours? Or your family’s?” Tonks asked curiously, gesturing to the cat flap. Harry’s return smile was bitter.

“That isn’t for a cat.” He would have felt bad about the bewilderment on her face, but really, was she being so oblivious on purpose? He’d been *locked in*. Eight times over! “How are we getting to... wherever we’re going?”

“Apparating,” Remus supplied. “It’s not the most comfortable thing in the world, but it’s the most discreet way to travel at this time of day. We’ll have to do a few different jumps, to make sure we don’t leave a trail.”

“Mad-Eye here wanted to fly you out,” Tonks volunteered, sounding amused. “But we can’t do that in broad daylight.”

“Yes, yes, it’s a shame we can’t wait ’til nightfall. Bloody muggles,” Moody groused. “Let your owl free, Potter, she’ll meet you there.”

“Would if I could, sir.” Harry was getting a perverse amount of pleasure from playing this authentically; Hedwig’s cage was padlocked, as it would have been by Vernon if he’d truly stayed all summer.

“Ah, I’ll get it.” A tap of Remus’ wand, and the padlock dropped to the ground. Harry opened the cage — Hedwig, bless her devious little heart, made a show of stretching out her wings and adjusting her feathers, as if she’d been cooped up for weeks. She butted her head against Harry’s chin, nipped him on the ear, then took off out the open window.

“Right, let’s get moving, then. We’ve been dawdling too long as it is.” Moody straightened up, passing Harry’s trunk to Tonks, and Hedwig’s cage to Remus. “Take my arm, Potter.”

It felt wrong to be trusting Moody to apparate him, even though he knew this was the real deal. Remus gave him an encouraging look over Moody's head, and Harry squared his shoulders, before gripping Moody's forearm tightly.

When Remus had said 'a few different jumps', Harry hadn't imagined the stomach-churning, disorienting hell that followed. A crack, and they were stood in a dingy alley somewhere. Before he could even breathe, Moody had let go of him, and another hand grabbed his arm. "Hold tight!"

Another crack, and he was in a field. His head was spinning. The hand on his arm let go, and a vaguely familiar arm wrapped around his waist, pulling him against a firm chest. "I've got you, cub."

Another crack — this time he was on a rocky cliff. His stomach lurched. Remus let go of him. He was gripped by the wrist tightly.

Another crack, Harry's vision blacked out for a second; when the world returned to focus, he was stood in the middle of an ordinary muggle street, Moody holding onto his wrist, practically keeping him upright. A half-beat later and Remus and Tonks appeared, Remus stood close behind Harry, discreetly steadyng him. "Sorry about that, cub. It's a little much when you're not used to it, but it's the safest way."

Harry had thought he was getting used to apparition by now, but he didn't think he'd ever get used to *that*. "I might be sick," he declared, hearing Tonks giggle.

"Pick a point and stare at it 'til the world stops spinning, there's a lad," Moody instructed, no sympathy in his tone whatsoever. "Can you read?"

"Generally? Yes. Right now? Debatable."

Tonks giggled again. Even Moody snorted, lips twisting in amusement. "Read this."

It took a few seconds for Harry's vision to steady enough to make out the words on the scrap of parchment Moody thrust his way. It was in Dumbledore's unmistakeable handwriting.

The Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix is located at Number Twelve Grimmauld Place

Harry read it again, committing it to memory. When he looked up, there was a whole new building squeezed in between numbers eleven and thirteen. The parchment in his hand burst into flames, scattering ash on his shoes.

Finally, he would get to meet the Order.

Chapter 43

Chapter Notes

CW for mentions of child abuse/neglect

The first thing Harry registered upon stepping through the door of Number Twelve was his godfather's smiling face.

"Sirius!" His relief was real; he hadn't seen the man in almost a week, and what a *hell* of a week it had been. He threw himself into his godfather's arms, some of the tension leaving him when Sirius hugged him tight.

"I've got you, pup," he promised in a fierce whisper. "You're alright."

Harry almost broke down there and then, but muffled voices reminded him they weren't alone. Reluctantly, he pulled back, making a face when he saw their surroundings. Sirius had mentioned the house was in poor shape, but he hadn't expected it to be so... dark.

"Good to see you, mate!"

"About time you showed up!"

The twins were whispering, which Harry found odd, but they beamed at him from behind Sirius. Nudging past the animagus, George ruffled Harry's hair, tucking him between himself and Fred and leading him through a door off to the side. Harry found himself in a very full kitchen, the smell of cooking meat making his stomach rumble.

"Oh, Harry, dear!" The twins were dislodged as their mother hurried over, and Harry tried not to stiffen too much when he was bundled in a rib-cracking hug. "Look at you, you're far too skinny, you poor thing!" She patted his cheek, eyeing him over with a frown on her face.

"Pale as a ghost, too. Have you been getting any sun at all?"

Harry wasn't *that* pale, and he grit his teeth — as far as she knew, he'd been shut in his room all summer; was she trying to rub it in?

"I'm afraid you can't stay long; it's almost time for the Order meeting. But I'll make you a quick sandwich to take up with you — did you have lunch? Never mind; you're a growing boy, you can always eat more! I'll only be a minute."

Harry turned towards the table, around which were several people he didn't recognise, all of whom were staring at him with varying levels of interest. He was saved having to say anything by the door opening, and Ginny skidding in past Tonks.

“You’re here!” she crowed in delight, practically jumping on Harry in a hug. He couldn’t help but laugh, smiling into her strawberry-scented hair.

“Hi, Gin.”

When she pulled back, she kept her hands on his shoulders, studying him carefully. “You’re looking better than I thought you would. Are you alright?” Harry didn’t know how much of the question was for show, and he shrugged.

“All things considered, not bad.” That seemed to be enough for the redhead, and she nodded decisively.

The door opened again, and Snape strode in, his customary sneer on his face. Harry didn’t react at the sight of him, though he saw the faintest flicker of approval in the man’s dark eyes when he saw the Gryffindor. “I see we are to be *blessed* with Potter’s presence once more,” he drawled. Sirius growled, only to get a whack on the shoulder with Mrs Weasley’s wooden spoon.

“Severus, goodness, is it time already? Kids, come on, we’d better get you upstairs — yes, Fred, George, for the last time that means you as well! I don’t care if you’re of age, you’re still in school, and you’ll stay out of all this.” With a plate piled high with sandwiches floating behind her, Mrs Weasley beckoned Harry over. “I thought I’d put you in with Ron, dear; I’ll show you the way.”

“Harry’s taking my old room, Molly,” Sirius said, stepping forward and placing a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “I’ll take him up.”

“Nonsense; the boys share all the time when they’re at the Burrow, it’s no trouble.”

“Harry is my godson, and this is my house,” Sirius reminded her firmly. “He’s had a difficult summer, and if he wants the privacy of his own bedroom, he can have it.”

Mrs Weasley turned to Harry, as if expecting him to argue and insist he wanted to share with Ron. Harry had no intention of doing so, and flashed his godfather a smile. “Thanks, Sirius.”

“No problem, kid.” Sirius grinned, reaching out to steal one of the sandwiches. “Come on, I’ll show you around. Stay quiet in the main hall, now; my mother’s portrait is sleeping. She’s a bit of a hag, you don’t want to wake her up.”

That explained the whispering earlier. Before Mrs Weasley could protest, Sirius had grabbed the plate of food and was headed for the door, three redheads and Harry in his wake. They tiptoed up two flights of stairs, lined with a grotesque collection of severed house elf heads, and turned to a door with a tarnished silver nameplate. *Sirius Orion Black*. Sirius nudged the door open with his elbow.

It was as dark and austere as the rest of the house, though clearly teenaged Sirius had done his best to lighten it up — a Gryffindor banner took up half of one wall, along with a collection of muggle posters of scantily clad women posing with motorbikes. Sirius flushed

sheepishly. “I was a bit enthusiastic with the Sticking charm when I was young. Wanted to piss off Mum. I’ll figure out how to get them down, don’t worry.”

Harry snorted. “S’alright. Not like they do anything for me.” At least they were muggle posters, and wouldn’t wave and wink at him like the girls he’d seen in some of his dormmates’ dirty mags. “This was your room, huh?”

“My childhood prison,” Sirius agreed wryly. “Until I abandoned ship and moved to the Potters’. Feel free to snoop — Merlin only knows what’s in here, I haven’t been through it since I left.”

The three Weasleys hung awkwardly in the doorway, and Harry beckoned them in. “I don’t mind,” he assured. “I wanted to talk to you guys anyway.”

“I’d better get down to the meeting,” Sirius said, rolling his eyes. He set the sandwiches down on the bed, then reached into his jacket pocket. “Moony gave me this, by the way.” It was Harry’s trunk, which he resized and set at the end of the bed. “I think Tonks still has Hedwig’s cage.”

“Brilliant, thanks.” Harry gave Sirius one last hug, then let him leave. As soon as the door shut behind him, George raised his wand, putting up a privacy ward.

“Just in case Ronnienkins comes snooping when he realises you’re here,” he declared. He perched on the edge of the bed, raising an eyebrow at one of the muggle women in the posters before leaning back against the wall. “So. How you doing, kid?”

Harry couldn’t help the snort that escaped him. Kicking off his shoes, he made himself comfortable on the bed, leaving plenty of room for Ginny and Fred too. He reached for a sandwich, his stomach rumbling. “I was doing great until a dementor killed my cousin,” he said flatly. All three redheads winced.

“I’m so sorry, Harry. It’s awful, what happened. Even if your cousin was an arse.” Ginny squeezed his hand sympathetically. “But you’ve been okay besides all that?”

“Yeah, mostly. I still... I still have the odd nightmare, about the graveyard,” he admitted. “But Remus has been really great helping me work through stuff. And I kept busy. I’m not the interesting one, though; what’s been going on here?”

Even though he’d been exchanging letters with the twins and Ginny through Remus all summer, there was still tons they hadn’t talked about. Harry knew the basics, of course; the Order had meetings here, and in the mean time the kids cleaned the house. But he knew the twins had figured out a way to eavesdrop, and he wanted to know how much they knew.

He was impressed by the explanation of the Extendable Ears, though hid his smile when Ginny complained Snape was onto them and had started warding the door.

“We don’t know much about what they’re doing,” George admitted. “But You-Know-Who has been quiet all summer. No raids, no mysterious deaths, nothing. We think he’s making the

most of Fudge refusing to believe he's back — gathering his forces in secret while no one's really looking for him."

Harry hummed in agreement; that fit with what little Snape had told him, and what he'd seen through his scar.

"Do you... have you been getting the *Prophet*, wherever you were?" Ginny asked cautiously. Harry winced; he understood her trepidation.

"Unfortunately, yes." Even without Rita Skeeter on the payroll, the *Prophet* was doing a fine job of coming up with ridiculous stories painting Harry as a lunatic and Dumbledore the same. Harry couldn't say he was surprised, and he didn't entirely hate the way they were discrediting the headmaster. He wasn't looking forward to going back to school, though.

The twins exchanged identical grimaces. "Yeah, it's all a bit of a mess," Fred muttered.

"Have you seen much of Dumbledore?" Harry asked. While he'd been working on his plans for the upcoming year, he'd toyed with the worry that some of his friends might be under similar Compulsion charms like he once had. Maybe that was the reason Ron and Hermione were reporting back to the headmaster on him.

He could hope.

"He's been in and out for Order meetings. Stayed for dinner once or twice," George volunteered. "I haven't seen him talk much to Ron or Hermione, though — except for when he told them not to tell you anything sensitive in letters."

"What letters?" Harry remarked, rolling his eyes. "I bet he didn't care a bit that I wasn't leaving the house, that they knew."

Here, Ginny bit her lip. "Dad brought it up a few times. He was part of your guard at first. Dumbledore reassigned him when Dad started talking about sending a note through your window to check you were okay."

"I did wonder if anyone was remotely concerned that I didn't seem to leave my room ever," Harry said derisively.

"They were all just told to let you grieve," Fred confirmed. "We tried to explain that you'd told us your relatives wouldn't let you have mail, and what they were like and all. Dumbledore wouldn't have any of it; he convinced everyone that he'd know if you were harmed in any way, and they just had to leave you be. He said it might upset you more to have contact with the magical world before you were done *grieving your loss of innocence*." He made a face, and Harry did the same. What a load of bullshit!

"I'm so glad it was all a ruse, or I'd really have been fucked this summer," he mused. A shudder ran down his spine when he imagined it; being tossed to the Dursleys alone and unaided, after watching a friend die and Voldemort rise again right in front of his face. That gaping hole in his chest, left to fester all summer... he would have been in a dark, dark place.

Ginny bumped her shoulder against his sympathetically. “Ron and Hermione have been in their own little world all summer. They’re not together,” she added quickly at his surprised look, “but they don’t spend much time with us except when Mum makes us all clean together. Hermione tries to talk to me sometimes, when Ron’s pissed her off, but... all she wants to talk about is you, and all the things we’d have to do to *help* you once you got here.”

“Control me, you mean,” he said, grimacing. “Merlin... I’m not looking forward to that for the next month.”

“Are you going to keep pretending you’re friends?” George asked. “Or has that ship sailed?”

“I think by now, Dumbledore is pretty aware I keep shedding his Compulsions,” Harry said. “I don’t mind him thinking that as long as he’s not suspicious about the blocks.” He’d spent a lot of time thinking about how he would go about the upcoming school year; the time for hiding completely had passed. Let Dumbledore think he was just having a bit of a rebellious phase; let the man try and bring him to heel. Harry putting a wrench in his plans might hopefully leave him on the back foot, and allow Susan and her scheming to start crumbling his pedestal.

“So we’re all good to prank Ron this year?” Fred’s brown eyes were bright with mischief. Harry grinned.

“Be my guest.”

“Wicked,” the twins murmured in unison. Harry *almost* felt sorry for Ron. Almost.

“What else has been going on, then? I thought Bill would be here? And Percy?” He thought Charlie was the only one still out of the country.

The siblings shared a loaded glance. “Bill’s got a flat that Gringotts put him up in, he only comes in sometimes. Percy...” Ginny trailed off. The twins scowled.

“We don’t talk about that prat anymore,” George declared. Harry raised an eyebrow. That sounded like a story.

“He’s practically attached at the hip to Fudge,” Fred explained. “Siding with him on everything, thinks Dumbledore’s cracked and you’re an attention-seeking little brat. He had one hell of a row with Mum and Dad before we moved in here — said some bad shit to both of them, but Dad especially. Stormed out, we haven’t seen him since. Mum cries every time she so much as thinks about him.”

Harry let out a low whistle. “Wow.” He never would have expected that of Percy. Supporting the Minister, yes — he had always placed a lot of importance on rules and order and authority structures. But to go against his family... that was surprising.

“Right. No talking about Percy, got it.” He hummed thoughtfully, wondering if there was anything else to catch up on. It was easy with these three; he’d been talking to them all summer, there wasn’t much of a gap to fill in. And he definitely didn’t want to talk about Dudley or dementors or any of that yet.

Reaching for another sandwich, he grinned. “So, tell me — how hard should I go on the temper tantrum in front of the others?”

Dumbledore wanted a broken, grieving teenage boy, isolated from his friends and loved ones?

Harry would deliver that and more.

.-.-.-.

They were up in Harry’s room for a few hours before Sirius knocked, letting them know the meeting was over and dinner would be ready shortly. “I’d offer you the tour, but quite frankly, the less you see of this god-awful place, the better,” the animagus remarked to Harry as they walked downstairs. The twins had apparated away to go check on a potion they were brewing, while Ginny had disappeared to pester Tonks into staying for dinner.

“It is a bit… grim,” Harry agreed, looking around at the peeling wallpaper and dark wood panels. “Was it any better when you were a kid?” He couldn’t imagine growing up in a place like this.

“Bit cleaner,” Sirius said. “But the decor hasn’t changed. I swear, if I’m stuck here much longer I’m gonna gut the place and remodel it. Might be a fun project once you’re all back at school.”

“If the house will let you,” Harry half joked. The dark magic soaked into the walls was practically tangible; he got the feeling it would fight any renovations. Sirius grinned, baring his teeth.

“That’s half the fun of it, pup! Quiet, now.” He put a finger over his lips, stepping cautiously into the main hall, gesturing towards a heavy velvet curtain covering most of one wall. Harry assumed it was not in fact a window.

“Your mum?” he whispered. Sirius nodded.

“She’ll be the first thing to go, as soon as I can figure out how. I’ll knock the damn wall out if I have to.”

The kitchen was still the hub of activity, though most of the Order members had left. That was a shame; Harry was curious to meet them. He noticed Snape had gone, too.

“Harry!” Ron goggled at him from across the table. “When’d you get here? Where have you been?”

“In my room. Got here a bit after two.”

“Your room? You’re sharing with me, mate. Mum said.”

“Yeah, turns out Sirius cleared out his old room for me, so I’ll be in there.”

"It's good to see you, Harry. You're looking well." Hermione's voice was cautious — she clearly knew better than to expect a warm welcome. Harry clenched his jaw.

"Hermione." He nodded in her direction.

Mrs Weasley looked perplexed by the stilted interaction, but breezed through it regardless. "Sit, sit, dinner will be ready in a few. Do you want a drink, Harry, dear?"

When she offered him a glass of pumpkin juice, she set it in front of the seat beside Hermione. Harry moved it to claim the free space between Ginny and Sirius. Ginny squeezed his knee under the table.

"Have you met Tonks yet, Harry?" she asked, gesturing to the pink-haired auror on her other side. "She's great!"

"Briefly. Hi." Harry waved, making Tonks grin.

"Hiya. Finally got your land legs back?" she teased.

"Just about, yeah. You're an auror, right? I remember you from the Rita Skeeter thing."

"Ahh, that was a good day," Tonks sighed, a satisfied look on her face. "Yup, that was me! Kingsley — Shacklebolt, the other auror there, I think you met him the other night — he's in the Order too." She gestured further down the table, where the bald auror was sat talking to Mr Weasley. He looked up at the sound of his name, smiling.

"It's nice to meet you properly, Mr Potter. I'm truly sorry for the previous circumstances." He looked it, too. Harry just nodded a little stiffly.

"Tonks is also my cousin," Sirius cut in, leaning an arm across the back of Harry's chair. "I don't know if I mentioned that. Her mum's mum was my dad's sister."

"Mum was disowned when she married Dad, though," Tonks informed him cheerfully. "So we're not technically part of the Black family anymore."

"Count yourselves lucky," Sirius said, rolling his eyes. "Not exactly a great club to be part of."

"Tonks is a metamorphmagus!" Ginny enthused, before the conversation could get soured by talk of Sirius' relatives. Harry's eyebrows shot up.

"That's supposed to be really rare, isn't it?" He'd read about the trait in the Black family grimoire. Tonks smiled, her nose becoming long and narrow like the old Disney cartoon of Pinocchio.

"Rarer every generation!" she confirmed. "I'm the only one in Britain, as far as we know. There's a fair few in Europe though, and in the States. Came in handy for the disguises part of my auror training!"

"She takes requests, too. Show him the duck!" Ginny bounced eagerly in her seat, laughing when Tonks' nose and mouth became a bright yellow duck bill. "Merlin, that never gets old."

When her face was back to normal, Tonks shot Harry a wink. "What do you think?"

"Very cool," he confirmed, grinning.

The conversation was interrupted by Mrs Weasley's declaration that food was ready, and the chaos began; dishes floated every which way as people summoned what they wanted, occasionally both summoning the same thing at once and causing a minor spill. Harry was learning first-hand what Sirius had meant about his cousin being clumsy — in serving herself, Tonks had almost flung the beef shoulder across the table, caused an avalanche of mashed potato, and somehow got peas in Remus' hair.

"I'm so sorry, Remus!" she exclaimed, cheeks turning pink. The werewolf smiled, brushing the vegetables from his hair and vanishing them.

"No worries; I've had worse from food fights back in my school days."

"That was *not* an invitation, boys," Mrs Weasley reprimanded when the twins lit up. George pouted, making Harry snicker.

"Do all these people live here, then?" he asked, quietly, wondering how he was ever going to get peace and quiet. The Weasleys in themselves were a large crew, but there were at least five other people besides.

"No, they're just here for the free food," Sirius assured. "It's just you, me and the Weasleys here permanently. Until you lot all bugger off to school, that is." A shadow crept into his eyes, one Harry hated seeing. He pressed his knee to his godfather's.

"Sometimes I wish I didn't have to."

"Don't be silly, Harry." Across the table, Hermione pursed her lips at him. "You love Hogwarts. And you have to go back; we have our OWLs this year." She paused, smiling. "Don't worry, I've already started working on your revision schedule. And we're mostly just cleaning around here, so you'll have time to do your summer homework."

"I've already done my summer homework, Hermione," Harry told her, resisting the urge to roll his eyes.

"Again? Harry, I really wish you'd let me check it this time."

"I've been locked in my room for a month with nothing to do and no contact with the outside world," Harry bit out. "Homework was all I had — I think it's as good as it's going to get."

That seemed to knock the wind out of Hermione's sails a little.

"You know we would've written to you if we could, Harry," she insisted, ducking as a plate of bread rolls nearly decapitated her. "But even if we could have, Professor Dumbledore told us not to put any sensitive information in a letter."

"There were other ways to get in contact with me! Hell, last time I couldn't write to anyone, Ron and the twins showed up at my window! What's the matter; couldn't find your way without a flying car?" he retorted.

"The Order were watching you. They said you were fine." Ron seemed unconcerned, too busy stuffing his face

Harry stilled. "What do you mean, the Order were watching me?" He wanted to know exactly what constituted 'watching'. Especially after what happened to Dudley.

"Dumbledore assigned you guards, of course," Mrs Weasley informed him, bringing more gravy to the table. "After that awful business with the tournament, surely you didn't expect him to leave you alone all summer; anything could've happened to you!"

"And none of these *guards* seemed concerned that I never left the house?" Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sirius wince at his icy tone.

"Well," Mrs Weasley faltered. "After what happened with the poor Diggory boy... we rather suspected you just needed time to process."

"We were there to keep you safe," Tonks piped up hesitantly. "We didn't want to intrude."

"Keep me safe, right. And I bet you all thought I was locked in my room to *keep me safe*, too. Two bathroom breaks a day, meals through the cat flap. A list of chores twice my height to *keep me safe*." He mentally scolded himself; he hadn't meant to say that much. Beside him, Sirius stiffened.

There was an awkward beat of silence. "I'm sure your aunt and uncle were just trying to give you space, dear. It's difficult to know how to help someone grieve." Mrs Weasley finally took a seat beside her husband.

"The last thing they want is to give me *space*; I might get up to something *unnatural*," Harry drawled. "Seriously — I had people watching me twenty-four-seven, and none of you thought it was strange that I didn't so much as go in the garden?"

There were several uncomfortable faces at the dinner table. Harry didn't feel sorry for them — if not for the intervention of Sirius and Remus and Snape, the summer he was pretending to have had would have been a very real possibility; worse, even. He wouldn't have been able to use Silencing charms at Privet Drive — if Vernon had been woken up by his nightmares, Harry would have been belted raw.

"Great. Good to know people only care what happens to me when it involves Voldemort." Several people flinched at the name. "Would Dumbledore's supposed protections have told you if I'd died? If I needed help?"

"We wouldn't have let any Death Eaters get in the house, Potter," Moody snapped, his electric blue eye whizzing around its socket.

The laugh that Harry let out was cold. “Yeah, because Death Eaters are the only thing that could possibly cause me harm in that house.”

“Harry, really, now—“

He ignored Mrs Weasley, green eyes flashing angrily. “For that matter, where the hell was my *guard* when a dementor was sucking the soul out of my cousin just round the corner?”

There were several people who wouldn’t meet his gaze, then. Kingsley Shacklebolt was one of them. “I’m afraid that was an error on our parts. It was Mundungus’ shift to watch you, and he... neglected to inform his relief that he’d be leaving early for a meeting.”

“Mundungus who?” Harry’s glare searched the group, though he knew everyone at the table. Whoever Mundungus was, he hadn’t stayed past the Order meeting. Probably knew Harry would want to kill him.

“Mundungus Fletcher,” Moody said. “Thief and a scoundrel, but a good set of eyes and ears to have when you’re looking for unsavoury types. Idiot buggered off to see a bloke about counterfeit cauldrons.”

“Meanwhile, my cousin was *dying*,” Harry roared. “Mundungus Fletcher had better bloody hope I don’t meet him any time soon, or the only place he’ll be finding cauldrons is up his arse.”

“Harry!” Mrs Weasley looked scandalised. “Language!”

“You didn’t even like your cousin, what do you care?” Ron complained. “He was a bullying prat.”

“And because of that, he deserved to die, did he?” Harry shot back. “I shouldn’t feel bad that he had his soul sucked out by a monster that was looking for me, just because my cousin was a bully, is that it?”

“He didn’t mean it like that, Harry.” Hermione, always ready to leap to Ron’s defence. “I understand you’re upset, we all do. It’s terrible, what happened to your cousin. But Mundungus didn’t mean any harm, he feels awful about it, really!”

“Oh, that’s alright then!” Harry crowed, getting to his feet and slamming his hands on the table. “Everything’s fine because Mundungus *didn’t mean any harm*. I’ll just pop on back to let my aunt and uncle know, shall I? I’m sure they’d be *delighted* to hear it.”

“Kingsley said you didn’t even tell them about the dementors. They don’t know anything about it,” Ron pointed out.

“Yeah, because they’d bloody kill me if they knew I had something to do with it!” Harry shouted. His scar began to ache, anger coiling in his gut like a snake made of fire. “The amount of injuries I’ve had just from *existing* around them, you think I’d survive telling them that magic killed their precious boy? Worse, that magic aiming to kill *me* did it? They’d do Voldemort a bloody favour!”

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Remus' eyes flash gold, and he knew with a sudden sick feeling that he'd said too much. His mostly-for-show temper tantrum had hit too close to the truth, in his desperation to make these people feel *some* sort of guilt for what they'd done all summer.

And maybe, deep down, he wanted them to know the truth. Wanted them to be aware of what he put up with every time he left Hogwarts, what he'd survived for years before learning about magic.

But he didn't want to be there to watch them react to it.

"I'm going to bed," he muttered, chair legs screeching against the tile. Just as he opened the door, several people called his name — and the velvet curtain covering Mrs Black's portrait flung wide open, revealing a large painting of an older woman with venomous eyes.

"*Scum! Blood traitors and filth, in my house!*" she screeched, beginning an impressive tirade. Harry ignored her, storming up the stairs to his bedroom. Merlin, he was glad Sirius hadn't made him share with Ron.

Slamming the door shut only slightly muffled the portrait's cries, and it was several minutes before things went silent again. Harry sat on his bed with his knees tucked up to his chest, his hands pressed against his face. His scar ached, and the anger was still raw within him. When he took several deep breaths, he could feel the oily taint of the horcrux within him mixed up in it all — Voldemort was angry too, and it was feeding into Harry's rage. That explained a lot.

Not all of it was Voldemort, though. Most of it was Harry. He couldn't help it — here were people who were supposed to care about him, think of him like *family*, and they were all too happy to leave him to fend for himself at the Dursleys' and not think twice about it. Happy to put him back in his box and forget about him until it was time for him to be Gryffindor Golden Boy Harry Potter once more.

Pushing back tears and trying to stop the raw edges of the hole in his chest reopening, he almost missed the gentle knock on the door. "It's just us, pup."

The door opened, Sirius and Remus looking sadly through the gap. "Can we come in?" Remus asked softly.

Harry made a noise that was neither acceptance nor denial, but the two men took it as permission, shutting and warding the door behind them. Sirius perched on the edge of the desk. "That was quite something, pup. Even James wasn't that good when he got going." Sirius' attempt at levity fell flat, and he ran a hand through his hair in frustration.

"Harry," Remus began, warily approaching the bed. When Harry didn't yell at him, he continued, sitting on the mattress a couple of feet from Harry's curled up form. "I know... when we took you from your aunt and uncle's house after your third year, we never really — we didn't address the situation. We were just happy to have you, and delighted to see you coming out of your shell at last." He reached out, placing a gentle hand on one of Harry's socked feet. "Perhaps that was our error. Perhaps we should've had you talk about things

back then. It's too late, now. We just let Severus keep giving you potions and let you bluster on past it."

"You knew about the potions?" Harry blurted. Sirius cracked a wry smile.

"You think Ceri wouldn't tell me that healing and nutrition potions were being left in my godson's room? Hell, you think old Snape could keep a secret like that from his Moony-love?"

Remus' cheeks went pink, but he didn't falter. "Severus said it was up to you to deal with things how you preferred, and we should give you the space to do so. Considering his... experience in the matter, I followed his advice. But Harry, if you need to talk about it — any of it. We're here to listen."

"I'm over it, really," Harry insisted. "Mostly." He would never *truly* be past it all. He would always be the boy in the cupboard under the stairs, at least at heart. But he was growing despite that. "A lot of what I said I was just saying for effect down there. But that doesn't make it a lie, or exaggeration. Vernon really would have tried to kill me if he knew the truth about Dudley. And... the way I described the summer, the food through the cat flap and two bathroom breaks a day and the chores — that's how things were, before. After the incident with the bars on my window." He'd told them about that, he remembered. That should've given them enough of an idea even back then.

"And the scars?" Sirius asked softly, moving from the desk to the bed beside Remus.

"Are long since healed, and I'm fine," Harry insisted, squeezing his eyes shut. "You—Moony, you said I'd never have to go back there. Anything else doesn't matter."

"And I meant it," Remus promised. "Whatever happens, you'll never have to lay eyes on those awful people again, we'll make sure of it. But... if you ever want to talk about what they did to you. Or if you want to get rid of some old wounds. Even if you can't talk to us — I have it on very good authority that Severus is an excellent listener, and even better with Scar Reducing Cream," he added with a half-smile. "Any one of the three of us will do whatever we can."

"We aren't exactly the poster children for happy families, either," Sirius pointed out roughly. "Moony's parents treated him like a monster, mine tried to *make* me a monster, and I don't know the details of Snape's but it has to have been bad to make him such a miserable little git so young—ow, Moony!" The werewolf was unrepentant as Sirius rubbed where he'd just been hit on the shoulder. "My point is, we aren't as rose-tinted as the Weasleys. We can handle it, if you want to tell us."

Harry appreciated the thought, truly. But knowing they'd had crappy childhoods didn't make him any more eager to recount his own.

"I know, Pads," he said eventually. "I just... I just need to get some sleep, I think."

"It's been a long day," Remus agreed. He leaned in, pressing a kiss to Harry's forehead, frowning when he saw the inflamed scar. "Is it bothering you again?"

“Not really,” Harry shrugged. “I’ll meditate before bed, I’ve got my wardstone.” It wouldn’t stop him being dragged into a dream if Voldemort was determined, but maybe it would be one of the nicer ones — that mysterious endless corridor instead of Voldemort torturing his servants.

“If you need Dreamless Sleep, call Ceri. Severus has some in the medicine cabinet at home.”

“Thanks, Moony.” Harry managed a smile that was mostly genuine, if a little strained. The werewolf smoothed Harry’s messy hair down.

“I’ll see you in the morning, cub. Sleep well.”

He left, and Harry looked expectantly at Sirius; his godfather looked like he had something to say.

“I’ll never forgive myself for going after that rat bastard instead of making sure you were okay,” he said eventually, voice shaking. Harry’s heart clenched.

“Sirius, no, it’s not your fault!”

“If I’d protected you like I was supposed to, you never would have gone to them!” Sirius argued. There were tears in his grey eyes, his face pale. “But I can’t undo what I did. All I can do is promise to be better in future. You’re always my first priority, pup, no matter what. I swear. I’ll be a better godfather to you.”

“You’re the best godfather,” Harry assured him, shuffling closer for a hug. “Let’s face it, Dumbledore probably would have found a way to get you out of the picture somehow. He needed me to grow up thinking I was worthless.” Sirius flinched at that. “It all worked out in the end, and you’re here now. Please, let’s just draw a line under that part of my life, yeah? It doesn’t matter anymore.”

Sirius sighed, his head tilting to lean against Harry’s. “If you say so, kid. But if you ever want to talk. Or... don’t tell Moony, but if you ever want them to pay for what they did to you... I’ve already served twelve years in Azkaban. I figured I’ve got some room to do a few things to make it actually worth it.” There was a darkness in his stormy gaze — not like the darkness of Voldemort and his people, torturing for fun; more like the darkness in Narcissa Malfoy’s when someone threatened her son. A reminder that Sirius was raised a dark wizard, and knew all the things a dark wizard knew. And he wasn’t above using them.

“They aren’t worth it, Siri,” Harry insisted. “What happened to Dudley is enough.” He’d done enough damage to that family with his existence. He was too tired to want vengeance. He just wanted it all to be over.

“I suppose. But the offer stands.” Sirius winked, kissing Harry’s forehead and getting to his feet. “I’ll leave you to settle in. I’m in the room at the far end of the hall if you need me for anything. Molly and Arthur are upstairs, and the kids are all on the floor below — you should be pretty undisturbed in here.”

“Thanks, Pads. I’ll see you in the morning, yeah?”

“Love you, kiddo.”

“Love you, too.” Once Sirius had left, the door shut quietly on his way out, Harry slumped against the headboard with a long, drawn-out sigh.

It had been a long week. But he had the sinking feeling it was going to be *nothing* compared to the weeks left until he would return to Hogwarts.

Chapter 44

When Harry entered the kitchen the next morning, an awkward hush descended over the gathered occupants. He stifled a grimace, though a glimmer of satisfaction rose within him. Good; let them feel guilty after his outburst the night before. They deserved it.

He almost made a beeline towards Remus — at Seren Du, the morning often began with the werewolf handing him a cup of tea and ruffling his hair, telling him the training plan for that day while Harry let the caffeine drag him into wakefulness. But he couldn't do that here; not only would there be no training, but as far as most of the people in the room were concerned, Harry had barely interacted with Remus since the man had left his teaching post.

Luckily, Sirius was stood by the kettle, and offered up a steaming mug with a half-smile. "Morning, pup," he greeted.

"Sit down, Harry dear — eat up! You must be starving!" Mrs Weasley insisted, then froze at her choice of words. "Do you want bacon or sausages? Or both! I'll put both on; growing boys need their protein!" Her slightly-too-high voice made Harry wince.

She put the plate at the empty setting beside Ron, and once again Harry moved it over to sit by the twins instead. Mrs Weasley pursed her lips at that, but didn't say anything.

Harry wondered how long everyone was going to be walking on eggshells around him, after last night. Maybe if he was lucky, he could have them keeping their distance until school started up.

"Did you sleep alright, Harry?" Remus asked, a knowing glint in his eyes. Harry shrugged.

"Well enough." He gave the man a weighted look; no nightmares. Something in Remus' shoulders relaxed.

"Glad to hear my old posters didn't scare you off," Sirius joked. Harry snickered.

"I'm just glad they don't move," he replied dryly.

"There's still the other bed in my room, mate," Ron piped up around a mouthful of fried egg.

"No, thanks. I'm fine where I am," Harry assured evenly.

The awkward silence continued; no one really seemed to know what to say, whether to Harry or to anyone else. Eventually it was broken by Ron's eyebrows suddenly turning bright pink, growing out rapidly until they were two enormous bushy caterpillars on his face, taking up most of his forehead. The twins smirked and high-fived each other, and Harry burst out laughing.

"Oi!" Ron slapped a hand up to his face, feeling the overlarge brows with a wide-eyed look of panic. Mrs Weasley glared at the twins.

"Boys! Honestly, what have I told you about magic at the table?" She pulled her wand and tapped Ron's forehead, attempting to end the spell.

There was a beat, and then the eyebrows shuddered — before blooming into glittery pink flowers. Ginny screeched with laughter, and even Remus' neutral expression cracked. Ron's panic grew.

"What happened? What did they do?" He had both hands up now to cover his eyebrows, while Hermione tried to pull them away so she could get a closer look.

"Fred! George!" Mrs Weasley barked menacingly. The twins held their hands up.

"It'll go away on its own!" George promised.

"I think they're rather fetching," Fred agreed, yelping when the wooden spoon was brought out. "Ow, Mum! It's just a bit of fun!"

"You'd think being old enough to use magic outside of school would make you a bit more responsible with it!" Mrs Weasley scolded. Personally, Harry didn't see what the problem was; it wasn't hurting Ron, and the twins wouldn't use any magic they couldn't counter. It wasn't like they'd burned his eyebrows off or anything!

"Leave them be, Molly. It's a great bit of magic," Sirius complimented, giving the twins a thumbs up. That just seemed to increase Mrs Weasley's wrath.

"Don't you go encouraging them, Sirius Black — they'll get themselves in trouble if they carry on the way they're going. You of all people should know better!"

"I of all people?" Sirius repeated indignantly. "What exactly is that supposed to mean?"

Mrs Weasley's lips thinned, but she didn't say anything.

"Let's all just calm down," Remus soothed, resting a hand on Sirius' shoulder. "Ronald, I'm sure your eyebrows will be back to normal in no time. If not, I'm sure the twins would be happy to correct it. Molly, the boys are just having a bit of harmless fun; with all the serious discussions going on lately, I can't really blame them."

"Hermione, leave it," Ron grumbled, batting her hands away from his face. "You can't do anything anyway."

"Speaking of serious discussions," Harry cut in loudly, figuring now was as good a time as any. "When's the next Order meeting? It sounds like I've got a lot of information to catch up on." He was done with being kept in the dark to 'allow time to grieve'. The Order didn't know how much he was aware of, but he refused to let them continue pushing him aside until it was time for him to face Voldemort again.

"See!" Sirius barked triumphantly. "I told you he'd want to be involved."

"Harry, dear, don't be silly; you're far too young to be in the Order," Mrs Weasley dismissed, ignoring Sirius entirely. "You don't need to be involved in all that."

“I think I’m already involved,” Harry pointed out. “If someone’s sending dementors after me, I want to know what else to expect!”

“You’re safe here — this place is unplottable, and under Fidelius. No one will get to you here,” Mrs Weasley assured him. “You just relax and enjoy the rest of your summer, dear.”

“Yeah, okay, I’ll relax here while someone might be sending another dementor after my aunt and uncle, or worse,” Harry snapped back, unable to help himself. “And what about when I get to school? I won’t be safe there!”

“That’s ridiculous; Hogwarts is the safest place in the world.”

“Cedric Diggory died last year!” Harry was up on his feet, hands slamming against the table. You could’ve heard a pin drop in the wake of his explosion. “Both of us were kidnapped by a Death Eater who had been *teaching us the entire year* without anyone noticing. The year before that, there were dementors crawling all over the castle. Before that, a massive basilisk! And before that, *literal Voldemort possessing a teacher*. Hogwarts has never been safe, and I want to know what’s going on. I’ve gone all summer without a scrap of information — not so much as a bloody quidditch score!”

“You had your Wireless,” Ron pointed out. Harry glared at him.

“You know damn well the Dursleys lock my trunk under the stairs the day they get me home from the station. I barely managed to smuggle my homework out — if they’d heard a radio in my room, I’d have been dead.” Once again, everyone winced at the reminder of his life with his muggle relatives. Harry couldn’t bring himself to feel remotely bad about bringing it up again.

“You don’t need to go looking for trouble,” Mrs Weasley tried to soothe. “You’ve got exams to focus on.”

“Surely it’s easier not to go looking for trouble if I know where the trouble is to begin with?” Harry pointed out. She didn’t seem to have an answer for that one, face reddening as she stuttered objections.

“The Order is for adults, Harry,” she said eventually, folding her arms over her chest.

“I think Harry’s close enough, after everything he’s been through,” Sirius retorted. “Why shouldn’t he be allowed to sit in? He deserves to know what Voldemort’s up to, especially when it involves him!”

“He’s just a boy!” Mrs Weasley argued, turning on Sirius now. “You’re supposed to have his best interests at heart, not be sending him off to war before he’s even taken his OWLs!”

“I’m not saying we start sending him out on missions, for Merlin’s sake!” Sirius exclaimed. “I just think he deserves to hear what’s going on!”

“If Harry gets to go to meetings, I want to go as well,” Ron demanded. Mrs Weasley whirled around to glare at him.

"None of you children are attending Order meetings, and that's final!" she screeched. "If you don't like it, take it up with Dumbledore; I'm sure he'll agree with me."

Harry scowled — there was no way in hell Dumbledore would allow Harry to go to Order meetings. He needed his little pawn as oblivious as possible.

Sirius was scowling too, and even Remus looked unimpressed by the whole argument. Some of Harry's ire cooled — they would both tell him anything he needed to know.

It was just frustrating, to know that he was closer to the action than ever, and yet still expected to keep his head down and pretend to be an ordinary teenage boy without a care in the world. He couldn't even take his frustrations out on Snape in a duel, or on the quidditch pitch.

God, he missed home already.

.-. .

Apparently, while Harry and the other teenage members of the household were too young to be part of the Order, they weren't too young to be put to work in making the house habitable for said Order. After breakfast he was handed a rag and a spray bottle, and sent with Ron and Hermione up to the drawing room, where they were told to clear out the china cabinet and check for infestation.

"Infestation of what?" Harry asked with a grimace of disgust. Hermione pursed her lips.

"Doxies. We got most of them out of the curtains yesterday before you got here, but there might be more hiding elsewhere." She opened the china cabinet, coughing at the swirl of dust it sent up. "Watch your fingers, boys; some of this stuff might be cursed."

The shelves of the cabinet were full of all sorts of odds and ends; small weapons, tarnished silver boxes, several crystal potion vials with curious-looking contents, and even a coiled snakeskin.

Harry watched Hermione use her rag to pick up one of the boxes, tossing it into a rubbish bag. His brows furrowed — if they were potentially cursed, surely they shouldn't be touching them? At the very least, they should have wands ready. Neither Hermione nor Ron even had theirs with them.

Surely they didn't think their magic would be traced *here*? The house was unplottable!

But as he kept watching, neither of them used so much as a Shield charm. "If this stuff is dangerous, surely someone old enough to use magic should be dealing with it?" he said cautiously. Hermione glanced over at him.

"They're busy with the important things, Harry," she told him, voice dripping with condescension. "Besides, Mrs Weasley scanned it yesterday and said it's probably fine, we just have to be careful."

"We've dealt with worse," Ron agreed. Harry bit his tongue against the retort that they had dealt with worse *with their wands*. If anything truly tried to get at him, he could always use wandless magic.

Still, as he got stuck in with removing items from the cabinet, he had to wonder what kind of scan Mrs Weasley had done; some of these things were *dripping* with dark magic. Ron yelped as a snuff box tried to bite his finger off, flinging it into the rubbish bag.

Harry pulled out a large silver serving tray embossed with the Black family crest, and looked around. "Is there somewhere Sirius wants us to put this stuff?"

"Mum said just chuck it all," Ron dismissed. "It's all dark — not like Sirius has any use for it anymore, is it?" He snorted.

At his sides, Harry's fists clenched. "Did she ask Sirius that?" These things were family heirlooms, centuries old. They were the Black family legacy — *Harry's* family legacy. It wasn't even cursed, it was just a serving tray!

"Sirius hates this house," Hermione told him. "He doesn't want anything to do with his family."

That didn't sound like something Sirius would say — since he'd learned Harry was his heir, he'd become determined to redeem the Black family name eventually, no matter what it took.

But Harry didn't want to cause yet another argument, so he reluctantly put the tray in the bin bag, and turned back to the cabinet.

He frowned, recoiling — in the corner of the cabinet, tucked away behind a vase Hermione had just removed, was a gold locket with the letter S embossed on the front. And it was full of dark magic — *familiar* dark magic.

It carried the same oily, disgusting feeling as the magic in Harry's scar.

His heart leapt into his throat. Carefully, with the rag covering his hand, Harry reached for the locket. It didn't seem to react when he picked it up, but he could feel the magic brushing up against his own like he'd had a bucket of cold water dumped over his head. He shuddered, then glanced up at Ron and Hermione, who were bickering over a crystal bottle that Ron was insisting contained blood.

While they were distracted, Harry put the rag-wrapped locket into his trouser pocket, resolutely trying to ignore the magic rolling off it in waves.

He'd get a closer look at it later, in his room. But in the back of his mind, there was a sinking certainty that he already knew what it was.

The question was, how the hell had it ended up *here*?

Once they had the cabinet completely empty — something that took several hours, and more than a couple of close calls with cursed objects — Hermione insisted they move it to check for doxies nesting behind it. Just as they were getting ready to pick up the heavy piece of furniture, the drawing room door opened.

“Lunch is— whoa, whoa, what are you three doing?” It was Bill Weasley, whose eyes went wide in alarm at the sight of them.

“Clearing the cabinet, like Mum said,” Ron replied with a shrug. “Thought we’d check it for doxies.”

Bill’s gaze flicked from the cabinet, to the bulging rubbish bag, to Harry — who gave a discreet nod and a pointed glance, expressing his own feelings on the matter. “I told Mum I’d deal with that!” Bill fussed, waving his wand and raising a shield over the rubbish bag.

“Bloody hell, what was she thinking? You three could’ve been killed!”

“We were fine!” Ron argued.

“None of you should be touching anything in this damned house without an adult present! There’s all manner of curses on all sorts of things! Tonks and I found a hairbrush that was enchanted to take a bite out of your skull the other day, just lying on a shelf!” Ron paled, and Hermione gasped.

“But— but Mrs Weasley said it was all safe, she’d checked it,” she said, voice wobbling.

Again, Bill’s eyes moved to Harry, who shook his head ever so slightly. The cabinet contents was *not* safe.

“It’s not your fault,” Bill assured. “I just need to have a word with Mum about the kind of jobs she’s giving you lot. Bloody hell. Anyway, leave that thing where it is — lunch is ready. Also, hi, Harry; good to see you.”

“Hi, Bill,” Harry greeted, as if he hadn’t already seen the redhead that summer. “The twins mentioned you were around.” He paused for a moment — he didn’t want to raise suspicions, but he *really* didn’t want to go to lunch with that *thing* in his pocket. “Hey, can I borrow you for a second? There’s a locked drawer in the desk in the room I’m staying in, Sirius says he can’t remember being the one to lock it and he thought we should get you to take a look first. Just in case.”

Bill frowned, then caught the insistent look in Harry’s eyes, and nodded. “Yeah, no problem; I’m sure it’ll only take a second. You two go on ahead, tell Mum we’ll catch up,” he said to Ron and Hermione. Ron, not ever one to miss a meal, dragged a protesting Hermione down the stairs, while Harry led the way to his bedroom. When they were inside, he warded the door.

“There’s not actually a locked drawer in the desk, is there?” Bill presumed, glancing at the desk in question. Harry grinned lopsidedly.

"There is, but Sirius knows exactly what's in there, and he says I won't open it if I know what's good for me," he replied dryly, chuckling at Bill's look of mild disgust. "No, I wanted to show you this — I found it in that cabinet we were clearing out." Carefully, he dug the locket out and set it on the desk, nudging the rag away so Bill could see it clearly. "It has the same magic as my scar, Bill. I think it's another horcrux."

"Another?" Bill asked, aghast. "You think he made more than just you?"

"I wouldn't put it past him." Voldemort had already more than proved he was willing to take an innocent life. "Even if it's not, it feels awful and needs destroying, but I really think it is, Bill."

Bill scanned it with several spells, his expression growing more and more grave. "I think you're right, mate." Reaching into the pocket of his leather jacket, Bill pulled out a dragonhide bag, and levitated the locket inside it. Immediately, Harry felt the pressure of the magic ease off. "There; that'll keep it protected until I can get it back to work, do some investigating. I'll take care of it, don't worry, Harry." He pocketed the bag again, then clapped Harry on the shoulder. "I'm sorry about your cousin, by the way. Awful stuff."

"Yeah," Harry agreed, heart clenching briefly. "S'pose you've heard it's all being swept under the rug."

"Merlin forbid the Ministry take responsibility for anything," Bill retorted wryly. "But they'll get theirs, eventually. Once the right people are in power." He squeezed Harry's shoulder, nudging him towards the door. "Come on; if we don't hurry up, Ron'll have eaten everything."

Harry snorted — even Ron might struggle with the amount of food Mrs Weasley cooked in this house, never sure how many people she'd be feeding. But he was hungry, so he let Bill lead the way down to the kitchen, both of them tip-toeing past Mrs Black's portrait.

While they ate, Bill tried as tactfully as possible to tell his mother the kids shouldn't be dealing with cursed objects unsupervised.

"Well there's only so much cleaning they can do without their wands," was her response, and Bill grimaced.

"Maybe they shouldn't be cleaning, either?" he suggested. Clearly he wasn't going to point out that they could definitely use magic without getting into trouble — Harry wondered if Mrs Weasley had forbidden everyone from revealing that fact to Ron, Ginny and Hermione. "It's the summer, Mum. Just let them relax."

"The kids have plenty of time to relax as well, Bill, don't worry," Mrs Weasley assured. "But if I didn't give them anything to do, Merlin only knows what sort of trouble they'd get into!" She laughed, shaking her head. "Though I do see what you mean about the cursed cabinets; they can stick to taking down wallpaper until they're back at school. There's certainly plenty of it that needs to go!"

Harry glanced over at Sirius — he didn't seem to be paying much attention to the conversation, reading over a piece of parchment with Tonks.

After a month of sharing the house with the Weasleys, he'd probably just given up arguing. Harry would have, too.

He ducked out quickly after finishing his lunch, ignoring Hermione's call to go over their summer work together. He caught up to Sirius, who was headed up to his own room. "What's up, pup?" the animagus asked, offering a grin. Harry shrugged.

"Feel like I've hardly seen you since I got here." He didn't say much more — he was uncomfortably aware of the number of portraits on the walls, watching their progression up the stairs. Their painted gazes burned into the back of his head, and he wondered how many of them were loyal to the head of the Black family. Probably not enough to make it safe to talk.

"I know what you mean," Sirius agreed. "Why don't I help you get your room together? Move the last of my teenage crap out of there!"

Harry was glad his godfather seemed to get the hint, and the pair of them headed to Harry's room, immediately throwing up wards. "You alright, kid?" Sirius, asked, concerned. Harry sighed.

"Fine. Just... wishing I was back at Seren Du."

"Tell me about it," Sirius hummed sympathetically. "How was your morning? Were Ron and Hermione awful?"

"Honestly they barely talk to me most of the time. I don't think they're trying very hard to still be friends with me." Perhaps they'd gotten too used to not having him around.

While Sirius fired random spells at the scantily-clad women on the wall, hoping to unstick them, Harry told him all about the cabinet adventures from the morning, as well as the locket he'd given to Bill. Sirius' face went dark.

"Bet it was bloody Reggie," he muttered. Harry eyed him quizzically. "My little brother, Regulus; he was a Death Eater. Died when he was eighteen — either he fucked up something important, or he tried to run, we were never sure. There was never a body recovered; he just showed up as dead on the family tapestry one morning. Little idiot." His mouth was scowling, but his eyes were sad. Harry's heart ached — eighteen was far too young to be serving a Dark Lord, let alone dying from it.

"You think Voldemort gave him the horcrux? What, to look after?"

"This house is safer than most places," Sirius pointed out. "It'd be a good place for it. Y'know, if I hadn't come along," he added with a sharp grin. "Or maybe old Voldie hid it here himself — he certainly visited plenty, my mum thought he was brilliant. He could've tucked it away and left no one the wiser." He shook his head, like he was trying to shake off

memories. “Lucky you found it, then. Bill’ll take care of it. Just add it to the pile of shit from this house I’m paying for the goblins to destroy.”

“I— Ron said Mrs Weasley told them to just chuck everything out. Even the stuff that isn’t cursed.”

Sirius’ smile grew twisted. “Oh, I’m sure she did. Easy to be careless with things when they don’t belong to you, isn’t it?” He looked up at Harry, and his gaze softened. “Don’t worry, pup. Molly thinks I’m disposing of all the rubbish bags as she sets them aside to be chucked. Really I’m going through them with Moony and Ceri — the cursed stuff needs properly managing, and anything worth keeping is going to the family heirloom vault, just in case you want it when you’re older. Or your boyfriend does,” he added with a wink. “Him and Cissa have as much of a right to it as we do, I think.”

Harry’s shoulders slumped in relief. “Good. I thought — I know you’ve got bad memories of your family,” he said cautiously. “I didn’t know if that would extend to the things they used to own.”

“The Black family wasn’t always awful,” Sirius told him. “It’s just in the last century or so — a bunch of them got mixed up with Grindelwald, and it all went downhill from there. But a few generations of shite shouldn’t make the whole family a write-off. And I’ll be damned if I let Mundungus bloody Fletcher make money from selling my family silverware,” he added with a growl.

“Seriously? He tried that?” Harry asked incredulously, outrage brewing when Sirius nodded. “Why is this Fletcher bloke even in the Order? He sounds useless.”

“He’s Dumbledore’s contact in the *less reputable* parts of the magical community,” Sirius quoted with a roll of his eyes. “As if he’s even good at that. Idiot’s useless in a fight, has double-crossed half the dodgy dealers in the country, and can’t be trusted as far as you can throw him. But Albus insists he’s useful, so he stays. Merlin only knows what plans the old goat has for him.”

Harry scowled. He’d like to be given five minutes alone with Fletcher.

He pushed the bloodthirsty urges away, grinning when a spell from Sirius had all the posters fluttering to the ground.

“There we go!” the animagus cheered, vanishing the posters with a flick of his wand. “Knew I’d get there eventually.” He turned to Harry, winking. “You can put up pictures of sexy boys now, if you want.”

“I think I’ll pass, thanks,” Harry said with a snort.

“Hmm, yeah; don’t want Draco getting jealous,” Sirius teased, yelping when Harry shot a Stinging hex at him. “Oi! You’ve gotten far too used to doing magic whenever you want.”

“I haven’t done any in front of the others, don’t worry,” Harry assured. “They still think they’ll get in trouble. Has no one explained to them how the trace laws work?”

Sirius shrugged. “They’re Molly’s kids. If she doesn’t want them doing magic, that’s her problem. Don’t see why she’s so determined to lie to them, though; they’d be able to clean much faster with magic.”

“Wouldn’t we just,” Harry groused. “It’s like being back at the bloody Dursleys. I thought you said every Black property had a house elf?”

A dark look flickered across Sirius’ face. “There is technically a house elf bound to this house. His name is Kreacher. But he’s mad as a box of monkeys and dangerously obsessed with my mum and the darker side of the family — I didn’t think it’d be safe to have him around with the Order needing secrecy and everything. So I sent him off to one of the unoccupied Black properties where he couldn’t do any harm.”

“Why didn’t you bring Ceri here?”

“And give Dumbledore access to a good Black house elf?” Sirius retorted. “Worse, give Molly access to one of my elves? She’d be bossing poor Ceri around like she was the head of the damn family — she’s certainly got no trouble doing so to me and every other bugger under this roof. Conveniently forgetting it’s *my* roof and I allow her and her family to live under it. Besides,” he smirked a Marauder-ish smirk, “cleaning the house by hand is giving everyone something to do. Made it easier for me to come see you at Seren Du if they were all occupied. Dumbledore and Molly are the ones who want it clean and empty of cursed objects — it certainly doesn’t bother me any. I grew up surrounded by all this filth, and it’s still cleaner than Azkaban.” He winked at Harry. “I’m not gonna be here any more than I have to be, pup. But if they want to slave away with rags and such to make this place presentable, they can be my guests.”

Harry snickered to himself. “So you *do* know how to be a bit Slytherin when it suits you,” he accused playfully. Sirius’ answering grin was devious.

“Don’t know what you’re talking about, pup,” he replied drily. “I am the very epitome of a Gryffindor.”

“Just as much as I am.”

“Exactly,” Sirius agreed, grinning. Harry couldn’t help but grin back.

At least he had allies, in this awful house. He could survive the next few weeks.

.-. .

That night, Harry made sure the house was quiet and his door was warded before he pulled a small silver mirror from his bedside drawer and propped it up on his knees. “Draco Malfoy,” he murmured quietly. It took a few beats, but soon Draco was staring back at him through the glass. Just seeing him made Harry’s heart stutter, warmth flooding to his fingertips.

“Where are you now?” Draco asked, eyeing him curiously. “That isn’t the muggles’ place.”

"I can't tell you where," Harry told him. "Like, physically cannot tell you." Understanding dawned in Draco's silver gaze.

"You're with them, then? Dumbledore's lot?"

"Unfortunately," Harry sighed. "It's nice to see the twins and Ginny again, but..."

"But you're also stuck with Weasel and Granger," Draco finished knowingly. "Are they being awful?"

"Not actually as bad as I expected, honestly. It's mostly Ron's mum trying to push us together even when everyone else can see we're not friends anymore." Thanks to Mrs Weasley's meddling, he'd been forced to eat dinner sat between Ron and Hermione. He'd survived mostly by ignoring them entirely and talking to Ginny, who was sat opposite. To their credit, Ron and Hermione didn't seem keen to talk to him either. "I think they realised they went too far with ignoring me all summer. After I maybe yelled at them a bit."

One of Draco's pale eyebrows rose, and Harry filled him in on his little tantrum the other night. By the end of it, Draco was biting his lip to keep from laughing. "And you say *I'm* dramatic," he teased, shaking his head.

"You can't say they didn't deserve it," Harry argued, blushing.

"Oh, that and far more — I'd have hexed them all for leaving you alone like that." There was a protectiveness to his tone that made Harry blush harder, though for entirely different reasons. "Still, be careful; you don't want to alienate yourself from them entirely, not this early in the game. You don't know what the headmaster is expecting of you."

Harry scowled — Merlin, he wished he didn't still have to play Dumbledore's stupid game. "I know," he assured. "But it's fine if he thinks I'm naturally shedding the Compulsions; apparently that's normal during puberty, especially after traumatic events. Remus says so," he added with a fond roll of his eyes. "As long as I can get through the year with him thinking I still trust him — and thinking I don't know much more than he's allowed for me to find out — I should be alright."

It was a tricky line to walk, especially when all he wanted to do was hex the man into oblivion, but until Harry was in a better position to fight, he had to play it safe.

And with the discovery of a second horcrux — neither of which he'd told Draco about, just to be safe — he had no idea how long it would take to be ready to fight Voldemort. He just hoped he could hang on that long.

"You're putting a whole lot of faith in Dumbledore assuming you can't outwit him," Draco said, his expression showing just how unhappy that made him. Harry offered the blond a smile.

"Draco, Dumbledore assumes *no one* can outwit him. He's spent years believing himself to be infallible — he's not going to lose sleep over a fifteen year-old boy who just seems to be

going through a bit of teenage angst. The worst he'll do is make Ron and Hermione stick to me like glue once we're back at school."

"They'd better not," Draco muttered with a scowl. "I'm not going a whole year with only our public facade. Even the study group don't know the truth."

"We'll figure something out," Harry promised. "I won't let that happen." He wouldn't survive the school year if he couldn't meet with Draco in private. He'd go mad before Christmas. "Besides, you're the one who should be careful. You're the one with a bloody Dark Lord in your house."

Draco made a face. "Don't remind me."

"How bad is it?" Draco opened his mouth, and Harry gave him a pointed look. "Honestly."

The Slytherin sighed. "It's... bearable. Obviously, I hate it," he added. "But I'll survive. I'm more worried about Mother — she's expected to be an *active participant* in whatever that madman requires. I just have to keep to myself, and agree with every word he says at mealtimes."

Harry bit his lip. "It's only a few more weeks."

"For me," Draco replied. "Not for Mother."

Heart aching, Harry wished he could reach through the mirror and hold his boyfriend close, kiss away the pained expression in his eyes. "She knows she has options," he said instead. "She's making her own choices, and she won't tackle more than she can handle. Your mum is strong, Draco."

"She shouldn't have to be!" Draco burst out angrily. "Not in her own damn house!"

"I know." *God*, he hated that it was three weeks before he'd see Draco again. Hated there was nothing he could do to help.

"If anything happens to her, Harry..." Draco trailed off, fear on his face.

"We won't let it," Harry assured softly.

They both knew he couldn't control that. But if it helped Draco, Harry would happily pretend.

.-.-.-.

The sight of Seren Du up ahead of him made Remus' shoulders relax, even as guilt wormed its way through him at the same time. He felt bad, being so happy to be home when Sirius and Harry were stuck at Grimmauld.

But in his defence, his happiness was less about the place and more about the person within.

He found Severus in the smaller living room; the more private one that they liked to use when they wanted to be alone somewhere that wasn't their bedroom. The Slytherin looked up, sympathy veiled in his dark gaze.

"You do not want to be in that house right now. Hell, I'm glad I'm not in that house right now," Remus declared, dropping onto the sofa beside his partner. He had only stopped in for a couple of hours — dinner, and a little time after — but that was enough for the tension to wrap its way around him, making his hackles rise and his mind *itch* in the corner where the wolf lived. It wasn't just about Harry, either; the way Molly was treating Sirius made him want to yell at the woman, and while some of that was the approaching full moon, a lot of it was just his own frustration. Did she not realise what she was doing to Sirius?? She was lucky he was in a much better mental state than he was pretending to be, or she'd be driving him right to do something reckless just to get away from the house; away from her.

Maybe that was the point, he thought with a scowl.

"I can imagine, after the things Potter let slip on his arrival," Severus said with a faint frown. He had left by that point, but Remus had told him everything that had happened over dinner and after. Everything they'd been able to fill in the gaps about, regarding Harry's home life.

"I swear," Remus growled, eyes flashing gold, "if I ever see Petunia again..."

"She is not worth your anger," Severus told him, lips quirking ruefully. "Believe me. I have known that woman since she was a girl, and quite frankly she is worth very little indeed. Her husband... he is worth even less, but deserves a lot more," he snarled dangerously. The murderous glint in his eyes might have frightened another, but Remus could only agree with it. To know those *people* had treated his cub like that.

"At least he's away from them. He has us, now." Remus scowled briefly, knee bouncing restlessly. "It would be better if we could get him away from Molly and Dumbledore, too, but... it's a step."

"Indeed. And while there may be some less than ideal company at Grimmauld, at least he will have the three redheaded demons he actually likes. And Black," Severus added, far less contempt in his tone than there might have been a year ago. Remus grinned.

Suddenly, a thought occurred to him, and a heat flickered within him. There was a much more productive use for his restless energy, here.

"Meanwhile, the two of us get this place to ourselves," he drawled playfully, intentions clear. Severus' eyes darkened, his gaze trailing over Remus' form. Remus hadn't exactly been aiming for this when he'd come home, but it was a much better way of relieving his tension than punching or cursing something. And it seemed Severus wasn't too adverse, either.

"That is a benefit," the Slytherin agreed, setting his book aside. Remus pounced, sliding a hand into that fine dark hair and pulling Severus into a heated kiss. Severus didn't go easily, pushing back, dominating the kiss and swiftly moving both of them until Remus was pinned back against the arm of the sofa. "You're sure no one else is coming home?" Severus asked, and Remus smirked.

"Nope," he said, popping the p. "Just us, all night, I promise." The look in Severus' eyes made his blood race, and he reached up to undo his tie, tossing it to the floor. Severus' long, talented fingers were already working on the buttons of Remus' shirt.

Remus wasn't letting himself be the only naked person in the room, and he hurried to match Severus button for button, peeling the black shirt off his lover's pale skin. The firelight cast long shadows over them, highlighting the dips of Severus' collarbones and the flex of his arms. Remus bit his shoulder lightly, feeling the man's hips jerk against him.

"What are you after, wolf?" Severus growled, and Remus smirked; what an excellent question to be offered.

"Whatever you're willing to give me," he returned, relaxing back against the sofa. Severus wasn't often the more aggressive one of the two of them, but sometimes Remus needed to be taken out of his own head before the tension within him ate him alive, and his Slytherin was excellent at that.

Dark eyes brightened with arousal, and Severus reached for his wand. Within moments the pair of them were naked, and Remus' breath hitched as cool air hit his flushed arousal. Then Severus' body was over his, pressing hard against him, those amazing hands wrapping around his cock as lips hungrily devoured his own.

As the kiss deepened, they both realised it wasn't *quite* enough. Parting with a ragged gasp from Remus, Severus stood, and Remus had a split second to admire his naked form before he too was being pulled to his feet. He wondered if they were moving it to the bedroom — and then Severus firmly but gently manoeuvred them both down onto the plush rug, straddling Remus' hips. Remus smirked. "In front of the fire? Such a cliche," he teased, arching up as Severus grabbed his hands and raised them over his head, pinning them to the floor with one hand. Remus whined, arousal shooting sharp through him; with his werewolf strength he could easily break Severus' hold if he wanted to, flip them over and change the dynamic, but half the fun was *letting* Severus pin him down like this.

Besides; Severus knew spells that would keep Remus in place, if he really didn't want him moving. This was more for show, but it was enough.

Severus was methodical as he kissed his way down Remus' body, avoiding the one place Remus wished he'd touch most. But then he summoned a vial seemingly out of nowhere, and Remus didn't mind at all, amber eyes glowing as a pillow was shoved unceremoniously under his hips.

There was no holding back between them; Severus knew exactly how to make him fall apart, driving into Remus with abandon, every thrust utterly perfect as stars burst behind Remus' eyelids. Remus couldn't remember what he'd been angry about, could barely remember his own *name*, all that mattered was Severus inside him, over him, holding him down and fucking him. He came with a loud shout, and Severus followed not long after with one last powerful thrust, his hand almost painfully tight around Remus' wrists as he rode out his orgasm. When he was finally ready to move, he pulled out and leaned down for a hard kiss. "Better?" he growled, and Remus chuckled breathlessly.

"Perfect," he sighed, whole body feeling sluggish. "Fuck. I needed that." They'd both been tense lately, with Severus now back at Death Eater meetings and both of them having to deal with Dumbledore and the Order. Remus realised belatedly that they'd hardly had any time alone together in weeks — no wonder he was so wound up.

Severus helped him to a sitting position, pulling Remus into his lap, uncaring of the sticky mess between them. He massaged Remus' shoulders, soothing any aches that might have come from having his arms up like that. Remus leaned into him, humming softly. "I'm not that old and fragile," he teased, though he didn't move to stop his partner's ministrations. "You used to have to do a whole lot more than pin me down to hurt me." Merlin, some of the things they used to get up to... not all of the injuries Remus blamed on the full moon were actually due to the wolf.

"And I used to be able to fuck you on the floor without my knees aching," Severus drawled in response. "Things change." Remus eyed him worriedly, but Severus shook his head ever so slightly. "I'm fine," he assured, softening into another kiss.

"Good. I'd hate to break you when we've just got the house to ourselves," Remus teased, earning a harder kiss and a bite to the lip.

"I do not *break*, wolf," Severus muttered, and Remus' eyes flashed.

"That sounds like a challenge," he replied flirtatiously, knowing that he was the only person in the whole world Severus would even *consider* doing anything that could be considered breaking for. It was a heady feeling indeed.

"Need I remind you, we are not eighteen anymore," Severus pointed out, fingers digging into Remus' shoulders. "If you're trying to get me going again, it's going to take considerably more time to recover." Then he glanced down between them. "Though evidently werewolf stamina counts for something."

Remus smirked, though he wasn't actually looking for a round two. "Not right now," he dismissed. "I'm just thinking, for the rest of the summer... both of us are going to need a hell of a lot of stress relief, with everything we've got ahead. Maybe I should take a shopping trip next week." There was a weight to his voice suggesting exactly what kind of shopping he had in mind, and he felt Severus tense.

"That... would not be a bad idea," the Slytherin agreed, and Remus felt triumph flare within him.

"For now, though, I think we should run the bath," he suggested, leaning back to stretch out his back. He wasn't ready to make Severus put clothes on, yet; a bath sounded like a perfect idea.

As they stood, Remus looked down at the pair of them, naked and still sticky with come and lube, some of the mess staining the rug. He snorted, shaking his head. "And you say we're not eighteen anymore," he joked lightly, raising one eyebrow. "Merlin. Well, thank God for this house; we couldn't do that at Grimmauld, or Hogwarts." Bless Sirius' family for being so

fucking rich and pretentious, that there were living rooms with fireplaces he could have sex in front of like something out of a trashy period romance novel.

Severus looked up at him, amused. “Perhaps if we did, Albus would finally have that long-overdue heart attack,” he said with false consideration. “Molly, too, if we timed it right.”

Remus laughed, imagining what might happen if *any* of the Order could see what had just happened in that room.

Sometimes, he wished he could spill their secret, just to see the looks on their faces.

One day, the time would come. And he couldn’t *wait*.

Chapter 45

Chapter Notes

This fic has passed 3k kudos, you guys are awesome! <3

Harry hadn't realised how much he'd come to value the freedom of the summer until it was taken away from him. Grimmauld Place might not be a cage in the same way Privet Drive had been, but it was a cage nonetheless — if anything, this was worse, because he was expected to be *happy* about it. Be *glad* he'd been rescued and brought to a place where he could have information dangled in front of him but be denied it, where his desires were utterly steamrolled over in favour of what someone else thought was *best for him*.

Sure, those who were expecting him to be pleased didn't know the safe haven they'd torn Harry from, but it was grating all the same.

At least he had *some* friends around who were sympathetic.

And he had Sirius back properly. That was nice, too.

Harry was just sick of being pushed into spending time with Ron and Hermione, especially since the pair seemed to have realised that Harry was no longer magically inclined towards their company. They didn't really want to hang out with him either, though Hermione continued to make a good effort. Everyone seemed certain that his abrasiveness was just from the *trauma* he'd been through in the last few months, and he'd be back to his usual cheerful self by the time school went back.

It was a shame they didn't seem to realise that he was perfectly cheerful around certain people.

For example, he was content in the library with Fred, George and Ginny, under the supervision of Bill while they looked through the Black library for anything *dangerous*. "I don't know why this is our job," Ginny mused as she pulled a huge stack of books from the shelf, depositing them at the table in front of Bill. The curse-breaker was checking each book for unsavoury magic, and was supposed to be checking the contents too for anything dark or alarming, disposing of books he thought would be deemed inappropriate.. Really he was just splitting them into two piles — one to remain in the library there, and the other to be smuggled out through Remus to Seren Du. Not that Bill knew where they would end up, just that Remus would take them somewhere safe.

"Mum thought Hermione might be too tempted to read if she did it," Fred supplied, levitating books back onto the shelf once Bill was finished with them.

“Because we four are of course, utterly allergic to the very *concept* of reading,” George continued dryly. “Oi, Harry, can I borrow this one?” He held up a book from the ‘sneak out’ pile, on the potions use of contraband creature products. Harry snorted.

“If you can keep it hidden from your mum, sure,” he agreed. George winked at him, shrinking the book down and pocketing it. Both twins already had a small collection of books in their pockets that they had promised to look after, and Bill had a stack of his own, too. Harry didn’t mind; as long as the books were kept out of the hands of Dumbledore and his ilk, he was happy for his friends to raid the library as much as they wanted. He also got a vindictive sort of glee when he thought of how disappointed Hermione would be with only the ‘appropriate’ remains of the vast collection.

Of course, she’d had access to the library for the whole summer before he’d showed up, so perhaps she’d already had her fill.

He snorted to himself; as if that were possible, with Hermione Granger.

The five of them continued their work quite happily, up until the point Sirius knocked on the door, calling them down for lunch. Ron and Hermione were already in the kitchen when they arrived — they had been paired with Remus to try and clear out one of the upstairs drawing rooms, and didn’t look nearly as happy about the assignment as the library crew.

Harry ignored the perpetually-empty seat at Ron’s side, heading down the other end of the table to sit between Ginny and Bill. Mrs Weasley clucked her tongue at the space between Harry and the other two-thirds of the ‘golden trio’ — then something in her gaze softened, and she smiled.

“I’m glad this summer is giving you and Ginny plenty of time together, Harry dear, but be careful you don’t neglect your friends,” she said, giving Harry a conspiratorial wink, while he stared at her in utter confusion. Beside him, Ginny groaned quietly.

“Mum, I’ve told you a thousand times, it’s not like that,” she insisted. Mrs Weasley chuckled, patting her daughter’s head as she set plates down in front of them.

“I’m just saying; a first romance is exciting, and I know what it’s like to want to spend all your time with them, but friendships are important too.”

Harry, who had just taken a sip of water, choked. “I’m sorry, what??” Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Sirius bite his lip to stop himself laughing, while Remus sighed in exasperation.

“I told you,” Ginny said, rolling her eyes. “Mum reads *Witch Weekly*, but not the *Quibbler*.¹”

Harry blinked. “Mrs Weasley, Ginny and I aren’t dating,” he said. That only made her smile wider.

“You don’t need to keep secrets from me, dear — Arthur and I are delighted. As long as you take good care of our little girl,” she added with a giggle. Ginny blushed as red as her hair.

"No, seriously, we're not, I— have you thought that all summer?" Incredulity crept into his voice. "Surely someone showed you the *Quibbler* article?"

Mrs Weasley's lips pursed. "Oh, that silly little rag has always been full of nonsense. Really, I'm amazed old Xeno Lovegood gets enough money to keep it in print!" She waved him off, starting the dishes washing in the sink.

Harry grimaced — so she had *seen* the article, then. She just refused to believe it. "I mean, I don't know enough to comment on the rest of the stuff in the *Quibbler*," he admitted — sure, a lot of it *seemed* like nonsense, but Harry wasn't so arrogant as to assume anything he didn't understand was made-up — "but I wrote that article myself. I asked Luna's dad to print it. Ginny and I aren't dating; I'm gay."

Water sloshed over the edge of the sink as Mrs Weasley abruptly dropped a saucepan. "Really, Harry — you should be more careful about what you allow the media to say about you, even if it is in a small magazine like that. Whatever you think you might be feeling, it's rather hasty to go and spread something like that about everywhere; you're only fourteen, after all."

Harry stiffened. Across the table, he saw both twins grimace. A stilted silence filled the kitchen.

"So I know my own mind when you think I'm going out with your daughter, but when I say I'm gay it's *hasty*?" Harry was slowly beginning to realise why he was almost always paired with Ginny to do chores around Grimmauld. Anger bubbled in his belly.

"Mum, come on, not this again," Bill started, sighing.

"If you aren't with Ginny, that's perfectly fine, Harry," Mrs Weasley said, ignoring her eldest son. "Though the two of you would make a wonderful couple. But there's no need to go saying things you can't take back."

"I'm not likely to take it back," Harry retorted sharply. He wished he could say something about Draco — something to make Mrs Weasley realise he wasn't just *confused*, or whatever else she'd convinced herself was going on in his head. Then again, he doubted even his relationship with another boy would change her mind on that; it didn't seem to have done any good for George or Charlie, from what he'd heard.

"I think he knows his own mind, Molly," Sirius piped up, the barest hint of a growl in his voice. Mrs Weasley huffed.

"Well, you *would* say that, wouldn't you?" she muttered derisively. Harry clenched his hands under the table, trying to rein in his magic before it made the plates shatter.

"I'm going to eat in my room," he declared, getting to his feet. He glanced over to the twins and Ginny. "I'll meet you back in the library in half an hour."

"Harry, *really*, there's no need—" Mrs Weasley tried, but he ignored her, picking up his plate and striding to the door. Before he could even leave, he heard her sigh. "He'll come around,

Ginny darling, don't you worry," she said softly, though in the utter silence of the kitchen it carried just fine.

"I don't fancy Harry, Mum!" Ginny protested angrily. "I wouldn't want to date him even if he was straight, *which he's not*."

Harry didn't stick around for anything else Ginny might have said — as glad as he was that she was sticking up for him, he was too tired to sit and listen to Mrs Weasley try and talk him out of his own sexuality. A knot formed in his chest; why did she have such a problem with it? Not just for Harry, but for her sons, too? Was it truly just about wanting them to have children?

He shook his head, bumping his bedroom door open with his hip. It didn't really matter anymore; long gone were the days where he hoped for Molly Weasley's approval.

God, he couldn't *wait* for school to start.

.-. .

After that fateful afternoon in the kitchen, Mrs Weasley had stayed conspicuously silent, though the approving smiles she gave Harry and Ginny every time they so much as *looked* at each other were beginning to grate. While Harry wasn't one to involve himself in other peoples' relationships, part of him hoped Ginny would soon agree to get together with Neville, just so he didn't have to deal with being shoved her way every five minutes.

On top of her stubborn insistence on Harry and Ginny making a wonderful couple, Mrs Weasley seemed utterly oblivious to the tension between Ron and Hermione and the rest of the household. It was at the point where Harry was beginning to wonder if she was under some sort of *Confundus* charm — only for Remus to assure him that Snape had discreetly checked every member of the Order, and sadly her actions were entirely her own.

The confirmation that Mrs Weasley had been taking money from his vaults of her own volition hardened something within Harry — he no longer felt bad about snapping at her when she got too overbearing.

He kept to himself the best he could, each day making him miss Seren Du more and more. He couldn't even be distracted with the Order meetings happening regularly; they took great care to keep him very firmly away from any Order business, though Sirius and Remus would tell him anything he needed to know. From the sounds of things, Dumbledore's *elite* group were fairly stalled in their plans to deal with the rise of Voldemort and his followers.

Harry wondered if Dumbledore might ever tell them about horcruxes. He didn't have any doubt that the man knew about them — though he clearly hadn't had any idea about the one residing under his very nose, in the locket.

Harry was relieved when Bill pulled him aside one afternoon, when anyone who might be suspicious of such things was distracted elsewhere. "I wanted to try something. Do you mind...?" He held up his wand, gesturing with his free hand towards Harry's scar.

"Go for it," Harry assented, bracing himself while Bill cast something in a language Harry didn't recognise. There was a strange *tugging* sensation, both over his scar and around the centre of his chest, and Bill looked relieved. "What was that for?"

"One of the other curse-breakers working on this was wondering if the continued exposure to the horcrux from such a young age might have a sort-of blending effect on the host soul," Bill explained. "She thought since your magic was growing kind of around the soul fragment, it might assimilate it in a way that makes them almost indistinguishable." The alarm must have shown on Harry's face, as Bill quickly continued. "The spell I just did confirmed that they're two separate, distinct entities. They can be separated," he assured. Harry visibly slumped in relief. "We don't know how yet, but we'll figure it out."

Bill spoke with such confidence, Harry couldn't help but believe him. "And the locket?"

"Destroyed," Bill confirmed.

"Thank fuck," Harry muttered, though trepidation gathered in his chest. "Though, Bill, I was thinking about something the other day — how much do you know about what happened with Ginny in her first year? With the Chamber of Secrets?"

He'd been toying with the idea ever since they'd discovered the locket and realised his scar wasn't the only horcrux. The more he thought about it, the more it seemed to make sense.

Bill frowned. "Something about you killing a basilisk? I'll be honest, Mum and Dad didn't tell us much." Harry had expected that. He gave Bill a quick run-down of the events; focusing more on the odd behaviour of Tom Riddle's diary, and less on the whole basilisk situation. Even so, by the end of the story Bill was wide-eyed and a little green behind his freckles. "Bloody hell, kid."

"Yeah, there's a reason Dumbledore swept that one under the rug." The Prophet would've had a field day with the knowledge that the headmaster had let a basilisk roam the school for a year. "Anyway, I think—I think the diary was another horcrux."

Bill's face grew grave. "From the sounds of it, I think you might be right." He quirked an eyebrow. "Don't suppose you have access to the diary now, so I can run tests on it?"

Harry shook his head — that would've been helpful, but considering he used the diary to help free Dobby, he couldn't regret giving it back.

"Thought as much. Ah, well — I'll get the team looking into it. I don't know if there's any way to find horcruxes — especially not a way that won't let old Snake-Face know we're onto him — but at the very least we can start brainstorming for others he might have. He can't have made too many more; the soul would be too unstable for him to resurrect himself after more than about eight or nine splittings."

Harry's stomach lurched at the idea of so many horcruxes existing in the world. "I hope it's not that many."

Bill grimaced, nodding in agreement. “You and me both, mate.” He ran a hand through his hair, which was loose for once. “Well, if that Potter luck holds, maybe you’ll stumble across a couple more on your adventures,” he remarked wryly. Harry snorted.

“You never know.” He wasn’t sure just how far the Potter luck would extend. “At least that’s two of them out of the way, for sure.” Hopefully, soon, they could add the third to the list. “Are... have you figured anything else out, with my scar?”

The redhead looked apologetic, which was an answer in itself. “We’re working on it. I promise you, we’ll figure something out. Gorrak’s got Gringotts’ best and brightest on the case — and me,” he added, smiling bashfully. Harry elbowed him in the side, rolling his eyes.

“Gorrak told me you’re one of the best they’ve got, don’t get humble on me now,” he teased. Bill nudged Harry away, blushing.

“Either way, we’ll get it sorted. You just focus on the three hundred other things you seem to have going on in your life,” he teased.

Considering Bill was only privy to about half of Harry’s secret plans, that felt like an understatement. The curse-breaker ruffled Harry’s hair, signalling an end to the conversation, and they stepped out of the room they’d holed up in — opening the door directly in Tonks’ face. She stumbled to a halt, looking between the pair with raised eyebrows. “Something I should know about, you two?” she asked, innuendo heavy in her voice. Harry blushed brightly. Bill, on the other hand, just laughed.

“As if I wouldn’t be taking the opportunity to piss Mum off with that, if it were the case,” he teased, hand resting on Harry’s shoulder. “Besides, Tonks, you already know where my interest lies.”

“Ah, yes,” Tonks drawled, looking devious. “Pretty veela intern girl.”

Harry’s eyes went wide. “Intern girl?” He whipped around, looking up at Bill. “Is Fleur interning at Gringotts?” He couldn’t think of another veela girl they might have been talking about, not after the way Bill had behaved at the third task. And Harry knew from his last letter from Fleur that she’d been looking into Gringotts jobs in England, though he’d been moved to Grimmauld before she could tell him any more.

“Shit, I forgot you two were friends,” Bill muttered, cheeks going pink. Tonks lit up.

“Harry, you know the girl Bill fancies?” she asked excitedly. Harry grinned.

“She was the Beauxbatons champion. She’s great.” He glanced to Bill. “I’d ask her out sharpish if I were you. She’s not impressed by a man who waits around.” She would say yes, Harry was sure of it.

Bill’s blush brightened, while Tonks cackled. “That’s you told, Weasley,” she teased. “Now, off with you; I need to talk to Harry here.”

Bill's embarrassment faded in the wake of concern, but Harry discreetly shook off his worry. He wasn't sure what Tonks wanted, but he doubted she'd do anything to him with half the Order around. Sirius said his cousin was one of the good ones.

"We'll catch up with you in a bit," Harry assured the eldest Weasley, and followed Tonks through to the small parlour nearby. He kept his hand ready to draw his wand from its holster, especially when she privacy-warded the door. She turned to face him, and her eyes darted to the movement — then immediately turned sad.

"I'm on your side," she blurted. "I mean—I wanted to say sorry, for how I acted when we came to pick you up from your relatives' house."

Harry tensed, eyeing her suspiciously. "Why, because you feel bad for taking this long to figure it out?" he asked, somewhat harshly.

"No, because I knew from the start and I was trying to see if Mad-Eye would say anything," came the reply. Tonks sighed, her hair shifting from pink to a deep purple. "Well, I didn't know the specifics. I don't think any of us did. But... Sirius is my cousin. I knew right from the get go that things weren't right with him and Dumbledore. I talked to him about it, the few times it was just the two of us in the house. He told me he was worried about you, that he knew the muggles didn't treat you right — and he knew Dumbledore knew that, and kept sending you back there anyway."

Trying to keep his face impassive, Harry was internally wide-eyed at the onslaught of information. That was not what he'd expected — why hadn't Sirius warned him he'd spoken to Tonks??

"So you're not Dumbledore's biggest fan either, then?" he surmised, wondering exactly what he could get away with saying. Tonks snorted derisively.

"Not hardly. Old man always did put his nose more places than it was ever wanted," she retorted. "I'm here because Kingsley's here. And Kingsley's here because he wants Voldemort gone, and he knows that's more likely to happen with Dumbledore than the Ministry." She paused. "Sirius told me you're the Black heir," she admitted. "That makes you family. And if you've learned anything yet about being a Black, it's that family comes first." The smile she shot him was vicious, and Harry grinned back.

"He mentioned he'd talked to your mother. He didn't tell me he'd told you." It was exhausting, trying to keep track of who knew which secrets. Harry would write it down if he wasn't so worried about the information getting into the wrong hands.

"Most people think that because Mum was disinherited, I don't give a toss about all that pureblood Wizengamot stuff," Tonks drawled. "It makes me a good target for people like Dumbledore to try and sway over to their side. As far as the Order's concerned, I think all purebloods can go hang. Now I'm not trying to barge my way in to whatever secrets you've got going on; I just wanted to let you know that you've got an ally in me, for whatever you need. Kingsley, too, even if it doesn't seem like it," she added, correctly interpreting the look on Harry's face. Harry hadn't spent much time with the older auror, but from the little he had seen, the man seemed very... by the book. "He's head of the Shacklebolt family. He's been

dealing with Dumbledore on the Wizengamot for years now, he knows how the headmaster works. And he knows how the Ministry works. But while he was technically a Ravenclaw, he's always had a solid Slytherin side to him."

Tonks grinned, and Harry grinned back.

"That's good to know." He wouldn't let them in on what he was *really* doing, not until he knew how much he could trust them. But it was definitely nice to know there were two more Order members who weren't mindless Dumbledore puppets.

It would make it much easier to steal them over to his side, once he was ready.

.-.

Bill and Tonks both stayed for dinner, and Harry was amused by the way both of them eyed each other suspiciously, glancing back to Harry as if they could somehow intuit what the other had needed to talk to him about. Harry ignored the whole thing, chatting with Remus instead. At least until Bill cleared his throat.

"I got a letter today, Mum. With some news you'll be pleased about," he said, barely stifling a smile. Mrs Weasley eyed him curiously. Bill's smile widened. "Charlie got a job as a senior handler at the reserve in North Wales. He'll be home by the weekend. For good."

All the redheads in the room made exclamations of surprise and joy, Mrs Weasley even shedding a few tears in delight. "Oh, Arthur! Our boy's coming home!"

Mr Weasley took her hand and kissed the back of it, beaming. "That's brilliant news, Bill," he said.

"I'll get one of the rooms upstairs cleared out for him," Mrs Weasley started, but Bill shook his head.

"Oh, don't worry; I offered him my spare room for when he's not at the reserve," he assured. Mrs Weasley made a quiet sound of protest, and Bill grinned at her. "No offence, Mum, but no one wants to move back in with their parents after they've lived by themselves for five years." His voice was playful, and Mr Weasley pecked his wife on the cheek.

"Let the boys have their space, love. I'm sure Charlie will be over for dinner plenty. And Order meetings," he reminded. That seemed to placate the matriarch — or at least, her excitement overshadowed it all.

While the twins quietly wondered if they could get Charlie to bring them home dragon scales for experimenting on, Harry smiled into his shepherd's pie. With Bill and Charlie both back in the UK, that meant they would soon be ready to take up their Wizengamot seats.

His plans were all beginning to line up. He couldn't wait to see how things would play out.

.-.-.

The next morning, Harry woke with a sharp gasp, empty grey eyes the only thing he could see. He cursed softly, clenching his hands in his duvet — his brain had somehow melded his guilt about both Cedric and Dudley, until his dream became watching Cedric get his soul taken by a dementor in the middle of that graveyard.

Harry could still feel the cold.

He took a shower in an attempt to warm up, glad it was still too early for most people to be awake, and desperately wishing he was still at Seren Du. There, nightmares were greeted with a sympathetic hug from Remus, a cup of tea from Ceri, and then at least an hour of forcing his brain into more productive pursuits by duelling with Snape.

Harry couldn't believe how much he actually *missed* the Potions Master.

Nightmares in Grimmauld Place were an entirely different kettle of fish; Harry had wiped all traces of it from his face by the time he went down to breakfast, not wanting either Mrs Weasley or Hermione to begin the *concerned* questioning, as if he were one wrong word away from another shouting match.

They might not have been far off with that assessment, but the nightmares wouldn't be the thing to trigger it. He was just so *tired*. After weeks of being free to process his grief, Remus and Snape and even Sirius giving him the space and comfort to do so on his own terms, having to lock it up tight — or worse, *perform* his grief for the satisfaction of others — was beginning to gnaw at him, constantly, making his skin itch and his stomach churn. It wouldn't be so bad if he could sneak off for a quick cuddle with either of his godfathers, but there was hardly a moment of privacy in Grimmauld. It was somehow worse than the Burrow the summer before; despite being a much bigger house, everyone seemed to congregate in the same five rooms, and Harry wasn't quite brave enough to go exploring in the rooms that hadn't been fully cleaned and cleared of dark magic. Hiding in his room only got him so far — Ron and Hermione had figured out where it was after the first week.

With school drawing ever closer, they seemed to have decided it was time to bring Harry back into the fold — or someone had instructed them to, perhaps. Either way, it meant the pair were constantly hounding him for attention now, Ron pestering him to play chess or exploding snap, while Hermione asked incessantly about his summer homework.

He got lucky, through breakfast. Ron was busy stuffing his face, and Hermione seemed too tired to begin the Harry Inquisition. He was able to keep his head down and eat his breakfast — and ignore the concerned glances Sirius sent his way. Remus had gone, no doubt back to Seren Du for the day. Part of Harry hated him for being able to travel so freely.

Since Hermione was *under the weather* — Harry heard her mutter something to Ginny about cramps, and wisely decided to ask no further — the teenagers were allowed a chore-free morning. Harry told Ron that he too wasn't feeling well, and the oblivious redhead decided both his friends had clearly caught the same germs, so he went to go bother the twins while they rested.

Unfortunately, Harry's luck began to fail around lunchtime.

He was just beginning to hope he might get a peaceful afternoon, too — perhaps enough privacy to call Draco on the mirror, even — when Ron claimed the seat beside him at the table. “Alright, mate. You seem to be feeling better.”

Harry didn’t answer.

“I guess Hermione’s staying in her room for the day,” Ron continued, unperturbed. “Look, d’you think that, y’know, while she’s not around — could I take a look at your Charms essay? She won’t let me copy hers, not even just to get cliff notes so I can write my own version. You keep telling her you’ve done it already. Unless you were lying? You can tell me, mate — we can do them together, before she finds out and yells at you. Merlin, she’s gonna be a *nightmare* this year with OWLs coming up.” He chuckled. Harry didn’t.

“I’ve written my essay,” he confirmed.

“Brilliant!” Ron grinned. “So can I borrow it?”

“No.”

The redhead faltered. “What? Come on, mate. I’m not gonna copy it, I just wanna see what you’ve written so I know I’m on the right track.”

Harry gritted his teeth. The low-level headache he’d had since he’d woken up was rapidly spreading, his pulse thudding in his temples. He could already feel his magic buzzing under his skin — after stretching it to its limits while training with Snape the first half of the summer, it was not doing well being cooped up these last few weeks.

“We’re going into fifth year, Ron. You should be able to write your own damned Charms essay by now,” he bit out. Ron snorted.

“You sound like Hermione,” he complained. “Mate, seriously, I—“

“*No, Ron,*” Harry cut him off, voice louder than intended. Around them, everyone went silent. “You can’t copy my essay, and I’m *not your ‘mate’*. ” His tenuous hold on his emotions shattered, along with the jug of pumpkin juice in the middle of the table. Chair scraping against the tiles, he got to his feet. “Do your own bloody homework, and leave me alone!”

He’d hardly eaten, but he didn’t care, storming from the kitchen before anyone could call him back. It was a stupid thing to get so upset over — he didn’t even *care* about the Charms essay, but Ron talking to him as if the entire last year hadn’t happened, as if he and Harry were still best friends... it was the final straw.

He reached his room and slammed the door in his wake, throwing himself down on his bed. His magic leapt eagerly to ward the door, and Harry wished more than anything that he could curse something, or go flying, or just get out of this damned *house*. He almost called Ceri to take him over to Seren Du, consequences be damned. Sirius had managed to escape for a few hours a week before Harry had moved there; surely they could do *something* to give him the same freedom?

He would never ask, though. It wasn't worth the risk — now Harry was here, there would be chaos if he went unnoticed for more than about ten minutes.

Besides, if he went to Seren Du they'd have a hard time getting him to ever leave again.

A knock on the door made him groan, but his ire lessened when he recognised Sirius' magic on the other side of the door. He dropped his ward, inviting the animagus in and rolling onto his side. His cheeks flushed at the look on his godfather's face. "I'm not mad at you," Sirius assured. "Not like Molly is. But she can stuff it, quite frankly — her youngest son is an arse." Harry snorted. "Did yelling at him help any?"

"Made me feel a bit better," Harry muttered, shifting aside so Sirius could join him on the single bed. The older man shuffled beside Harry, leaning against the headboard and stretching his legs out. After a beat, Harry rolled closer to him, burrowing his face in the man's side. "I hate this, Padfoot," he admitted, eyes stinging with tears. "This house... it's bad enough on its own, but they just *won't leave me alone*. I've got no privacy and far too many secrets and I still can't get a full night's sleep without waking up from one nightmare on another, and as soon as I wake up they're just *pestering me* and it's only going to get worse when school's back in because Dumbledore will be there, and no one here seems to even *care* that Cedric is dead or that Dudley is dead or *anything!* I can't even bloody go outside for some fresh air!" Across the room, the desk rattled. Harry swallowed back the lump of emotion in his throat. "I want to go home, Sirius," he whispered, staring up at the man with desperate eyes, red-rimmed and tearful.

"I know, pup," Sirius sighed, running his hand through Harry's hair. "I do, too."

Guiltily, Harry realised that Sirius had been stuck in this house for just as long as he had. He opened his mouth to apologise, but Sirius shook his head. "No, don't — I've had years of experience being trapped in this dump with people I hate," he said wryly. "I'd say at least we've got some good ones on our side — the other Weasley kids, and Remus, and even Tonks when she's around — but it's really not the same when all you need is a day or two to yourself." He kept stroking Harry's hair, and the boy leaned into the touch, feeling the tension slowly leak from his frame. "I'm sorry, pup. You've not had time to process anything about your cousin — that's a complicated bit of grief if I've ever seen one. And hell, you haven't really dealt with Cedric's death yet, not really." His voice was knowing, and Harry didn't deny it. The Hufflepuff's death still felt like a gaping wound in his chest. "I wish I could do more to help. I wish it wasn't so easy for Molly to boss me around in my own damn home."

"She's got Dumbledore on her side," Harry pointed out. "You never stood a chance."

"Neither of us did," Sirius agreed. "I wish I could take you home and let you fly and swim and bake with Ceri for a while. Wish I could get Draco there, and Cissa too — get them out of that bastard's clutches, get them somewhere safe. But... safe won't last long, these days, until we've done something about it. And doing all those things would only bring more trouble down on our heads."

Harry hummed quietly in agreement. Slowly, his breathing was beginning to steady itself again, his emotions draining from him until all he had was exhaustion and a deep, aching sadness. "I didn't mean to have such a meltdown." He wasn't going to apologise to Ron, but

he'd have to deal with the awkwardness that would follow, and probably a scolding from Hermione about his temper, when she found out.

"I think you're owed more than a few of those," Sirius retorted. "Ron was being a prick, anyway — you were right, he's old enough to do his own homework." His hand stopped moving, resting on the back of Harry's neck, a comforting weight. "But you can lock him out of here 'til dinner. And the twins and I will up our pranking game to try and keep him off your back. There's only two more weeks until school, and then you'll have all your other friends around, and it'll be easier to avoid Ron and Hermione."

There was a sadness to Sirius' voice, and Harry's heart clenched; he would get to go back to school and escape Grimmauld Place, but Sirius wouldn't. "Are you going to be alright, when I go?"

"Oh, don't worry about me, pup," Sirius replied, bravado lingering at the edge of his smile. "Once all you kids are gone it'll be easy for me to pretend to sulk in my room all day. I can have Ceri pop me home and hang out with Beaky in the sunshine. I managed alright last year, after all."

Harry remembered all the days he'd called Sirius and seen the shadows in his face. All the times Remus had stayed at Seren Du to keep him company. Sirius was doing lots better, but Azkaban's scars were still present. "I'll always worry about you," he confessed, burrowing deeper into the man's chest. Sirius held him close.

"I know, kiddo. But honestly, I'll be alright. I can survive anything after Azkaban."

Harry sighed, longing for the day that Sirius — and himself — no longer just had to *survive*, but could truly enjoy life.

"Two weeks feels like forever," he admitted softly. Even at the Dursleys, summer had never dragged on so long.

"Tell me about it," Sirius agreed with a snort. Then he grew serious. "D'you want me to ask Snape for some more Dreamless Sleep?"

It was a tempting offer, but Harry shook his head. "It won't help in the long term." It would only delay the dreams. He couldn't take the potion forever. "Just... can we hang out here for a bit?" It was nice, being in the quiet with Sirius. Almost like being back at home.

"As long as you like, kiddo," Sirius agreed without hesitation. He started to stroke Harry's hair again, playing with the messy black strands. "We don't have to leave 'til you want to. Or if you want to kick me out and get some time to yourself, that's fine too. I'll just go hex all of Ron's pants to scream at him when he gets a boner."

Harry choked, burying helpless giggles in Sirius' jumper. "Maybe in a bit," he agreed.

He couldn't deny a Marauder his fun, after all.

Chapter 46

At this point, Harry felt like he deserved a medal for not hexing Ron Weasley into a gibbering puddle of sludge. Hermione was almost as bad, but she was thankfully distracted by Mrs Weasley declaring the library ‘safe’. With less than two weeks left before she was back at Hogwarts, the young witch was determined to read as much as humanly possible.

In-between harassing Harry about the state of his summer homework, his future revision schedule, and anything else she could think to pick at, of course.

Ron just continued to talk to Harry as if they were still best friends, crowing about how great it would be to be back at school and how Harry would kick the Slytherins’ arses at quidditch with his Firebolt. The obsession with dominating the other houses — especially Slytherin house — was wearing on his nerves.

Harry had to wonder what their angle was — if they had been told by Dumbledore to continue befriending him, was this really the way they thought to do that? Sure, it might have worked when they first met, but he was eleven and drowning in compulsion charms then! He would’ve befriended a statue if Dumbledore’s spells had directed him to.

It was becoming incredibly clear to him that there was a reason the pair had no friends outside of each other, and Harry.

“Surely this is too much, even for them,” he mused to Remus one afternoon, hiding in the werewolf’s bedroom. “If they really wanted to try and be friends again, I’d have thought they’d try it a bit more gently.”

“I don’t think either of those two know what gentle is,” Remus replied dryly. “It does seem odd, though. Hermione’s a smart girl, she should’ve realised making you angry isn’t likely to endear them to you.”

“She just thinks I’m *struggling with my feelings*,” Harry muttered, recalling something he’d overheard her saying to Tonks when she thought Harry couldn’t hear. “The only feeling I’m struggling with is the one telling me to punch Ron.”

Remus snorted, shaking his head. “At least you’ve got Ginny and the twins.”

Harry made a face — he did, but the twins were locked in their room at all hours frantically trying to develop more joke products for the upcoming school year, and spending time with Ginny by herself was causing Mrs Weasley to make all kinds of uncomfortable comments.

“I’m worried about what Dumbledore might have Ron and Hermione do if I’m not friendly with them again soon,” he confessed, finally speaking aloud something that had been niggling at him for a while now. “I mean, he clearly knows his compulsions have failed. If he tries more, or...” Harry didn’t like to think about how far the headmaster might be willing to go. Ron and Hermione had access to him in Gryffindor Tower; his dorm, his trunk,

everything. If Dumbledore pressed them to do some kind of magic on Harry *for his own good*, there was little he could do to escape it.

"If you need to, you can always fake friendship with them," Remus pointed out. "It'll add another burden to your shoulders, but it might be necessary to keep you safe."

A noncommittal hum sounded in Harry's throat. Then his brow furrowed, as another long-brewing thought finally surfaced aloud. "Do you think Dumbledore has spelled them, like he did me?" He hated how hopeful he sounded. "Put compulsions on them to make them treat me a certain way?" If he hadn't had the security of his other friendships through his fourth year, Ron's treatment of him after his name came out of the Goblet would have devastated him — he would've been desperate to take the redhead back by the time he deigned to apologise. Would Dumbledore go that far, to keep Harry vulnerable?

Remus sighed, running a hand through his hair. "It's possible," he admitted, though he sounded doubtful. "There's a meeting before dinner if you like. I can have Severus stay and try to check them."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "Would Snape actually be willing to stay for dinner, *here*?" The man was always one of the first ones to leave when Order meetings ended. Harry hadn't seen him for more than five minutes in total since he'd left Seren Du.

A small, fond smile flickered across Remus' face. "He will if I ask him," he assured, and Harry grinned.

"He'd do anything if you asked him," he teased, watching the werewolf blush. It was strange, to think of Severus Snape in such a way, but it was absolutely true; if there was one thing Harry had learned in the last year, it was that the Slytherin would live and die at the behest of Remus Lupin.

"Alright, enough of that," Remus muttered, nudging Harry's shoulder. "Unless you want me to mention the list of things Draco would be willing to do for you."

It was Harry's turn to blush, and he shook his head. "I'll stop," he promised. "But... if Snape wouldn't mind, that would be great." At least then he would know. Then he could stop hoping.

"He might even enjoy it; getting to torture Gryffindors even in the summer," Remus joked. "It'll be good for you, too — blow off some steam with someone who won't treat you like glass."

Harry couldn't deny, that sounded good. He hadn't expected to miss Snape's bluntness so much, but after having half the house pussyfoot around him — even Remus and Sirius sometimes, though they tried not to — he couldn't *wait* to snipe at someone who would be equally sharp in return.

Sure enough, when Harry and the other teenagers were allowed down into the kitchen after the Order meeting, there was a tall, black-clad figure stood in the room.

It was worth it just to see the blood drain from Ron's face.

"Professor Snape is staying for dinner," Mrs Weasley declared, false cheer in her voice and confusion in her eyes. Harry couldn't really blame her; if he hadn't asked for it, it never would have happened. He wondered what sort of motive Snape had given for the odd behaviour.

"But—" Any protest Ron might've made died when dark eyes narrowed in his direction. Instead, a tiny squeak escaped him, and he hurried to sit as far away from Snape as possible.

Harry, more than willing to play his part, shot the Potions Master a moody glare. Amusement flashed in the man's eyes for the briefest moment.

Snape ended up sat between Remus and Kingsley; the two most tolerable Order members, as far as he was concerned. Though he played up his disgust at having to sit beside Remus.

Harry was amazed the werewolf could keep a straight face through it all. More than that, he was amazed that no one but him and Sirius seemed to realise that Snape's grumbled insults followed by Remus' too-mild witty retorts were the pair *flirting*.

Gross.

"So, Severus," Mr Weasley said cheerfully, passing a bowl of cabbage further down the table. "Are you ready for school to go back? Feeling like the castle is too quiet yet?"

"Ready to have my time invaded by imbeciles who can barely brew a Swelling Solution?" Snape drawled, sending a pointed look in the direction of the Gryffindor teens. "I think not."

Mr Weasley chuckled, as if it was supposed to be a joke. "Ah, but I'm sure there's a few talented kids in the mix who make it all worth it."

"We try our best, Dad," Fred chirped bravely, earning a Snape-glare of his own.

"Such a shame you've only got us for one more year, isn't it, Professor?" George added. The pair seemed bolstered by the fact that they — presumably — couldn't earn detention during the holidays. Though Harry noted they weren't *quite* bold enough to try any pranks at the dinner table. He'd seen George pocket some jelly-bean-like things the moment he'd seen Snape in the kitchen; no doubt the evening's entertainment rescheduled.

"On the contrary, Mr Weasley; I believe the entire school will rejoice if the two of you actually make it to graduation."

That just made the twins grin wider.

The possibility that they might *not* make it to graduation had Mrs Weasley pursing her lips. "You boys had better buckle down this year," she warned. "You only get one chance to take your NEWTs, after all — you'll never get a good Ministry job without them. I'm of half a

mind to ask Professor Snape to keep a stern eye on you, make sure you aren't getting up to trouble."

"I have better things to do than keep a pair of Gryffindors from getting themselves expelled," Snape said coolly. His ire didn't seem to bother Mrs Weasley, who continued to stare down her twin sons.

"You've got a lot to live up to, you know — all three of your older brothers got excellent NEWT results."

Harry hid a scowl behind a forkful of roast lamb — how dare she compare them with their brothers like that? They were different people! Besides, it wasn't like there was anything to truly worry about; Fred and George had excellent grades, when it actually mattered. They might only have three OWLs each, but they were all Os — it took a lot of brains to come up with the prank products and spells they created, after all.

The only thing more laughable than the twins failing their NEWTs was the idea of either of them getting a job at the Ministry.

"Leave the boys be, Molly," Sirius called languidly. "I'm sure they'll do fine in their exams. If even James and I could get our heads on straight long enough to pass our NEWTs, your two will manage alright."

"A fine example, Black — considering you and Potter got more detentions in your seventh year than any other," Snape pointed out acidly. Sirius just grinned at him.

"Aw, it's sweet that you kept count for us, Snivelly."

Snape scowled. "Only to see if a certain number would *finally* result in expulsion."

"What number did you get to, Sirius?" George asked.

"We'll see if we can beat it." Fred was smirking, right up until a wooden spoon whacked him on the shoulder.

"Absolutely not! Sirius, don't you dare encourage them," Mrs Weasley snapped. "Honestly, think of the kind of example you're setting for Harry, if nothing else."

Sirius glanced over at his godson, and winked. "I'd say Harry's doing grand, all things considered."

"If you mean he's following in his arrogant father's footsteps, mutt, you would be correct." Snape let his eyes land on Harry, challenge clear. A thrill shot down Harry's spine — oh, it was on.

"Don't talk about my dad like that," he retorted hotly, glaring at the professor. "He wasn't arrogant."

"Watch your manners, Potter," Snape scolded. "I dread to think what kind of fanciful lies the mutt and the wolf have been filling your head with this summer, applauding your rule-

breaking recklessness.” His eyes flashed, a sneer twisting his features. “There won’t be a Triwizard Tournament to stroke your over-inflated ego, this year. Perhaps you may finally learn some *humility*.”

“I managed just fine without the three years before the Triwizard,” Harry shot back. It was hard to maintain the hateful look in his eyes; this was *fun*. When he felt a smile threaten to creep through, he drew up on all his frustration at being trapped in Grimmauld. “I’m sure there will be something to keep me busy. Another Death Eater teacher, perhaps. Has Dumbledore hired a new Defence teacher yet?”

“*Professor* Dumbledore, Potter,” Snape corrected. “And that’s none of your business.”

“That’s a no, then.” Harry’s lips twitched. “Blimey, is it really getting that difficult to find people who don’t want to kill me?”

Someone further down the table snickered. Harry thought it might’ve been Tonks.

“Despite what I’m sure your *dogfather* has told you, the world — and Hogwarts’ staffing practice — does not actually revolve around you,” Snape drawled at him.

“Yeah, kid; Defence professors were dropping like flies long before you hit the scene,” Bill joked, winking at Harry.

The rest of the Order managed to diffuse the situation, keeping conversation relatively civil through the remainder of dinner — though Harry couldn’t help throwing a few more snide remarks Snape’s way, which were returned in kind viciously. It felt good, being able to actually *argue* with someone who wasn’t just going to coddle and patronise him. Someone who could handle it if Harry’s venomous tongue got a little too sharp.

It helped too that the others were looking at him like he was either utterly mad or incredibly brave, speaking to Snape like that, even outside of school. Perhaps it was foolish of him, but it helped cement Snape’s reputation as hated dungeon bat — especially when he promised Harry a week of detention once school started back up.

“You can’t do that! It’s summer!” Harry argued indignantly, making Snape smirk in satisfaction.

“*Watch me*,” he hissed.

“I think that’s enough for one night,” Remus cut in, his professorly ‘disappointed’ face firmly in place. “Harry’s had a difficult summer, Severus; you can’t punish him for things he says outside of school. Though he really should *apologise*,” he added with a pointed glance at the dark-haired teen. Harry huffed mulishly, glaring up at them.

“Sorry, *sir*,” he bit out. Remus gave him a look that said he might be overdoing it a touch, but Harry held firm.

“No matter,” Snape dismissed. “I’m sure he will earn those detentions soon once school begins, if he cannot learn to keep a civil tongue in his head. I should have expected his

attitude to get worse once Black became involved in his care.”

That set Sirius off again, and really, those two had far too much fun picking at each other.

“Why don’t I walk you out,” Remus said, pitching his voice loud enough to be heard over Sirius’ scathing tone. “Molly, thank you for dinner, it was lovely.” He turned the disappointed face back to Harry. “Cub, I expected better of you. Professor Snape is a guest here, and even in the summer he is still your teacher.”

Even knowing it was just a front, the tone still sent a squirm of guilt through Harry’s gut. But he went full throttle into teenage-angst, scoffing and shoving his chair back. “Whatever,” he muttered. “I’ll be in the library.”

He stalked from the kitchen, managing to make it all the way up to the privacy of the library before bursting into laughter. He didn’t have to wait long before the door opened, Remus and Snape slipping in and warding the door behind them.

“Brat,” Snape accused without heat, and Harry grinned at him.

“Don’t tell me you didn’t enjoy that.”

A flicker of a smile was the only answer the tall man gave.

“Yes, yes, very funny, both of you,” Remus said, rolling his eyes. “Honestly, I thought you were going to give Molly a heart attack, the way you two were carrying on. Sirius, too!” He eyed them both exasperatedly. “Sometimes I think I made a mistake in getting you all to befriend each other.”

“Too late,” Harry chirped, grinning. “Also, like the two of you can talk — frankly I’m astounded no one has realised the truth, all that flirting going on.”

That brought a blush to both their faces. “People see what they want to see,” Remus said, shrugging. “And no offence, Severus, but no one in that room wants to see even a hint of you having a sex life, let alone with me.”

Snape gave his partner a quick smirk, eyes burning. “Their loss.”

“Uh, hello, I’m still here, please stop,” Harry begged, knowing this was his punishment for being a sassy little shit in front of half the Order. “Back to business, please? Professor, did you manage to test them?”

The pair grew serious, Snape turning back to Harry. “Neither Mr Weasley nor Miss Granger are under any spells, compulsion or otherwise,” he confirmed quietly. Harry’s jaw tightened — the tiny fragment of hope he’d kept alive in his chest died.

“Right. Everything — that’s all them, then. They’re working for Dumbledore of their own will.”

“Likely he’s manipulated them into believing they’re helping you. Or, at the very least, helping the wizarding world at large,” Snape said. It made Harry feel a little better, but his

stomach still soured; it might be Dumbledore's instruction, but their obliviousness to Harry's emotional state was all them.

"Thank you for checking, sir. I appreciate it."

Snape nodded. "I took the liberty of checking the other Weasley children — they, too, are clear. The headmaster evidently does not see them as a threat to his control over you."

Now that was good news, relief rising in Harry. "Hopefully it stays that way." So far, only Remus and Sirius had been enchanted in any way, other than Harry himself. The two people who were most likely to take Harry out of Dumbledore's clutches.

"Keep a keen eye on those close to you — if you believe their behaviour to be suspect, tell me and I shall test them," Snape assured. "We have come too far to let carelessness be our downfall."

The prospect made Harry feel sick; if Dumbledore got suspicious of any of the heirs, it would only take a few well-placed compulsions and perhaps some truth serum to have all of Harry's work destroyed.

"We'll all be vigilant," he promised.

Satisfied, Snape nodded, then turned to Remus. "Do you need anything further, or can we go?"

"You go, I'll be over in a few." Remus ran a gentle hand down Snape's arm, giving him a look that Harry couldn't begin to decipher. Snape merely nodded, and disappeared.

"Is everything alright?" Harry asked, eyeing the werewolf hesitantly. Why would Remus need to stay behind?

"You tell me," Remus returned. "Those digs about the Defence professor weren't just to rile up Severus."

Remorse flooded Harry's gut. "You know I wasn't talking about you, right?" he assured quickly. "That night with Wormtail was an accident — you were the best Defence professor I've ever had, and you never should have left. I don't count you in the number that tried to kill me." He didn't want Remus to think Harry blamed him for what happened, even for a minute.

The man smiled slightly. "That's good to know, but that wasn't what I meant." Harry blinked, confused. "Are you that worried about this year's teacher endangering you?"

"Oh. Well, uh, track record hasn't been fantastic," Harry pointed out. "I wouldn't say worried, more... expecting the worst? Though it is concerning that we're this close to term and don't have one yet." Anyone who was such a last-minute hire was bound to be a problem, for one reason or another.

"You're not wrong, there," Remus agreed with a grimace. "With any luck, you'll get someone who's just incompetent rather than actually dangerous."

Harry, thinking of Lockhart, didn't say anything about how the former could easily become the latter. "As long as I pass my OWLs, I don't mind either way."

"I think that's one subject you don't have to worry about, cub," Remus said, ruffling Harry's hair. "You could take your Defence OWL tomorrow and get an O, I'm sure of it."

Harry preened; truthfully, he couldn't wait to take his exams. To put in to practice all the studying he'd been doing in secret, all the progress he'd been hiding.

"It's Potions I'm hoping for the O in," he admitted. "I want to see Snape's face when he has to admit I'm not as hopeless as he insisted."

Remus laughed. "Severus has every faith in you getting an O. He wouldn't have let you ease off your Potions lessons earlier in the summer, otherwise." His smile turned fond, as it often did regarding the dark-haired Slytherin. "He'll push you hard in class, but that's just because he knows you can do well. Even if he'll have to put up a fuss about letting Harry Potter into his NEWT class," he added teasingly.

Looking at him, Harry couldn't believe no one in the house was aware of the true relationship between the two. Hell, that they had never let it slip as teenagers, let alone the adults they were now. "Hey, Remus?" The werewolf quirked an eyebrow expectantly. "How come even the Order don't know about you and Snape? I can understand keeping it secret at school and everything, but... everyone here already knows what side he's on." It had to be exhausting, to pretend to hate the man you loved even in the comfort of a place that was supposed to be safe.

The Marauder's gaze grew melancholy as he met Harry's eyes. "It's complicated, Harry," he sighed. "Part of it is just Severus' reluctance to let his guard down among people he doesn't trust. Half the Order think he's still loyal to Voldemort and just playing Albus to keep himself safe. If even one person were to say the wrong thing in front of the wrong people..."

Harry grimaced — it could spell Snape's death.

"But on top of that, we can't let Dumbledore find out. So much of his trust in Severus — so much of Severus' position, and the knowledge he gets from it — is because he believes Severus owes everything to him. He needs to believe that Severus does not trust anyone but him; that he has nothing of his own to live for." There was pain in his eyes — a familiar kind of pain, to Harry.

He wondered how long Snape had gone believing that was the truth.

"I'm sorry," Harry said softly. "That— that's no way to live."

"It is what it is," Remus dismissed, managing a half-smile. "We have always kept our relationship hidden, and it has served us well so far. Eventually it will not be necessary, but until then... I have him back in my life, and that's the most important thing. I don't need other people to be aware of my love for it to be real."

Harry couldn't imagine what those twelve years were like for them, when Sirius was in Azkaban and Snape and Remus were apart and all of them were so, so lonely in so many ways. They had been hard enough for Harry, as a child. The adults had all kinds of other problems.

He couldn't imagine having to spend twelve years pretending he didn't feel the way he did about Draco.

"I hope you get to be open about it, soon," he said instead. Remus smiled, squeezing his shoulder.

"You and me both, cub." He glanced up at the clock. "I'll take my leave, if you don't mind? I think you've been in here long enough for the others to think you're done sulking."

Harry grimaced; he was amazed they hadn't been interrupted already. "Yeah, probably. See you tomorrow?"

Remus hugged him, kissing the top of his head. If Harry grew much more, he'd have to bend down a little for the werewolf to do that, and it made him grin. "Bright and early. Have a good night, cub. Sleep well."

"You, too."

Remus stepped back, and in the blink of an eye he was gone. Harry's stomach clenched enviously — Snape and Remus got to go back to Seren Du and be alone together.

One day, he would get to be back there, with Draco, and with his family. He just had to hold on until then.

. . .

The weekend brought with it a buzz of excitement, and a storm of baking courtesy of Mrs Weasley.

Charlie was home.

As promised, he came for dinner the day he returned from Romania, a still-red burn on his forearm that he hadn't even bothered to try and hide from his mother's disapproving gaze. He showed up with Bill, immediately catching Ginny as she threw herself at her older brother. "Oof, watch your elbows, there, Gin," he joked, mock-winded even as he lifted her off her feet in a hug. The rest of his siblings crowded him, full of questions about the Welsh reserve and what Charlie would be doing there. Harry hung back, though Charlie still managed to wade through the sea of redheads to give Harry a hug.

"Good to see you, kid," he enthused, then his eyes darkened. "I'm sorry about Diggory. And your cousin."

Harry's heart clenched. "Yeah. Thanks. Welcome back, though."

“Oh, not you again!” Tonks’ loud groan made them both look up — she was stood in the doorway, smirking at Charlie. “I thought I got rid of you for good.”

“Shut up, you love me,” Charlie declared, striding across to wrap the auror in a tighter hug than even Ginny had earned. Tonks yelped, shoving him away when he tried to smack an exaggerated kiss to her cheek.

Harry had forgotten the pair were friends; it seemed like a lifetime ago that he’d been first introduced to Tonks at the Quidditch World Cup.

“I hope you get eaten by a dragon,” Tonks said, wiping her cheek with an exaggerated grimace. Charlie barked out a laugh.

“Missed you, too, mate.”

The commotion had drawn the last few members of the household down to the kitchen; Sirius stood in the doorway, Remus at his shoulder, looking both amused and bewildered by the pair’s antics.

“You must be Charlie,” Sirius greeted, holding out a hand. Charlie shook it, blue eyes trailing appraisingly over Sirius.

“And you’re the infamous Sirius Black,” he returned. “Have to say, you look a lot better than you do in those Wanted posters.” His cheeks dimpled in a grin when Sirius laughed.

“I should hope so! Those Azkaban photographers never got my good side.”

Remus introduced himself as well, and the next thing Harry knew they were all being herded to the table, which was groaning under the weight of all the food Mrs Weasley had cooked to celebrate her son’s return.

For once, Harry was entirely overlooked in the kitchen of Grimmauld Place — everyone wanted to know what Charlie had been up to since the First Task, which was the last time he’d been home. The stocky redhead was in fine form, regaling them all with stories of his dragons, and the coworkers he’d left behind in Romania. He sounded sad to have parted from them, but his joy at being back with his family was obvious.

No one even looked Harry’s way, except when Charlie told him the Horntail’s eggs had hatched, and she was more ferocious than ever. “In case you ever fancy round two,” he joked, blue eyes sparkling. Harry snorted.

“I’ll stick to quidditch, thanks,” he replied dryly. Charlie could keep his dragons, thank you very much.

. . .

His return to Hogwarts was so close Harry could almost *taste* it — so close he’d entirely forgotten about booklists, until Ginny knocked on his bedroom door with two envelopes in her hand. “Cutting it a bit close, aren’t they,” she remarked, tearing into her own.

“Good thing there’s only two new books,” Harry agreed, scanning his list for the coming year. Ginny huffed.

“Speak for yourself. I’m lucky I can have George’s old books — Diagon’s gonna be a nightmare.”

Harry grimaced. “Are we going to owl-order, or…?”

“Mum’s gonna pop out and grab everything, once we’ve figured out what we all need. So I guess you’ll be owl-ordering.” Her brown eyes were knowing — she was fully aware of her mother’s forays into Harry’s vault, and the security measures put in place to stop that. Harry’s stomach clenched; no one had noticed anything amiss, yet. Hopefully Gringotts could keep her out without putting suspicion on Harry.

Ginny was eyeing the envelope in his hand expectantly, and Harry peered at it — just the two pieces of parchment, as always. “What?” he asked her, baffled.

“Oh, nothing. I was just expecting— well, fifth year, innit? Prefect badges?”

“Oh yeah.” That had completely slipped Harry’s mind. “You think Nev, maybe?”

Ginny brightened, “I hope so. His gran would be dead pleased.”

Harry hoped so, too; Neville would make a great prefect. It might encourage him out of his shell a bit more, too.

There was a high-pitched shriek from downstairs, closely followed by Mrs Black spitting profanities from her portrait. Harry and Ginny shared a knowing look. “Hermione?”

“Hermione,” Ginny agreed.

There was no way the female Gryffindor prefect wasn’t her. “Merlin help us,” Harry muttered under his breath, making the redhead giggle. The last thing Hermione needed was the illusion of authority.

Deciding to get it over with, the pair headed downstairs to find Harry’s year mates — sure enough, Hermione was holding a shiny prefect’s badge like it was the most precious thing in the world.

The surprise was the matching badge in Ron’s hand.

“No way,” Ginny murmured. Then, louder; “Ron, you’re a *prefect*?” She said the word like one might say *fungus* or *pus-filled boil*. Her brother glared at her.

“What’s that supposed to mean? Yeah, I’m a prefect.” He squared his jaw in challenge, eyes flicking smugly towards Harry.

“What?” Mrs Weasley had chosen that exact moment to come by, carrying a pile of laundry. Ron looked up, and showed his mother the badge. “Oh! Oh, my! Ronnie!”

The twins were summoned by the commotion, and looked equally as disgusted as Ginny when they realised what had happened. Their jokes couldn't quite hide the flash of pain that crossed both their faces when Mrs Weasley declared that was '*everyone in the family*'.

"Congrats, Ron," Harry said once she'd left with the promise of buying Ron a new broom. Ron's smug look returned, and Harry smiled evenly. "Good to see Dumbledore has faith in your ability to handle the workload of a prefect on top of your OWL revision. Personally, I'm glad I only have to deal with studying and quidditch."

The redhead's expression faltered — clearly he hadn't thought about the actual effort involved in being a prefect.

"You've got your priorities right, Harry," George agreed, grinning. "None of that *responsibility* nonsense."

"There's no need to be jealous, Harry," Hermione said primly. "I'm sure Professor Dumbledore had his reasons for picking Ron over you."

"Oh, completely," Harry agreed, throwing her off her stride. "I get into way too much trouble, he'd look bad to reward me for it. Nah, seriously, best of luck to both of you. Though I'm sorry it's probably fucked up those revision schedules you worked so hard on, Hermione."

Beside him, he noticed Ginny's cheek twitch with the effort of holding a straight face. Hermione frowned. "Oh, no, you're right — I should re-write those now!" She turned as if to leave, then paused. "Harry, is it alright if I borrow Hedwig, to tell Mum and Dad? You don't need her, do you?"

Harry was tempted to say no just to be difficult, but Hedwig hadn't really left Grimmauld since Harry had arrived; he hadn't wanted to risk writing to anyone, not sure what Dumbledore might consider unacceptable. "Yeah, go for it; she could do with the chance to stretch her wings. I think she's in the upstairs parlour, the one with the big window. I'm gonna go finish packing."

And so he went upstairs, leaving Hermione eagerly chattering to Ron about the adjustments she would make to their revision schedules — oblivious to the dawning horror on Ron's face.

Harry smirked to himself; oh, that was far too easy.

If Dumbledore was expecting Harry to be upset about not making prefect, he truly had lost his grasp on things.

.-.

Despite what he'd said, Harry didn't really have that much packing to do. He'd only brought from Seren Du what he would need for the school year, and a few quick spells had everything stacking neatly into his trunk. But with his usual shadows aflutter with the news of prefect-hood, Harry took the opportunity to dig out his two-way mirror. "Draco Malfoy."

After a few moments, the blond's face appeared in the glass. A tightness in Harry's chest eased. "Hey. I've missed you."

Draco's face softened. "Missed you, too, Scarhead." There were dark circles under his eyes that made Harry's heart ache. "Merlin, I can't wait to be out of here tomorrow. Did you see booklists finally arrived? I thought they'd forgotten, honestly."

"I think Dumbledore only just managed to find a new Defence professor," Harry supplied. "I have to say, I'm not impressed at their book choice, whoever they are. Slinkhard, ugh." He made a face, and Draco hummed in agreement.

"I don't know who it is, but Father said Fudge is very pleased by the appointment, so that doesn't bode well."

It definitely didn't; a tiny knot of trepidation formed in Harry's belly. Perhaps he'd been too flippant in his jokes about teachers trying to kill him.

Teachers trying to support the Ministry might be worse.

"Anyway, that doesn't matter. Let's see it, then," Draco prompted, lips curving in a smirk. Harry blinked, perplexed. "Come on, Potter." His silver eyes darkened playfully. "I'll show you mine if you show me yours."

Then his hand appeared in frame, long fingers carefully cradling a green and silver prefect badge.

"Oh!" Harry's stomach did a complicated little flip of emotions — joy; pride; the *briefest* snatch of jealousy; frustration, that Draco would now be busier. "I, uh, didn't make prefect."

Two pale blond eyebrows shot up. "*Really?*"

"Dumbledore, giving me authority?" Harry pointed out with a snort. "Don't be ridiculous — it might make me think I'm actually *worth* something." He rolled his eyes, hoping Draco didn't catch the little twist of bitterness as his joke fell a fraction short.

"I expected he might want to show a bit of support for his *Golden Boy*, considering what the *Prophet* has been saying about you all summer," Draco reasoned. His brow furrowed. "I'm sorry. Who is it, then; Longbottom?" Harry must have made some kind of face, for Draco blanched. "Don't tell me it's Weasel."

"Him and Hermione," Harry confirmed dryly. "Everyone's very proud."

"Merlin's beard," Draco muttered. "Granger was a given — that badge has been hers since first year. But *Weasley*, seriously? What was Dumbledore *thinking*?"

"Probably some kind of incentive for Ron to keep an eye on me," Harry said with a shrug. He'd had some time to think about it, and it made sense. "Give him something to lord over me to keep him happy — something the *famous Harry Potter* doesn't have. Better than giving it to me and having another thing for Ron to be jealous over." God, Harry was exhausted by all the posturing. "I think I've pissed him off by not being mad about it. As far

as I'm concerned, it's one less thing for me to worry about." He smirked at his boyfriend. "I was *hoping* it would mean more free time in my schedule to sneak about in unused classrooms, but clearly I'm going to be awfully lonely on that front."

"On the contrary, it just means I have a *reason* to be out past curfew, while you've got that fancy cloak of yours," Draco returned, a huskiness to his voice that made Harry's heart stutter.

His birthday felt like *eons* ago, now. He couldn't wait to have Draco in his arms again. "Seriously, though, I'm proud of you. I know you worked really hard to get that badge." Ron would probably say that Draco's father had bought him the badge, but Draco's grades spoke for themselves.

A pale flush rose on the blond's cheeks, a pleased smile crossing his lips. "Thanks. I expected it to be Blaise, honestly; he's a more politically sound choice."

He was the only Slytherin fifth year boy not directly connected to Death Eaters. "Your father aside, I think Snape would've had a fit if it was anyone but you. Dumbledore wouldn't have overruled him on this." Not like he almost definitely had with the Gryffindors — there was no way McGonagall would have picked Ron Weasley over the rest. Hell, even Seamus would have been a better choice than Ron.

"I can't wait to take points off Weasley the first time he insults me," Draco said with a smirk, and Harry laughed.

"God, there goes our chance at the House Cup." Even Ron's ability to take points wouldn't save them, considering prefect point adjustments had to be reviewed by the head of house.

There was a strange thud on Draco's side of the mirror, and the Slytherin boy froze. "I have to go," he whispered. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Before Harry could say anything, the mirror was blank. He growled under his breath.

The sooner Draco was away from that hellhole, the better.

. . .

That evening, there was a party at Grimmauld Place, celebrating the two new prefects. Someone had conjured a banner, and the kitchen was decorated in red and gold. Half the Order was there — whether to celebrate or just to enjoy free food — and Mrs Weasley was happier than she had been all summer as she flitted between groups of people, offering up drinks and food, happily gushing about the newest prefect in the family.

"Harry, dear, I'm so sorry but I wasn't able to get your new schoolbooks," she said, an annoyed frown on her face. Harry tensed. "The goblins have changed the rules — they wouldn't let me in without you there, even though I had your key. I would have just bought them with the rest, but, well; the Slinkhard book isn't cheap, and..."

“Not to worry, Mrs Weasley, I’ll owl-order them tonight before I go to bed.” Hedwig had already returned from Hermione’s parents, bearing a congratulatory letter and some sugar-free sweets. “They’re probably just tightening security because of Voldemort being back. Worried about people under Imperius and the like.” He said this with a lackadaisical shrug and a half smile, and the Weasley matriarch sighed.

“Something like that, I’d imagine. Really, I don’t know what Albus was thinking, leaving the school lists so late in the term. All those poor first years in Diagon today, hardly knew which way was up!” She bustled off, heading to greet Kingsley as he flooed in, still in his auror uniform.

Harry ended up stood with Charlie and Tonks, butterbeer in hand. The metamorphmagus had joined the Weasley clan this evening, with waist-length red hair and freckles across her cheeks.

“Sprout would’ve rather dug up the greenhouses than made me prefect,” Tonks declared, grinning. “This one, on the other hand, was Minerva McGonagall’s pride and joy.” She elbowed Charlie in the side, and he went pink.

“Only when I wasn’t in detention for trying to sneak creatures into the dorm,” he protested. “Or in detention *with you* for some kind of trouble or another.”

“Andromeda Black’s daughter? *Trouble?*” Sirius cut in with a mock-gasp, hand going to his chest theatrically. “Well, I never!”

Harry had known Charlie and Tonks were in the same year at Hogwarts, but it was only now he was realising how inseparable they had been in their school days. “You’d almost think trouble runs in the family or something,” he piped up cheekily. Sirius barked a laugh.

“Or something,” he agreed. “Don’t worry, cousin dear; us Blacks never made prefects. Only Cousin Cissa ever got a badge from our generation of the family.”

“You mean you weren’t a prefect?” Harry feigned shock, earning another laugh.

“Me? You know damn well I was in too many detentions with James to ever get that badge. No, that was dear old Remus’ *honour*. He was the good boy.”

They looked over, where Remus was seemingly trapped in a conversation with Hermione — a rather one-sided conversation, by the looks of things.

“I can see that,” Charlie mused. “He’s got that sort of trustworthy vibe to him.”

“It’s all bullshit,” Sirius assured. “He was responsible for just as many pranks as me and Jamie — he was just better at not getting caught. Damn werewolf nose, little cheater,” he grumbled fondly. He squeezed between Charlie and Harry, slinging an arm over his godson’s shoulders. “Nah, a prefect badge is more trouble than it’s worth. Now, the *quidditch captain badge*, that’s the one you want, pup. All the perks, none of the responsibility. The prefect’s bathroom is a hell of a thing.”

“You weren’t quidditch captain either,” Harry said, raising an eyebrow, and Sirius winked.

“No, but Robin Waters was Ravenclaw captain, and he was *very* generous with the password. For the right price.”

“Spare me the details,” Harry said, mock-gagging and making Charlie snicker.

“Quidditch captain is definitely less work than prefect,” he said, then grinned cheekily. “I would know, I was both.”

“Ooh, alright, show-off,” Sirius teased, grey eyes sparkling.

Across the room, Harry saw Ron glance his way — all afternoon, the redhead had been waiting for Harry to do something, or say something; any kind of sign of jealousy. It had to be eating him up inside that Harry genuinely didn’t care about badges.

Tonks slipped away to go talk to Kingsley about something, and Harry left Charlie and Sirius playfully sniping at each other in order to go and get more food. When he turned back to the crowd, he jumped — Mad-Eye Moody was right at his shoulder, electric blue eye fixed on Harry. “Alright, Potter. I’ve got something to show you.”

Harry knew this wasn’t the same man who had hounded him all of the year previous, but that didn’t make him any less uneasy — all through the summer, it had become clear that Moody was Dumbledore’s man through and through, and Harry didn’t trust him for a second. Nevertheless, he let the man lead the way to a couple of empty chairs at the kitchen table, and watched as a folded photograph was pulled from his pocket.

He had no idea why that was something Moody thought he might enjoy. Staring at all the people who had been part of the original Order, so many of them now dead or worse — seeing Neville’s smiling parents, stood not far from his own. So many other too-young faces, with no idea what was in store for them.

He wasn’t hungry anymore.

“Yeah, thanks, Moody,” he muttered, handing the picture back and making a quick escape. He didn’t get far — Mrs Weasley called a toast to the two prefects, her cheeks rosy and her arm around a squirming Ron, a beaming Hermione on her other side.

In another life, Harry might have felt something seeing that; envy, or pride, or something. Mostly he was just bored.

Charlie had cracked open a bottle of firewhiskey — keeping it carefully hidden from his parents as it was passed around Bill and Tonks and even Kingsley. As tempting as it was to stay and watch them get tipsy, Harry knew nothing truly interesting would happen with Mrs Weasley around. Instead, he snuck over to the twins, who were daring Ginny to eat increasingly suspect Bertie Botts Beans.

“Want to go upstairs?” he asked quietly, eyes darting towards the door.

“Hell yes,” came Ginny’s immediate response, throwing a strange purple bean at Fred.
“Cards?”

The four of them slunk out of the kitchen — noticed by Sirius and Bill, but not stopped — and tiptoed past Mrs Black’s portrait, heading for Harry’s room. There, they shut the door and made themselves comfortable on the floor, Harry pulling a pack of cards out of his satchel where it waited with his clothes for the next day.

“Have to say, mate, I’ll be pleased to see the back of this house,” George remarked, shuffling the cards expertly. Harry made a noise of agreement.

“I wish I wasn’t leaving Sirius behind. But it’ll be great to be back at school with everyone.”

“You missing your *boyfriend*?” Fred cooed, laughing when Harry’s cheeks reddened.

“Hang on, do you two know who it is?” Ginny asked, narrowing her eyes at her twin brothers. The pair shared a look.

“We can neither confirm nor deny,” George said, though he was grinning, which really gave it away in itself. Ginny scowled.

“Not fair.”

“Sorry, Gin. It’s not just my secret to tell,” Harry apologised halfheartedly. There was a lot she knew, but still plenty she didn’t, and Harry wasn’t sure how good her Occlumency was yet. Draco’s safety was too important.

Ginny mock-sniffed. “See if I give you any of the good gossip about my own love life, Potter.”

He made a face that had her kicking him in the shin. “You can definitely keep that gossip to yourself. Even if it’s Neville. *Especially* if it’s Neville.” There were some things he didn’t need to know about his best friend and his pseudo-little sister.

Mention of the other Gryffindor had Ginny blushing, which of course had the twins teasing her relentlessly; first about Neville, but then about some Ravenclaw boy she’d apparently been writing to.

Harry shook his head, still bewildered by the whole situation. They’d sort it out eventually, he hoped.

Obviously the party downstairs was not quite as exciting as intended; one by one, people trailed up to Harry’s room — first Sirius, flushed in the face and starting to edge into melancholy at the thought of them all going to school in the morning. Shortly followed by Bill, complaining about people insisting he got a haircut. Charlie arrived soon after, which of course meant Tonks joined too, and then Remus sniffed them out, looking amused to see so many people crammed into Harry’s bedroom.

“So this is where the real party ended up, is it?” he remarked dryly, snatching the bottle of firewhiskey from Sirius’ hands and necking back a shot. “Molly keeps thinking everyone’s

gone home without saying goodbye.”

“Whoops,” Charlie giggled, leaning back against the edge of Harry’s bed. “We probably shouldn’t stay long, anyway. Work in the morning and all that.”

“And you kids have a train to catch,” Tonks said, sticking her tongue out at the Gryffindor teens. “Which means I’ve got to make sure you get to that train.”

“Ugh, we’ve got a guard?”

“*You’ve* got a guard,” Bill corrected. Harry rolled his eyes.

“Lucky me.”

Someone downstairs made some sort of loud noise, which set off Mrs Black’s portrait. Sirius groaned, dragging himself to his feet. “I’d better deal with that,” he muttered, squeezing past Charlie and between the twins, eventually reaching the door. He swayed a little as he walked, and Harry and Remus both sighed.

“We knew this day would be difficult for him,” Remus said, meeting Harry’s gaze sadly. “I’ll go make sure he doesn’t drink himself to death. Get to bed, kids, it’s getting late.”

“Yes, Professor,” Tonks sing-songed, before bursting into giggles. The werewolf rolled his eyes.

“I wasn’t talking to you, but good to know where your mental age is at,” he joked, shaking his head. “Goodnight, everyone.”

That seemed to be the unspoken end of the party; Ginny snuck away before her mum or Hermione could find her and say anything about her being in Harry’s room. The twins apparated back to their own bedroom. Tonks assured Harry she’d see him in the morning and slipped out; before the two eldest Weasleys could do the same, Harry reached out to grab Charlie’s arm. “Hey, Charlie; y’know how you owe me a favour? From the seeker’s match last summer?”

“What do you need?” the redhead asked without hesitation. Harry bit his lip.

“I... would you keep an eye on Sirius, while I’m at school? Just drop in here every now and then, make sure he’s doing alright. Make sure your mum isn’t bothering him too much. I just — I worry about him, cooped up here.” Sure, Sirius might be able to get to Seren Du sometimes, but it wouldn’t be often enough for Harry’s liking.

Charlie’s face softened, and he patted Harry’s shoulder. “I’d do that even if I didn’t owe you one,” he assured. “Don’t you worry, kid. Sirius is a good bloke; we’ll keep him from getting too lonely.”

Bill muttered something that Harry didn’t quite catch, but whatever it was had Charlie blushing as red as his hair, glaring at his brother. “Shut up,” he hissed, turning back to Harry. “You just worry about your own stuff, let us take care of Sirius, yeah?”

Harry grinned, a weight off his shoulders as he bid the pair goodnight, finally alone in his room.

Sirius would probably be fine. But it couldn't hurt to have a couple extra pairs of eyes on him, just to make sure.

Chapter 47

Chapter Notes

Little later than usual, sorry, I am having A Day :)))) However I'm very glad to see that after the last chapter y'all are on board with one particular direction this fic is going~ Enjoy!

When he woke up, he knew the fast-fading dream had not been his own.

There was a certain *feeling*, to a Voldemort dream. A slick, oily sensation, much like the feel of foreign magic stuck to his own. But more than that, it was the same endless corridor with the same locked door. His head ached even as he shook it off, but he already knew he wasn't going to tell anyone. Especially not Sirius. No point in worrying him right before they said goodbye.

Harry found out about the whole boggart debacle once he made it downstairs. Guilt squirmed in his stomach — apparently, it had initially appeared as Bill's dead body, and since the curse-breaker was up in Harry's room, Mrs Weasley hadn't realised it was a boggart at first. But it wasn't his fault Bill was upstairs, and they'd all sorted it in the end. Mrs Weasley was fine, if a little pale.

It certainly didn't stop her shouting up and down the stairs all morning, herding her children through the pre-Hogwarts routine. Everyone had given up trying to close the drapes on Mrs Black, and after stealing some breakfast Harry avoided the chaos the best he could — his trunk was packed, Hedwig's empty cage resting on top of it, and she would meet him at school once she'd retrieved his owl-order of school books.

"Alright, pup?" Sirius snuck in, wincing from the volume of the chaos in the hall. "You about ready?"

"As I'll ever be," he confirmed. "The others aren't, I take it."

Sirius gave him a lopsided grin. "What gave you that idea?" He snickered, shaking his head. "Y'know, I thought about coming with you — as Padfoot, of course. But Moony pointed out that bloody Wormtail has probably given all our secrets away to his *master*," he sneered viciously. "Last thing I need is to be recognised by Death Eaters. So, ah, I'll have to say goodbye here."

Harry strode across the room, hugging him tight. "I wish you could come see me off." Every year, he watched kids hugging their parents before boarding the train, heart aching with envy. The Weasleys just weren't the same as having people there only for him.

“One day,” Sirius promised, holding him close. “Still two more goes after this one. Plenty of time to clear my name.”

Harry hoped they could manage it. “Are you going back to Seren Du?” He felt Sirius nod.

“Soon as the house has cleared out,” he confirmed. “Reckon I can get at least a couple of hours of sunshine. Moony’s going to tell everyone I’m sulking in my room when they get back from dropping you off.”

“Good.” Harry hated the idea of leaving him, but at least it would give him the chance to get out of the house. “I’ll get the mirror back from Draco and send it through Snape as soon as I can.”

“Sounds good. You look after yourself, alright? I’m not just talking about Dumbledore.” Sirius sighed, leaning his chin against Harry’s forehead. “I wish you didn’t have quite so much on your shoulders, pup. I hope you have a nice, quiet year, but I feel like that’s asking far too much. So all I can say is; study hard, fly well, make time for your friends, and *definitely* make time for your boyfriend.” His smile pressed to Harry’s hair. “Keep working on your animagus transformation, I bet you’ll have made loads of progress by Christmas.”

Harry had hardly had any free time to work on the magic since leaving Seren Du, and he was keen to properly get back to it. “You’ll look after yourself too, yeah? There’s enough people around that you shouldn’t be alone when the cold gets bad. As long as you tell someone,” he said pointedly, pulling back to look his godfather in the eye. “Bill, or Charlie, or even Tonks. She seems alright.”

“Yeah, she’s a good one. Course, with Andi as her mum, she wouldn’t be anything less.” Sirius was dodging the subject, and Harry narrowed his eyes until the man sighed. “Fine. I’ll tell people, if they’re around. I’m not nearly as bad as I was last year, though.”

That was true, but also he was daft if he thought Harry didn’t see how the ghosts of Azkaban could drown him some days.

“I don’t think I’ll make it through the whole school year without tipping Dumbledore off,” Harry confessed quietly. “Especially not exams. I’m not sabotaging myself on those.” His OWLs were important, and if he’d made it that far without the headmaster realising at least some of the truth, he probably wouldn’t make it much further.

“Do what you can. And remember, you’re not alone.” Sirius ruffled his hair. “You’ve got all of us here willing to help, and all your friends at school. Bill’s working on the scar situation. Dumbledore needs you, pup. Whatever his plans are, he can’t do anything to you, not if he wants to see Voldemort defeated.” His face grew serious for a moment. “And if he puts those blockers and compulsions back on you, *we will notice*, and we will fix it. I promise.”

Had his deepest fears been that transparent? A cold sweat gathered on the back of his neck every time he thought about being left to Dumbledore’s mercy, being shaped and brainwashed with magic and sent back to the ‘right path’ as a prisoner in his own body while his friends watched on, oblivious.

Before Harry could say anything, Mrs Weasley screeched up the stairs for them all to gather before they would be late. Harry hugged Sirius tight. “I love you,” he murmured. “I’ll see you at Christmas. And talk to you on the mirror.”

“As often as you need me,” Sirius vowed, smiling. “I love you too, pup. Give ‘em hell for me, yeah?” He winked, and Harry was laughing as he left his room, jogging downstairs while Sirius levitated his trunk for him. The whole entourage was crammed in the entrance hall, waiting — the school-age Weasley kids, Mr and Mrs Weasley, Moody, and Remus. Tonks was waiting elsewhere, as Harry discovered when Mrs Weasley practically forced him out the door. With one last wave to Sirius, he was off.

. . .

Getting everyone safely and discreetly to the platform — at least, as discreetly as possible when one person was Harry Potter and the rest had hair like traffic cones — was quite an ordeal, and Harry breathed a sigh of relief when he was finally on the train.

“Ron and I are supposed to go to the prefect carriage,” Hermione declared, once the twins had disappeared to find Lee. Harry shrugged. That was fine by him.

“Cool. Ginny?” He gestured down the train, and she led the way without even glancing back at Ron and Hermione, checking each compartment for familiar faces. To Harry’s delight, they found Neville also wandering the train — and then found Luna in a compartment by herself.

“Oh, good; I was hoping you’d find me,” she said by way of greeting, beaming at Ginny.

“Hi, Luna,” Harry greeted cheerfully, bemused by the strange glasses resting on the girl’s face, a copy of the *Quibbler* upside-down in her hand.

There was a brief awkward moment as Ginny squeezed too close past Neville to go sit with Luna, but they managed to get settled with their trunks up in the luggage rack just as the train sped out of central London.

“How was the rest of your summer?” Neville asked, hazel eyes sympathetic. Harry shrugged.

“Oh, y’know. Ups and downs.” He’d had a little contact with Neville while at Grimmauld, but only through tacking paragraphs on the end of Ginny’s letters to the other Gryffindor.

To Harry’s surprise, there was a knock on the door, and it slid open to reveal Susan Bones’ smiling face. “There you are! I’ve been looking for you since I saw Ron Weasley go into the prefect carriage.” She screwed up her nose to show what she thought of that decision, and Harry laughed.

“I would’ve thought you’d be in there with them.” Susan was a shoe-in for prefect, he’d thought.

“Nah, Dumbledore knows he can’t control me. Hannah and Ernie got the badges,” she explained. “Of course, he can’t control them either, but he doesn’t know that.” She winked. “I’ll let them have their romantic corridor patrols together; I’m far too busy this year.”

Harry was glad there was someone else who didn't care about being passed over for prefect, shifting over to make room for her so she could shut the door properly.

"How's it all going? I have the notes for you, by the way." The enormous stack of parchment with all his notes on the laws Susan had asked him to look at was safely in his trunk, where it had been since he'd left Seren Du. The Hufflepuff's face lit up.

"Brilliant. It's going well, actually; everyone's been way more helpful than I anticipated. Of course, there's only so much I can do at this stage — but you keep assuring me you've got my roadblocks handled," she teased.

"One at a time, I'll get to them," he joked in reply — just a controlling headmaster and a Dark Lord to do away with, nothing major.

"Good lad." Her smile dropped, and she rested her hand on Harry's arm for a moment. "My aunt told me about what happened to your cousin. I'm so sorry, Harry."

A lump rose in Harry's throat, and he cleared his throat. "Thanks. It— yeah, it wasn't great. I just can't believe a dementor actually got that far."

Susan's face darkened. "Aunt Amelia's furious. Fudge and Scrimgeour — he's the head of the aurors — keep telling her it was just a rogue dementor, that there's no need to look into it now it's been contained. As if a *rogue dementor* would get that far and only Kiss one person on the way." Her mouth set in a grim line. "I wish there was more we could do to get justice for you."

"Knowing your aunt even tried is help enough," Harry assured — even if the rest of the Ministry was corrupt as hell, it was nice to know he had an ally in Amelia Bones.

The atmosphere brightened when another knock on the door heralded Lavender and Parvati, who stayed for a while to talk to Harry and Ginny about their summer in India with Parvati's family. Susan left, but Anthony Goldstein swung by with Michael Corner, whose presence had Ginny blushing and Neville's jaw clenched painfully tight. Blaise and Daphne even stopped in briefly; in fact, the only one of the heirs group who *didn't* make an appearance was Cassius. Something that had the worry in Harry's stomach growing sharper — if he didn't know that Draco had written to the older boy regularly throughout the summer, he'd wonder if Cassius was even on the train.

They had obviously been side-tracked on the way back from the prefects meeting — or perhaps just hadn't been keen to find Harry again, which was fine by him — as when Ron and Hermione found them, Hannah and Ernie were in the compartment, along with Sullivan Fawley who was deep in conversation with Luna and Ginny about something.

"Where are we supposed to sit?" Hermione asked, dragging her trunk along behind her. Harry wondered why she hadn't shrunk it yet.

He shrugged. "Sorry, we're a bit full in here. Maybe there's room in one of the other compartments?"

Ron tried to stare the group down, but he was no match for Ernie's dead-eye expression, and he broke away first, flushing angrily. "Come on, 'Mione, let's find somewhere quieter," he muttered, already turning away. Hermione huffed, shutting the door hard in her wake.

There was a beat of silence, then Hannah giggled.

"You're at that point, then, are you?" she asked, linking her fingers with Ernie's in the stocky Hufflepuff's lap.

"I've been *beyond* that point half the summer," Harry groaned. "Once I moved in with them, they spent the whole month alternating between being pissed off at me, and trying to be my best friends again. I'm sick of it."

"So you're done pretending with them? Neville checked, and Harry nodded.

"I don't care if they think it's *teenage angst*, I've got *actual* friends to be hanging out with now."

"Can't say I'm surprised," Ernie mused. "They weren't exactly proper friends to you last year. What were they expecting?"

Harry hummed in agreement — Dumbledore would likely have something to say about it, but Harry couldn't be bothered to care anymore. If the old man wanted him to stay friends with Ron and Hermione, he wouldn't have let them ignore Harry for the first half of summer.

Though there was no reappearance from the two Gryffindor prefects, the compartment slowly emptied as people left to greet other friends, until once again it was just the three Gryffindors and Luna. Harry stretched his legs out, propping socked feet up on the seat opposite. Sometime soon, they'd have to change into their robes, but there was a little more time yet.

Just as he was beginning to consider a nap, there was yet *another* knock on the compartment door.

"Merlin, we're popular," Ginny remarked — only to freeze when a head of platinum blond hair snuck in.

Harry couldn't help the grin that stretched across his face, though at a swift kick to the ankle from Neville, he quickly schooled it into something less lovestruck. "I was wondering if you'd show up. Chill out, Ginny; we're friends now. I'll explain later, promise."

Luna didn't seem to even notice the interruption, engrossed in the *Quibbler* once more. Ginny eyed Draco suspiciously, but eventually nodded. "You and your secrets, Potter," she grumbled.

"Those never-ending secrets," Draco agreed drily. "I can't stay long. I told Crabbe and Goyle I was going to the bathroom." Harry snickered, sitting up straight so Draco could perch on the seat beside him. It was torture, having him so close and having to maintain a friendly distance. "I just wanted to confirm that myself and the others will still come to study group when we can."

“Even Cassius?” Harry asked, brow furrowing. Draco nodded.

“Yes, but we’ll have to step up our acting game. No civility outside of study group, unless it’s Blaise or Daphne. We’re working on things within the house,” he added in assurance. “Keep us in the loop, alright? And do try not to be offended by anything we may do or say in public.” He glanced askance, including Neville in that. Harry just grinned.

“When have I *ever* been offended by something you did or said?” he teased, laughing when Draco just stared at him. “Don’t worry, it’ll be fine. We’ve kept things hidden this long, after all.” Kept some things hidden even from their inner friend group. “But if you hex me, I’ll hex you back.”

Draco’s gaze met his, and heat flared for just long enough to send a frisson of electricity through Harry’s body. “Challenge accepted, Potter.” He straightened out his uniform, which already had the shiny prefect badge pinned to the lapel. “Just remember, I can give detentions.”

There were a dozen things Harry could say to that, and none of them were appropriate for present company. “I’d like to see you try,” he joked instead, green eyes burning into silver.

There was a long pause, then Neville coughed pointedly.

“I’d better go,” Draco remarked. Then he paused, digging into his trouser pocket and pulling out the two-way mirror. “Here, you can have that back. Thank you for lending it to me.”

Harry quickly stashed it away, smiling. “Glad you got some use out of it.” So very, very glad — he would’ve worried himself sick all summer without that means of communication.

He wished he could speak plainly, but he wasn’t quite ready to out them to Ginny and Luna yet. Instead he met Draco’s gaze pointedly as the blond stood to leave. “We’ll catch up properly soon, yeah?”

“Once things settle down,” Draco promised. He straightened up, nodding to the compartment at large. “Longbottom. Weasley. Lovegood. Enjoy the rest of the journey.”

And then he was gone.

Silence stretched between them.

“You have a whole lot of explaining to do,” Ginny declared. “*Both* of you,” she turned her glare on Neville, who gulped.

“It’s a long story, Gin,” Harry sighed, checking his watch. “Let’s get changed and then I’ll tell you, yeah?”

She was already in on so many of his secrets, Draco’s loyalty was one more she could handle.

As for their relationship — she’d have to remain oblivious to that, for now.

The four of them stuck together on the way off the train, Harry hiding a smile at the sight of Hermione bossing first years about while Ron stood by her side looking longingly at the carriages up to the castle. His gaze slid over to where Hagrid would be waiting to take them to the boats — and he paused. Hagrid wasn't there. Instead, Professor Grubbly-Plank was the one calling for the first years to gather round.

Where was Hagrid??

Harry knew the man had been on some sort of mission for the Order over the summer — something to do with giants in France, Remus hadn't been too knowledgeable on the details. But surely he wasn't still there? Fear gripped his chest; had something happened to Hagrid?

No. Someone would have told him.

"Harry, you're blocking the door," Ginny said with a roll of her eyes, grabbing him by the elbow. He let her drag him over to the carriages, and got his second surprise of the evening, in the form of huge black skeletal horses hooked up to the previously self-driving carriages.

"What the..."

"They're thestrals." He jumped, whipping around to see Cassius stood at his shoulder, gaze fixed on the ghoulish creatures. Harry stared at him; the Slytherin boy was thin, his usually tanned face pale. His already prominent cheekbones looked painfully sharp, and there was a faint distortion of magic around his eyes that betrayed the glamour he was using, no doubt to hide dark circles from sleepless nights.

Or worse, bruises.

"Cassius..." Harry breathed, watching the boy's face harden. There were students all around them, this was not the time nor place to ask about Cassius' summer. But, God, it looked like he'd had a shittier one than even Harry.

A halfhearted glare was all Harry got, before the Slytherin was stalking off to join his housemates in a carriage. Harry went with his three friends, lips pursed in thought as the carriage rolled towards the castle.

He'd read about thestrals; they could only be seen by people who had seen death. It made sense to Harry, why he could see them now.

Had Cassius always been able to, or was that a product of his summer?

He hoped Draco could talk to the older Slytherin, even if no one else could.

Hagrid wasn't in the Great Hall either, when they filed in to take their seats. Luna danced off towards the Ravenclaw table, and Ginny moved to sit with Colin and some of her other year mates. Firmly ignoring Ron and Hermione, Harry and Neville continued a little further down the table to sit near the rest of the Gryffindor quidditch team, and Lee Jordan.

"Hiya, Harry," Angelina greeted, smiling broadly with her hand in Fred's on the tabletop. Fred looked a lot happier than he'd been in the summer, too — George had regularly teased him about how much he'd missed his girlfriend, and clearly he was not remotely ashamed by it. It made Harry want to look towards the Slytherin table, but he couldn't risk it.

"Hey, everyone. Good to see you." He grinned quickly. "Let's hope they don't cancel quidditch again this year, hmm? Congrats, Angie," he added, seeing the shiny captain's badge on her robe.

"They'd better bloody not," she muttered, glaring up at Dumbledore suspiciously. "This is our last chance for another cup win."

It made Harry's chest hurt to think about quidditch without Angelina — and without the Alicia and the twins, who would graduate with her — and when he glanced over at Katie, he could see she felt the same way.

"Let's hope there's a brilliant keeper somewhere in this lot, then," Katie remarked, looking over the assorted Gryffindors. Harry had almost forgotten that they still had to replace Oliver, since there had been no quidditch the year before. He wondered if that had anything to do with Ron's request for a new broomstick.

"Never mind that," George cut in, smirking. "Have you seen the fresh meat up at the head table?"

Harry turned his eyes to the teachers, and flinched at the blaze of pink sat right beside Dumbledore. "Who the hell is she?" She looked like an overgrown toddler, with her round face and fuzzy pink cardigan.

"New Defence professor, got to be," Fred said. "Looks like you're in luck, Harry — I highly doubt she's a Death Eater, with a wardrobe like that."

The girls giggled, but Harry only felt dread, remembering Draco's words about Fudge's delight with the appointment.

Time would tell, he supposed.

A hush descended over the hall as McGonagall brought the Sorting Hat to its usual place, and a long line of first years filed down the middle of the hall. Harry braced himself for a song.

He did not expect the one that followed.

The clear warning about inter-house rivalry hung heavy in the air, long after the sorting itself had begun. Harry looked up at Dumbledore — the headmaster's lips were curved in a genial smile, but Harry could see the annoyance in those twinkling blue eyes. He was *not* happy with that hat.

"Bit on the nose, wasn't it?" George whispered, leaning close to Harry. Harry hummed in agreement, sharing a look with Neville.

Hogwarts was on their side, he could feel it.

At the end of the Sorting, the tables filled with food after some brief words from Dumbledore. Harry was ravenous, and eagerly began to fill his plate.

“Guess the hat’s told us, then,” Katie remarked, passing Harry a bowl of peas. “Better keep up our study groups. I’m glad — I swear, my OWLs wouldn’t have been half as good if not for some of the Ravenclaws helping me out.”

“You got good marks, then?” Harry asked, and Katie beamed as she nodded.

“Are they really as hard as people say they are?” Neville asked anxiously. Katie’s smile softened.

“They’re not too bad. As long as you remember to go over the early years of stuff as well as just what you learn in fifth year. But the teachers are good at making sure the important things are covered, and now everyone revises together I’m sure you’ll do great. Well,” she added, glancing doubtfully at the brand new professor. “DADA might be a bit hit and miss. But hell, that’s what you’ve got Harry for, isn’t it?” she joked. “I bet he knows more on the subject than I do.”

“Probably knows more than our new teacher, by the looks of her,” George agreed, bumping Harry’s shoulder as a flush filled the younger Gryffindor’s cheeks.

“There’s something familiar about her,” he said, looking back up at the woman as she cut dainty little bites of chicken. “I’ve seen her before, somewhere. Maybe in the paper?”

“We’ll find out soon enough,” Fred dismissed. “Can you pass the gravy?”

As they ate, Harry happily listened to the three chasers talk about their summers. He tried to, at least; hearing his name whispered from a dozen different directions was rather distracting, as much as he was somewhat used to it after all these years. Luckily, from what he could gather only a handful of people were calling him a lunatic and quoting the *Prophet*; the rest were remarking on how he wasn’t sat with Ron and Hermione.

He smiled vindictively into his roast beef. Perhaps with the whole school talking about it, they might finally leave him alone.

Dinner made way for dessert, and when the room was full of groaning stomachs and straining belts, Dumbledore vanished the plates with a wave of his hand, standing up. Harry stifled a yawn as the headmaster went through the usual warnings about the forest and banned objects, perking up when he gestured to the woman in pink at his side.

“Professor Umbridge, our new Defence Against the Dark Arts professor,” he introduced. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Susan at the Hufflepuff table, glaring like a scalded cat.

He knew that name. Why did he know that name?

It hit him just as the woman stood to make a speech of her own, clearing her throat in a falsely delicate way. Her every word sent a chill down his spine.

She was Fudge’s Senior Undersecretary. The very definition of a Ministry toadie.

Worse, she held the Selwyn seat of the Wizengamot, and was responsible for most of the awful, restrictive, bullshit creature laws. Harry had heard Remus and Snape cursing her name more than once — indeed, further down the table, Snape looked like he wanted to kill her where she stood.

This was not good.

It was hard to pay attention through her long-winded, Ministry propaganda-filled speech, but Harry did his best. Throughout the hall, the other heirs were doing the same. Susan looked *furious*.

Umbridge may be smiling sweetly, but her words were poorly-disguised venom. Fudge was watching Hogwarts, now — he didn't trust Dumbledore, and he certainly didn't trust the students. Harry wondered how many of last year's quiet rebellions had made their way back to the Minister's ear. How much he knew about how ready a bunch of teenagers were to utterly destroy him.

As Umbridge finally finished, taking her seat once more, Harry caught Susan's eye intently.

Their plans were going to have to change.

Chapter 48

As everyone began to make their way out of the Great Hall, the number of people trying to get a glimpse of *Harry Potter* increased — as did the number of people making snide remarks about his sanity. The one saving grace was that Hufflepuff House was mostly silent on the matter; they knew he and Cedric had been friends, and they (hopefully) knew that he wouldn't have lied about the older boy's death for attention.

"Come on, Harry. I know the password, let's get out of here," Neville urged, nudging him gently. "Don't listen to them. It's just because we're new back — once they settle in and remember they like you and the *Prophet*'s a bunch of crap, it'll be fine."

Harry wished he could have Neville's optimism, but he was no stranger to the school at large hating him. He just hoped he had enough friends spread throughout the houses to stop things getting too bad — and hoped that, regardless of what they thought about him and about Voldemort, the students would be offended by the very concept of the Ministry interfering at the school.

Ginny appeared at his side just as they reached the doors, and she was scowling. "Did you hear what that Umbridge woman was saying?" she hissed angrily, but Harry cut her off with a sharp look.

"Not here," he warned under his breath, tapping his ear and then looking at the crowd around them, hoping she got the picture; there were far too many people listening.

Her shoulders tensed, then she nodded sharply, and they were silent for the rest of the walk up to Gryffindor Tower. Neville gave the password — explaining delightedly how it was the name of a species of rare plant he'd gotten for his birthday, so he was sure to remember it — and Harry couldn't help the way his heart eased at the sight of the Gryffindor common room. His first real home.

Not many people had made it up thus far — the three of them had squeezed past the crowd and taken a few shortcuts, not wanting to be gawked at. "We can talk things over properly at the weekend," Harry said, keeping his voice low as he looked at Ginny. "Best to just observe for now."

She didn't look happy about it, but she nodded all the same. "I'm going to bed, then. Goodnight, boys." Seemingly without thinking, she leaned up on her toes and gave Neville a kiss on the cheek. When she pulled back, they were both blushing furiously, and Ginny disappeared with a squeak, practically sprinting to her dorm. Harry watched her go, then looked back at his dazed friend.

"It's been far too long a day to get into that," he decided, shaking his head and dragging Neville towards the stairs up to the boys' dorms.

"It's... complicated," Neville agreed, sounding wistful.

Whatever it was, Harry hoped it was sorted out this year. He'd finally rid himself of the Ongoing Saga of Ron and Hermione; he didn't need to be party to another romantic disaster.

Changing into his pyjamas up in the dorm, Harry wished he could talk to Sirius. He'd have to get the second mirror to Snape as soon as possible, so it could be passed on to his godfather.

Dean and Seamus entered just as Harry was pulling on his shirt, going abruptly silent when they saw him. Harry offered the pair a strained smile.

"Alright, Harry," Dean greeted, somewhat awkward. "How was your summer?"

"Oh, y'know," Harry replied evasively, shrugging — that was a can of worms he absolutely did *not* want to get into. "Yours?"

Dean looked at him, then glanced at his best friend. "...Better than Seamus'," he settled on. Harry sent the Irish boy a curious glance.

"Me mam didn't want me to come back," Seamus said eventually, focusing most of his attention on the quidditch poster he was putting up.

"Why not?" Neville asked curiously.

Seamus went quiet, his gaze flicking to Harry, and Harry put the pieces together with a heavy heart.

"She reads the *Prophet*, doesn't she?" he said knowingly. "What, didn't want you sharing a room with a lunatic?" There was more bite to his voice than he probably should've let out, but he was *tired*, and of all the places to deal with this shit he hadn't expected his own dormitory to be one of them.

Seamus scowled at him. "Don't you dare say anything about my mother," he snapped back. "The hell are we supposed to think, what with you showing up with Cedric Diggory's bloody *corpse* last year?"

Harry flinched.

"Oi," Neville said sharply, surprising everyone, including himself. "Don't, Seamus. We all know what happened there."

"But we don't, do we?" Seamus retorted. "We just know what *he* said." He waved a dismissive hand at Harry. "Him and Dumbledore, dropping cryptic shit about You-Know-Who being back and then buggering off for the summer."

"I can't control what Dumbledore does," Harry said hotly. "And I can't control what the *Prophet* writes. But after seeing my friend *murdered* in front of me and then being used in a ritual to resurrect a Dark Lord, I think I deserved a bit of bloody peace and quiet!" He tossed his school shirt at his bed, roughly grabbing his toiletries bag from his trunk.

"And we're just supposed to believe that, are we? No proof but your word?"

"Look at it this way," Harry roared, eyes flashing. "You can sit there and think I'm crazy; fuck knows I can't stop you. You can think I'm a liar and a lunatic and everything else the *Prophet* says about me. But on the off chance I'm *not* lying and Voldemort is actually out there, do you really want to take the chance of not being prepared?"

Seamus was milk-white at Harry's words, and even Dean had gone ashen-faced. Harry snorted. "Thought not." Then he stalked past them, heading for the bathroom just as the door opened to admit Ron.

Harry just wanted to brush his teeth and go to sleep, and hope to hell he didn't dream of that *fucking* corridor again.

..

Cool grey eyes surveyed the Slytherin common room, watching the assorted students greet each other after a summer apart, no longer on display in the Great Hall. They were still far more reserved than most, but Draco could see the tension leave each pair of shoulders as they stepped into their dungeon haven.

He watched closely, seeing the way certain students gravitated towards others, avoided some. The lines were already being drawn. Those with parents in the Dark knew the storm was coming, and they had instructed their children to ensure they remained on the correct side, to make sure they kept away from their classmates whose loyalties could not be certain. Even right down to the brand new first years, currently getting the 'Welcome to Slytherin' speech from Pansy, Draco could tell which way their parents leaned just by watching them interact with their peers.

It made the knot in his stomach tighten. He was going to have to walk those lines very carefully. A large number of people in this school knew his true feelings on the matter — he just had to hope they kept his secrets as well as they kept Harry's.

Draco wasn't so naive to think that he too wasn't being watched. Being Lucius Malfoy's son wasn't enough to give him immunity — if anything, it would make him a beacon. A shining example of how the future soldiers of the Dark Lord's army should act.

A very tall pedestal from which to fall, if he were caught.

If he was sensible, he'd keep his head down; befriend all the other Junior Death Eaters, avoid Harry Potter entirely, and hope the war ended before he was forced to make a clear choice.

But he'd long ago lost the ability to be that sensible. Right about the time he realised his heart skipped a beat when those vivid green eyes looked at him with joy instead of anger.

He looked across the room, meeting Blaise Zabini's even stare. They had talked about it, in encoded letters, over the summer. As much as Draco would love to help nudge his fellow Slytherins out of the Dark Lord's clutches, he was in far too precarious a position for that. Blaise, on the other hand, was a known neutral party. His mother lived in Italy, and couldn't give a single fuck about any Dark Lords.

Blaise would be the beacon for the light, lurking in the shadows. Blaise would quietly position himself to be the guiding hand for any students questioning their desire to follow their parents' footsteps. To become everything the rest of the world said Slytherins were. To fall right into the trap Dumbledore had spent decades priming.

It was dangerous. Blaise knew it, and so did Draco. But someone had to do it, or Slytherin House may crumble, and that wasn't a possibility they were willing to risk.

Draco turned away from Blaise — their friendship would have to end here, in public. If Blaise was about to start making overtures to the light, Draco couldn't be seen to approve it. Just another relationship for him to keep hidden.

"Draco, darling, stop lurking over there and show the boys to their dormitory," Pansy called, offering a slight smile. She was in the same boat as him — worse, even, because her father was already surveying the ranks of eligible young men in the Dark faction, and might not wait until Pansy was graduated to make a decision.

"Coming, dear," he assured drily, stepping forward to do his duty.

At least he had some of his friends, still.

Crossing the common room, he almost bumped into a tall figure, and reached a hand out to steady himself.

"Oh, sorry, Draco. I wasn't looking." Cassius Warrington offered the weakest attempt at a smile. "Long day, you know? See you in the morning." He was off before Draco could say anything — if Draco wasn't mistaken, there was an ever so slight limp to his walk.

Draco scowled to himself. He'd have to watch that one carefully. Cassius didn't have the luxury of time, like the rest of them.

.-.-.-

Severus was scowling as he stepped out of the fireplace at Seren Du. A minute later, Remus appeared opposite him, holding on to Ceri's hand. The house elf vanished as quickly as she'd appeared, leaving the greying werewolf behind. "Sev?" Remus greeted, perplexed. "What's the matter?"

"*Umbridge*," he growled out. Breathing steadily and trying not to shatter the crockery, Severus explained the scene he'd been *blindsided* with upon his arrival at the welcoming feast. Remus' eyes grew more horrified with every word.

"How could they allow that *bitch* to teach children??" he gasped. Severus glared at the wall.

"Albus was unable to find a suitable appointment, so the Ministry was *forced* to step in." If this wasn't a long-standing plan of Fudge's — and likely Lucius Malfoy's — Severus would eat his cauldrons. He was surprised Lucius hadn't mentioned it to him; then again, he didn't often talk to Severus about his Ministry dealings, except to gloat when they were successful. And Severus had been avoiding him somewhat, this summer.

"You should've heard the *speech* she gave. The Ministry don't like the things Dumbledore's spouting, so they're determined to interfere in Hogwarts and undermine him. No doubt Fudge has his little sycophant searching for something he can use to get Albus sacked." Truly, Severus wouldn't mind that outcome — if there was any way to trust that whoever the Ministry replaced him with wouldn't be a thousand times worse. Better the devil you know, after all.

"Well, that explains the bloody Slinkhard book," Remus muttered derisively. "I suppose we should be grateful she didn't set someone more like Argent."

Just the name of the man who wrote books detailing the number of ways to *dispose of* werewolves and other dark creatures made Severus hiss angrily. "No, instead we'll have a whole year of children learning nothing but *theory*, and being told to shut up and let the Ministry handle everything," he spat. "And I have to sit at the same bloody table as her for every meal of the day and *somehow* not slip poison in her tea."

The woman was utterly foul — responsible for half the woes of the last fifteen years of Remus' life, and here to cause trouble in *his* school besides.

Remus stepped forward, hands sliding over Severus' shoulders, kneading at the tense muscle. "With any luck, the curse on the position will take care of that for us," he joked quietly, brushing a kiss across Severus' cheek. The Potions Master couldn't help but lean into the touch, turning towards his Gryffindor like a flower seeking the sun. "She'll come after you," Remus murmured knowingly. Severus was a Marked Death Eater, and they knew damn well Fudge didn't believe anything about him being a spy for Dumbledore. "But not until after she's already gone for Hagrid, and Flitwick, and every teacher on staff who takes offence at her presence. She's there to keep the students downtrodden and complacent — who does that better than Professor Severus Snape?"

His amber eyes were dancing teasingly, Severus could hardly believe how calm he was being. The woman had made his life hell, would be making his family's life hell for the next year, and here he was making *jokes*. Severus would have been plotting a dozen or more *accidents* for her to befall while on staff.

He already had eight lined up in his mind.

Soft lips pressed to his, a hand cradling the back of his neck. "She'll be after Harry," Remus continued. "And his friends, if she ever realises they're just a year or two away from completely tearing her beloved Ministry apart. And look on the bright side — if she's busy at the school, she won't have the time to pass any more of her barbaric creature laws." Remus paused, looking up at him. "Has Dumbledore taken proxy of her seat?"

It was hard for Severus to think with those gentle fingers stroking the short hairs at the base of his neck, and it took a couple of seconds for him to answer. "No, she's kept it. Fudge's doing, I'm sure." Remus frowned, but stepped in closer.

"Shame. But this isn't the end of the world, Severus. This is an enemy we know. And this is an enemy you, my devious snake, can easily outwit." When the Gryffindor pulled back, his eyes were glowing, lips curled in a wolfish grin. "She's going to think she can take on our

cub, and she's wrong. He and his friends will knock her down before she even realises what they've done. All you have to do," he leaned in for a slow, chaste kiss, "is protect Harry while he puts that ridiculous Potter luck to good use. Which you had already planned to do this year. Anything you can do to infuriate that bitch is just a bonus."

Severus' lips twitched in a reluctant smile. "Sounds like you've got it all figured out," he drawled lightly. Remus smirked at him.

"She's a hideous excuse for a human, and she's going to get *exactly* what she deserves, one way or another." The satisfaction in his tone while talking about the downfall of that odious Ministry hag, the delight he was taking in the idea of her comeuppance — *that* was the man Severus knew and loved, innocent on the surface but devious underneath. And it was doing things to Severus' libido, heat gathering low in his gut.

"I don't want to talk about Dolores Umbridge anymore," he said intently, reaching out to take Remus' hand. He should be getting back to the school — first night back often ended with some homesick first year at his door — but he wasn't sure when he could get away again, and it would take a stronger man than him to walk away from Remus Lupin with that look in his eyes.

"Good." The werewolf's fingers tightened around his, tugging him towards the staircase.
"Neither do I."

....

When Harry first got down to breakfast, he was momentarily disappointed at the sight of four solid blocks of same-colour robes; had all their progress last year been for nothing?

Then his drowsy brain noticed the four heads of house handing out schedules, and he blinked — oh, that made sense. No need to send the teachers all over the hall. With any luck, they'd be back to their mingling by lunch.

Ignoring the feeling of eyes on him, Harry and Neville went to sit with their three favourite Weasleys. "Morning, lads," George greeted chirpily. "Ready for your first day of OWL lessons?"

"You ready for your first day of NEWTs?" Harry retorted dryly, making the redhead laugh.

"Oh, I think we'll manage just fine."

Harry and Neville looked up as McGonagall floated a pair of schedules towards them, and Harry shot her a quick grin in thanks. "Let's see what we've got, then." Harry looked at his schedule, and sucked in a sharp breath.

"Blimey; not giving you an easy start, are they?" George remarked, peering over Harry's shoulder, his own schedule ignored in his hand. "Binns, Snape, Trelawney and Umbridge all in one day. What a *winning* combination."

It seemed to be a unanimous agreement that Umbridge's classes were going to be awful. Harry grimaced — at least with double Potions he'd have a chance to relax.

He paused, running that thought back through his head.

Oh, how things had changed.

"Fred! George!" The screech made Harry wince, and the twins whipped around to see a furious Hermione storming over, a poster in hand. Harry recognised it as one of the advertisements for product testers the twins had shown him before leaving Grimmauld, planning on putting up in all the common rooms. "I should put you both in detention for this! You can't advertise for testers in the common room!"

"Please, O' Wise Prefect, point us to the exact section of the school rules that says we can't," Fred asked, grinning. Hermione's eyes narrowed.

"You shouldn't need to *see* the rules, it should be common sense!"

"There's a warning about the risks," Ginny pointed out mildly from the opposite side of the table. "As long as everyone consents, they're fine."

The twins shared a smirk as Hermione's anger grew, her nostrils flaring. "That can't be within the rules," she hissed. "Back me up, Ron!"

"Leave me out of this!" Ron yelped, already sat at the table further up and piling his plate high with breakfast foods. Hermione glared at him, then turned back to Fred and George.

"If I catch you two giving *anyone* one of your untested *disasters*, you'll regret it," she warned them, then stalked off to go and sit with Ron. Harry looked over at the two sixth year prefects, who were sat with a bunch of first years and helping them figure out their schedules.

"She does realise that there are *other* prefects in Gryffindor, right? And that one of them is your roommate?" he asked, frowning in confusion. "It's not all down to her."

"Kenny doesn't care what we do as long as we don't test it on him," George agreed cheerfully. "Don't worry, Little Miss Rulebook will learn eventually. She won't be able to keep an eye on everyone and still revise for her OWLs — especially not the way she studies."

"And with Ron as her prefect partner," Fred added, rolling his eyes.

"Well, on that *shining* note, we're gonna see if we can sell a few things before Herbology," George said, patting his satchel with a conspiratorial wink. "Good luck with your Hell Monday, chaps." He used a spell to ruffle Ginny's hair with a grin, and then the two of them were off. Neville snickered as Ginny tried to re-do her hair, then looked down at his schedule in dismay.

"It really is awful," he sighed. Harry shrugged.

"Could be worse," he mused, though he wasn't sure exactly how.

At least the rest of his schedule wasn't too bad — though, considering it was OWL year, there was probably no 'easy' configuration of classes. Harry was determined to apply himself this year, though; Dumbledore knew the compulsions were broken, there was no need to downplay his academic abilities. As long as he didn't perform any enormously strong feats of magic, he would be fine.

He was sick of holding back for the sake of others. He didn't have to worry about upsetting Hermione, or making Ron jealous. He *liked* learning — maybe not as much as the Ravenclaws — and he wanted to do well this year.

He wanted his godfathers to be proud of his exam results. Hell, he wanted *Snape* to be proud, too.

With that in mind, Harry finished his breakfast, and he and Neville headed off to Binns' classroom.

..

History of Magic was perhaps not the greatest class to begin his resolution to do well in class; everyone knew the only way to actually get a good grade in that subject was to self-study and ignore Binns entirely. Still, instead of using the forty-five minute period to doze off like he might have done in the past — or to doodle like Ron seemed to be doing — Harry sat in the back with Neville and a cluster of his Hufflepuff friends, making plans for the first study group of the year. The regular study group, not the heirs one; though Susan had a determined look in her eye that made Harry wonder what she had in mind to combat Umbridge's influence.

He was secretly very, very glad that Susan was the one spearheading the whole Wizengamot Takeover situation; she knew more about wizarding politics than he ever would, and had far more clear ideas and solutions than Harry. Also, he had other priorities; namely training to kill a Dark Lord, and getting rid of Dumbledore.

He would work on his end of the bargain, and Susan would deal with the rest.

In Potions, Harry was happy to partner with Neville, despite the skeptical look Snape levelled at him when no one else was looking. He wasn't going to abandon his friend in his least-favourite subject, even if it would be more of a political statement to sit with one of the Slytherins. Perhaps later in the term, if he could get Neville's confidence up, they could split up and sit with Blaise and Daphne; the only two 'safe' Slytherins now Voldemort had returned.

Harry tried his best not to look at the back of Draco's head while he stirred his Draught of Peace. Snape was throwing them right in at the deep end, setting a tricky potion that required precise measurements and careful timing. "You're doing great, Nev," Harry murmured supportively, looking over at his friend's cauldron. It wasn't quite the same shade of lilac as Harry's, but it was still purple.

Neville's hand trembled around his knife. "I can't do this," he moaned, voice quiet. "I'm going to fail Potions."

“No you’re not,” Harry insisted. “Come on, just take a breath. You’re ace at Herbology — you know exactly what every one of these plants does, and how they interact with each other. Just think of it as an extension of that.” If he could get Neville to get over his fear of Snape, the other Gryffindor would probably do very well in the subject.

If only he could tell his friend that the Potions professor wasn’t as awful as he made out to be.

He kept on top of his potion the best he could while also quietly coaching Neville through his, going silent every time Snape was even remotely near their corner of the classroom. It didn’t stop the man from strolling by and making snide remarks every five minutes or so, but that didn’t bother Harry; he just had to remind himself that, unlike in the summer, he had to refrain from replying. He kept his head down, focusing on his Draught of Peace — which he’d brewed before under Snape’s instruction, at Seren Du — and by the end of the class, Harry and Hermione were the only two Gryffindors whose potions were emitting a delicate silver vapour. Neville’s was puffing out clouds of pale grey smoke, which seemed a much better outcome than either of them anticipated. Certainly better than Ron’s, which was spitting green sparks.

“What is this, Potter?” Snape drawled, giving the cauldron a look of disgust. Harry fought down a smirk.

“Draught of Peace, sir.” He tried not to sound too confident, but he knew damn well there was nothing Snape could properly criticise about it. Snape knew, too, if the blink-and-you’ll-miss-it flash of approval in his eyes was anything to go by.

“We’ll see about that, won’t we?” came the cool response, before Snape gave one last disparaging glance at Neville’s cauldron and continued back up to the front of the classroom, barking out orders to bring a flagon of potion up for grading. Harry allowed himself a small smile as he bottled his draught.

Snape could belittle him and his father and his skills as much as he wanted during class, Harry knew it was all for show. And even if he found a way to give Harry a failing grade for every single piece of classwork, it would have no bearing on his exam grade.

Harry was going to get that O in Potions if it killed him.

. . .

Giving Ron and Hermione a wide berth at lunch — Ron was complaining about Potions, while Hermione was furiously marking up her class schedule and comparing it to her revision timetable — Harry and Neville went to sit at the Hufflepuff table instead, with Hannah and Ernie.

Harry’s first instinct had been the Ravenclaw table, but then he’d realised that beside Luna, Ginny was sat flirting up a storm with Michael Corner. He wasn’t going to subject Neville to that.

"Have you had a class with *her* yet?" Hannah asked quietly, eyes flicking up to the pink-clad woman at the head table. Neville shook his head.

"This afternoon, we've got a double," he said, grimacing.

"We've got her tomorrow," Ernie supplied. "You'll have to let us know how it goes."

"When's Susan thinking?" Harry asked, knowing the redhead would want everyone to meet soon. The two Hufflepuffs shrugged.

"Figured we'd let everyone settle in first, see when clubs and quidditch and everything are meeting. But soon," Hannah said. "There's a lot to talk about."

The four of them shared a knowing glance.

They spent the whole lunch hour at the Hufflepuff table, then reluctantly headed for the North Tower, where Divination awaited them. "I wish I could drop this bloody subject," Harry muttered, sitting on the stone floor beneath the silver ladder. They were early; the first ones there, in fact.

"At least it's one less exam to really study for?" Neville attempted optimistically. Harry snorted — Sirius had told him that the exam was going to take more than just *making up* a bunch of predictions. He would actually have to have knowledge about the different manners of divination, and when each was best used.

If only he could let on early that he planned to take the tests for Arithmancy and Runes, then he could drop classes. But that would make Dumbledore far too suspicious.

And so, with a sigh, Harry clambered up the ladder into the heavily-perfumed classroom. Not begrudging Neville as he went to go sit with Terry and Anthony — his usual class companions, since Harry had previously always sat with Ron — Harry looked around somewhat helplessly.

"Harry," a soft voice called, and he turned to see Parvati Patil gesturing to an empty armchair at the table she shared with Lavender. Harry beamed at the two girls, happily joining them — just in time to see Ron throw himself in his usual seat, then blink at the empty chair beside him.

"You're lifesavers, you are," the dark-haired Gryffindor declared under his breath, making the girls giggle.

"Figured you might want a save," Lavender told him. Then she put on a mock-severe expression. "But there's no slacking off at this table, Potter. We have a reputation to uphold you know."

Before Harry could answer, Professor Trelawney swept into the classroom. She blinked owlishly at the new seating arrangements — Dean had sat with Ron, whether through choice or through pity Harry wasn't sure.

As Trelawney began to talk about dream interpretation, Harry was surprised to see his table-mates writing neat little notes in vivid purple ink, frowns of concentration on their faces.

“You two really care about this subject, don’t you?” he remarked softly, once the three of them were bent over the copy of *The Dream Oracle*.

“A lot of people think it’s a load of waffle, but it’s actually really interesting. Even if you don’t have the Sight,” Lavender insisted.

“It’s not for everyone,” Parvati acknowledged with a smile, “but we like it.”

“Do either of you have the Sight?”

“Lavender has a little bit,” Parvati said, a touch of envy in her tone. “I don’t, but my grandmother does so I grew up with a lot of respect for the subject. Not all Seers are as ... *odd* as Lovegood.”

She spoke with such confidence, and *of course*, it made perfect sense that Luna was a Seer, like Ginny had always wondered. All those odd creatures she spoke of and the way they affected people, the way she seemed to just *know* things.

Not many other people seemed to have figured it out, though, judging by the way Luna was treated by her peers.

“Don’t worry, Harry.” Parvati pat him on the arm, grinning. “Stick with us, we’ll make sure you get *at least* an E in this class.” Her expression turned conspiratorial. “Word is you’re aiming to upset Granger from her top spot this year.”

The Hogwarts rumour mill would never fail to amaze Harry. “We’ve had *two* classes!” How could people already be talking about his dedication to his studies??

The two girls shared a look, then giggled, and demanded he recount a dream for them to interpret.

“I— can we do one of yours, instead?” he pleaded, grimacing. “My dreams... aren’t great. After the third task...” He trailed off, and Lavender gasped, wide eyes filling with sadness.

“Oh, of course,” she breathed, horrified. “Oh, you poor thing. Have you asked Madam Pomfrey for a sleeping potion?”

“Can’t take it every night, what’s the point?” he confessed grimly. The pair shared sympathetic expressions, and huddled in a little closer, while Lavender happily relayed her dream about looking for her childhood pet hamster in the Herbology greenhouses.

The bell went before they could move on to Parvati’s dream, and it caught Harry by surprise — the class went much faster when he wasn’t hating every second of it and mocking the whole subject with Ron. As he stepped down from the ladder, a shoulder shoved roughly against him. “You three looked pretty *cosy* up there,” Ron remarked bitingly. “Thought you were queer, mate?” His face was full of accusation, and Harry just rolled his eyes.

“Struggling to see what *friendship* looks like, Ron?” he retorted. “What a surprise.” He picked up his pace, wanting to put as much distance between himself and the redhead as possible, and the two girls jogged to catch up with him.

“Was he always that awful?” Parvati remarked in disgust. Harry shrugged.

“If he was, I never realised. I think he’s gotten worse since last year though.”

“He’s been going downhill since the Yule Ball,” Lavender said. “The whole Viktor Krum thing.”

Now that Harry thought about it, she was right — somewhere between Hermione’s relationship with Krum, and Harry coming out in the *Quibbler*, Ron had become mighty sensitive on the topic of relationships.

“It’s not my fault he can’t get his head out of his arse where Hermione’s concerned,” Harry groused. “They spent the whole summer together, he had plenty of opportunities.”

“Are Hermione and Krum over for good, then?” Lavender asked, always keen for gossip. Harry shrugged.

“He told me she hardly wrote to him over the summer, so I’d imagine so.” That reminded him, he had to write to Viktor at the weekend, now he was away from Grimmauld.

“You kept in touch? That’s so nice.” Parvati smiled. “If he’s single again, think you could put in a good word for us?” she joked, and she and Lavender both giggled as Harry blushed.

The good mood died quickly as they reached the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom, waiting outside. To no one’s surprise, they shared this class with the Slytherins, too — Dumbledore did love pairing the two volatile houses together in the more potentially catastrophic subjects.

“Nice to see you’ve lost your shadows, Potter,” Blaise drawled in greeting, giving a pointed glance over to Ron and Hermione further down the hall. Harry smirked briefly.

“These things happen. How was your summer?” He focused on the Italian boy purely to stop himself from staring at Draco. The blond Slytherin looked exceptionally attractive today, his slightly-longer hair swept neatly away from his face.

Blaise was saved having to answer by the classroom door swinging open. The Slytherin eyed it warily, then stepped back, giving an ‘after you’ gesture. Harry rolled his eyes, leading the way into the classroom.

Over the years, he had seen this room in a lot of different ways; from the dozens of portraits of Gilderoy Lockhart, to the huge stockpile of Dark Detectors Crouch-As-Moody had chosen to decorate with. But he’d never seen it so...bare.

There was nothing on the walls. The shelves contained only piles of extra Slinkhard books — *Defensive Magical Theory*, and the others that the younger students were using — and at the

front of the class was only a single blackboard. And Umbridge, in that fluffy pink cardigan, smiling like a spider might at a fly caught in its web.

A shiver of trepidation ran down Harry's spine. He pushed past it, heading for a free desk in the middle row, behind Fay and Sophie. Hermione, of course, went straight for the front row, dragging Ron with her.

Everyone was silent as they sat. Umbridge just smiled wider.

The chorused-greeting she insisted on like they were at muggle primary school was bad enough, and when she instructed them to put away their wands Harry knew it was going to be awful.

Her 'Ministry-approved' course aims made him want to gag. Of course Fudge didn't want students actually learning anything remotely useful in this class. If he admitted there was need for defensive spells, he might actually have to admit there was something out there worth defending against.

He hadn't actually had the chance to read his copy of *Defensive Magical Theory* yet, as it had only arrived that morning, but as he skimmed through the introductory chapter he could tell it was going to be just as dry and useless as every other Slinkhard book he'd ever read. Which, admittedly, was only one — Remus had caught him reading it and gone on a very long-winded rant about how Wilbert Slinkhard wouldn't know so much as a Disarming charm if it stripped him bare and slapped him on the arse.

He glanced up to see how the rest of the class was handling it, and was surprised to see Hermione in front of him with her book closed and her hand in the air. He looked across at the Slytherin side of the room — they all had one eye on the curly-haired Gryffindor, waiting for the show to begin.

Umbridge, who was sat at the desk and blithely ignoring her student's imploring gaze, lasted a whole lot longer than Harry anticipated. Eventually, when she could no longer pretend Hermione wasn't there, she smiled at the girl as if she'd only just noticed her. "Did you have a question about the chapter, dear?" she asked sweetly.

Harry was marginally surprised at Hermione's blatant disrespect. The Hermione Granger he'd met in first year would never *dare* question authority. Perhaps three years of friendship with Harry Potter had done more to her than he'd thought.

Or perhaps she just rejected any authority that wasn't Dumbledore's.

"We're not going to use magic?" Ron blurted incredulously, drawing Umbridge's ire to himself.

"Are you a Ministry-trained educational expert, Miss Granger?" Umbridge asked when Hermione continued to argue.

"Are you, Professor?" Harry cut in, unable to help himself. He might have shed his compulsions, but he was still a Gryffindor — and Umbridge couldn't be allowed to just

patronise them so completely. He couldn't let her get away with spewing her Ministry bullshit; more than that, he couldn't let people think he in any way *supported it*.

"Hand, Mr Potter!" she barked, and Harry flung his hand in the air.

"Are you a Ministry-trained educational expert, Professor Umbridge?" he repeated with false innocence. "Only, I thought for sure you were the Undersecretary to the Minister. I'd really love to hear about your teaching qualifications."

Someone sniggered from the back of the classroom. It might have been Pansy Parkinson. Umbridge scowled.

"*Senior* Undersecretary, Mr Potter," she corrected pointedly. "And I do not believe it is your place to question my teaching ability. Minister Fudge and the Department of Magical Education have appointed me to this role, and that is all you need to know. *Furthermore*, my curriculum has been designed by the Ministry's best and brightest minds in education, and is guaranteed to correct the erroneous and downright *irresponsible* teaching you have previously suffered under."

Harry's hand was still in the air. "And we're supposed to pass our OWLs without ever having performed the spells we're to use in the exams, are we?"

"With a firm enough understanding of the theory, you will all be perfectly capable of performing the necessary spells under controlled exam conditions," Umbridge assured, her smile turning vicious.

"And Merlin forbid we ever need to use those spells again in our lifetime, in *non exam conditions*," Harry retorted. Umbridge's beady eyes narrowed.

"What use would you have for those spells once you leave this school, Mr Potter?" She gave a girlish giggle. "You speak as if you expect to be *attacked* the moment you step foot outside the castle!"

Harry clenched his jaw; so this was her angle, was it? He should have known. She was here to discredit him, to goad him into shouting about Voldemort's return so she could call him a lunatic and make him look like a foolish child in front of his classmates.

Well, two could play at that game.

"I don't know, Professor, I certainly could have used some of those spells this summer when a dementor sucked the soul out of my *muggle cousin*."

Several sharp intakes of breath sounded around him. Umbridge's face turned the same sort of colour Harry usually saw on Uncle Vernon, right before Harry got the living daylights beaten out of him.

"Ten points from Gryffindor, Mr Potter," she snapped.

"For making a true statement?" he asked, eyebrows raised. "You can't deny it, Professor — the Auror Department case notes are available for anyone who wants to look." Everyone in

the class was staring at him now, their books utterly abandoned. Harry's pulse thudded in his neck, though his hands were steady; Umbridge wasn't even *close* to the most intimidating thing Harry had ever experienced.

"What happened to your cousin is of course, a devastating accident," Umbridge relented, "but you cannot use one outlying example as a call for everyone to have free use of *offensive magics*. The laws are there for a reason, after all, Mr Potter. The Ministry exists to protect its citizens."

"So my cousin didn't count because he's a muggle?"

"That is *not* the point, Mr Potter."

"What about Cedric Diggory?" Harry was on a roll now. "Where was the Ministry to *protect* him when a Death Eater hit him with a Killing curse?"

Umbridge stilled. "Cedric Diggory's death was a tragic accident," she said, venomously sweet. She looked away from Harry, facing the class at large. "You have all been told that a certain Dark wizard has returned from the dead," she announced. "That is, of course, a lie. *Certain* members of our community are trying to scare you into believing this Dark wizard is at large, and that sort of fear-mongering will not be tolerated."

"If I'm lying about Voldemort, what happened to Cedric? Or are you blaming that one on the Triwizard Tournament? Because I'll remind you, *Professor*, that Minister Fudge was one of the most staunch supporters of bringing back the tournament, despite peoples' fears over the previous death averages, and he was the one to assure everyone that steps had been taken to prevent a lethal outcome." He smiled coolly. "So which is it?"

"*Detention, Mr Potter!*" Umbridge screeched. "Tomorrow evening, five o'clock. My office. And I will kindly ask you to cease disturbing your classmates and return to your reading."

Harry paused, anger bubbling within him, trying desperately to remember everything Snape had taught him over the summer about not letting his emotions get the better of him.

"One last question, Professor. About your *course aims*." He plastered an innocent smile on his face. He was starting to lose feeling in his hand, from how long it had been in the air.

"What now, Mr Potter?"

"If the Ministry's stance is that none of us will ever need to use defensive spells outside of class, and the only time we should cast them is in controlled exam conditions, why do we bother learning them?"

She stared at him, and he stared back, unflinching.

"I beg your pardon?" Her falsely-girlish voice was *painfully* saccharine.

"Well I thought the whole point of school was to learn things that would benefit us as adults, in the real world. So if defensive spells are *not necessary* in the real world, why are they on the Ministry's curriculum?"

“For those looking to pursue a career as an auror—“

“Then why not leave them all til auror training?” Harry cut in, trying not to outwardly smirk when she scowled.

“Another ten points for interrupting me, Mr Potter,” she said immediately. “Now, *as I was saying*, for those looking to pursue a career as an auror, a firm grasp of the *theory* of these spells is necessary.”

“The aurors only know the theory, too? That explains a lot,” Harry remarked cheerily, earning another wave of hastily-muffled giggles from his classmates.

A vein in Umbridge’s temple twitched.

“Come here, Mr Potter,” she beckoned softly. Harry got to his feet, striding calmly up to stand in front of the desk. He wondered if she was going to curse him, or perhaps smack him across the hands with a ruler like in muggle schools. The whole class held their breath.

Instead, Umbridge pulled out a small roll of pink parchment, and scrawled a note that Harry could not see. When she was done, she sealed it with a tap of her wand and held it out to him. “Take this to Professor McGonagall, dear. Now, please,” she requested.

Hiding his confusion, Harry did as bid, stopping at his desk to gather his things — he wouldn’t be coming back, even if he had time left. He didn’t look at anyone on his way out.

Let Umbridge try and salvage that one, then.

Chapter 49

Once he was finally alone in the corridor, far from the Defence classroom, Harry allowed himself a quiet chuckle. The detention was frustrating, but he'd had worse, and he privately thought he'd handled that quite well. Sitting and accepting her Ministry propaganda hadn't even been an option, as far as he was concerned; but he hadn't said anything about fighting Voldemort, or made any outlandish claims — he'd just pointed out the facts, and the inconsistencies in her own logic.

Remus would be proud.

Ignoring Peeves juggling inkwells and singing about his sanity — or lack thereof — Harry strolled calmly up to the Transfiguration professor's office, knocking on the door. After a few moments, McGonagall opened it, and stared down at him in bewilderment. "Potter? Shouldn't you be in class?"

"I've been sent to see you," he informed her. Her eyebrows rose.

"*Sent?*"

Harry held up the pink roll of parchment by way of explanation. The Gryffindor housemistress' lips thinned. "Come in, then."

Taking the scroll, she unsealed it with a tap of her wand, absently gesturing Harry into the chair opposite her desk while she read. Eventually, she looked up at him, expression unreadable. "Is this true?"

"I wouldn't know, Professor; I don't know what it says."

"Is it true that you shouted at Professor Umbridge?"

"Well, I wouldn't say *shouted*," Harry said. "Raised my voice, perhaps." McGonagall didn't look impressed.

"You disrespected her, and the Minister?"

"I suppose."

"You called her a liar?"

"Not in so many words."

"You insisted that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named killed Mr Diggory last year?"

"I pointed out that if he *didn't*, the Triwizard Tournament — which Minister Fudge was responsible for — was at fault, and she was welcome to choose who to blame."

McGonagall stared at him for a long moment, quietly despairing. Then she sighed. “Have a biscuit, Potter.”

Harry blinked as a tartan biscuit tin was levitated towards him. “I...” What?

McGonagall just stared at him, until he’d selected a Ginger Newt and taken a bite. “It’s the first day of term, Potter. You need to be more careful.”

Harry swallowed. Not quite the scolding he’d anticipated. She actually sounded *anxious*. “I never explicitly said that Voldemort had returned,” he told her. “I said that a Death Eater had killed Cedric, and she was welcome to draw her own conclusions. Oh, and I, uh, sort-of blamed the Ministry for what happened to my cousin.”

McGonagall’s lips pursed. “My condolences,” she murmured, and he nodded. He supposed he was going to be getting a lot of that, now; the story would be all over the school by dinner. “But that doesn’t excuse this kind of behaviour. Acting up in Dolores Umbridge’s class could cost you much more than house points and a detention.”

“I know,” Harry agreed. “But I know what she’s here for. I know what she’s trying to do.”

McGonagall eyed him carefully. “Yes, I think that you do,” she murmured. “I suppose it would be too much to ask you to keep your head down in her classes?”

Harry couldn’t help but grin. “Professor, no offence, but when have you *ever* known me to keep my head down?” The despairing look returned, and he chuckled. “If she’s focused on me, she’s distracted from everyone else.” Let McGonagall think he was talking about Dumbledore, about the Order. Harry couldn’t give two fucks about them — but if Umbridge was busy playing word games with him, trying to get him to incriminate himself as a liar and a lunatic, then she wouldn’t have time to pay attention to Susan and the rest getting into place to take Fudge down as soon as they all came of age.

And the more he could get the Ministry puppet to deny Voldemort’s return, the easier it would be to unseat Fudge and his whole useless regimen when the Dark Lord finally reared his ugly head.

“You’re just a student, Potter — it’s not your responsibility to protect everyone else.” McGonagall sounded like she was worried about him, and Harry shot her what he hoped was a reassuring smile.

He had no idea how much she knew about Dumbledore’s meddling, but the fact that she didn’t approve of him martyring himself for the cause was a positive sign. Merlin, he hoped she wasn’t in cahoots with the headmaster. The school needed her far too much.

“I’ll be alright, Professor. It’s just a detention.”

“Actually, according to this note, it’s detention every evening this week,” the woman corrected with a slight frown. Harry cursed under his breath. “Language, Potter,” came the automatical scold.

"Sorry, Professor. But every evening this week? That's outrageous!" Then a thought occurred to him, and he laughed. "Oh, that's brilliant!"

"I beg your pardon, Potter?" His housemistress was eyeing him like the rumours of his insanity might not be too unfounded. Harry grinned at her.

"A whole week of detention, just for pointing out some facts — that's gonna make her look *really* in control, isn't it?" If she had just dismissed him out of turn, given him the one detention and ignored the rest, she would've shown that his words didn't matter to her. But a whole week's worth — everyone would see that Harry had struck a nerve.

She thought she was making an example of him, but really, she was only making one of herself.

There was a flicker in the Transfiguration professor's eyes — something like pride, if Harry looked carefully. "Be careful, Potter," she reiterated. "Dolores Umbridge has friends in some powerful places, and you cannot afford to have your future limited so young."

"Oh, don't worry about me, Professor," he said cheerfully. "I'm going to play professional quidditch after graduation. I don't think the Ministry has any say in that."

McGonagall stared at him, her lips twitching like she was trying very hard not to laugh. "Then I'd best see that trophy remaining on my shelf this year," she said, glancing at the Quidditch Cup, still in pride of place after Harry's third year. He beamed.

"I'll do my best."

.-. .

As expected, *everyone* knew about Harry's clash with Umbridge at dinner time.

Of course, many people were taking it as confirmation that he'd lost his mind, but mostly people just seemed entertained by Harry's bold and unashamed call-out of the Ministry. Especially once it was confirmed that a dementor had indeed Kissed a muggle teenage boy in the middle of Surrey, and the Ministry had covered it up.

Umbridge looked *furious*.

"I can't believe you," Neville declared, shaking his head. "No, I *can*, actually. That's the worst part."

Harry grinned smugly, feeling quite pleased with himself. "All I did was point out that there seem to have been a lot of *tragic accidents* under the Ministry's purview," he said, shrugging. "Not my fault she got upset about it."

"You're going to be in detention for the *entire* year," Neville despaired.

"Nah." Harry wasn't bothered. "Not with Umbridge, at any rate. Snape will miss me cleaning his cauldrons."

The other Gryffindor boy let out a moan of dismay, and Harry just chuckled. Across the hall he saw Luna enter the room, and he waved her over, gesturing to the empty seat at his side. To his surprise, she brought Sullivan Fawley with her.

“Hello, Harry,” Luna greeted airily. “I hear you’ve had a rather exciting first day back.”

“Don’t encourage him,” Neville groaned, and Sully snorted.

“Did she *really* say you weren’t going to use magic the entire year? In your OWL year?” He sounded offended by the very concept. Harry nodded.

“Apparently if we know the theory well enough we’ll be able to do the spells perfectly on our first try — in our exams, while being graded on our performance.” He rolled his eyes, and the Ravenclaw boy grimaced.

“What a load of nonsense. Merlin — we’ve had some truly interesting Defence professors over the years, but you know, I think this might be the first to cause an entire year group to fail both their OWLs and NEWTs.”

Harry rather thought that was exactly what Fudge was aiming for. Sometimes he wondered if the Minister wasn’t in league with Voldemort himself; surely he couldn’t just be *that* incompetent?

“Wait, people passed their exams when Lockhart was teacher?” Neville asked incredulously. Harry echoed his surprise.

“Professor Umbridge never said we couldn’t use the spells outside of class,” Luna remarked, absently spooning soup into a hollowed-out bread roll. “Only that they weren’t permitted inside the classroom.”

“Looks like we know what most study groups will be focusing on, then,” Harry agreed, wondering how many people were about to get kicked out of the library for using magic near the books. Not everyone was willing to sneak into abandoned classrooms after curfew.

“That’ll keep Madam Pomfrey busy,” said Neville, shaking his head.

As Sully asked Neville a question about Herbology, Harry tuned out of the conversation, trying instead to make out the whispers of conversation including his name happening all over the Great Hall.

It felt ambitious to be trying to convince everyone that Voldemort was back, when the Ministry and the *Prophet* were doing their best to shut down even the vaguest insinuation that such a thing could be possible — and when Voldemort himself was being so frustratingly silent.

They would find out eventually, when the Dark Lord made his first move.

The more immediate problem was discrediting the Ministry without sending everyone straight into Dumbledore’s arms. Harry didn’t want people to see it as supporting one or the

other; he just wanted them to think for themselves, to start to question the information they were being fed so blindly. To be prepared to fight if it came to it.

There were far too many puppetmasters pulling strings for his liking — his best bet would be to just cut every single one he could.

.-. .

The teachers seemed to be determined to make their students very aware from the start that they were now preparing for their OWL examinations — even after one single day of classes, Harry and his year mates had a small mountain of homework. After dinner, Harry and Neville went up to the common room to get started on it; with the number of people still talking about Dudley, Harry didn't want to face the library to try and find an inter-house study group.

Hermione had already claimed the comfortable chairs by the fire, Ron at her side, so Harry and Neville set themselves up on the opposite side of the common room. Not far off, Fred and George were handing out sweets to a bunch of first and second years, holding clipboards and grinning. One by one, the first years slumped unconscious, caught by the Cushioning charms the twins had layered up. Harry nudged Neville to get his attention as Hermione stormed over, fury burning in her eyes. They watched amusedly as the fifth year prefect tried to go toe-to-toe with the twins, who were utterly unbothered by it, continuing their experiment. The first years did seem totally fine, once Lee had given them the other half of the Fainting Fancies — not that Hermione was placated by that in any way.

“You going to put us in detention?” George dared cockily. Hermione squared her shoulders, narrowing her eyes at him.

“I’ll write to your mother,” she retorted, and a low ‘oohh’ resonated around the common room.

“Low blow,” Neville murmured, wincing. Indeed, the twins looked horrified at the very prospect.

“Won’t stop them, though,” Harry said knowingly. “They’ll just get sneakier about it.” Fred and George Weasley were not going to be stopped by one single prefect, not when they were so close to their dream.

After that, the noise in the common room ramped up, starting to nag at Harry’s headache. Glancing around, he raised a discreet privacy ward around the pair of them; one that would dampen the noise. Neville gave a small sigh of relief. “Thanks, Harry.”

“No problem.”

They worked in silence for a few more minutes, and then Neville cleared his throat. “So, uh... how *was* your summer, really? Other than, y’know.” He waved a hand, as if to encompass the dementor attack and Ron and Hermione’s pestering and Harry’s total lack of privacy in one single gesture. “I know there’s stuff you wouldn’t tell Ginny or anyone. Not that you have to tell me,” Neville added quickly.

"No, no — I was going to anyway. I... it was actually really nice, up until everything went to shit. I was... somewhere safe, at first, with Sirius and Remus. They started teaching me how to duel properly." Neville didn't know about Snape, and it was best kept that way.

The blond boy grew serious. "You're getting ready to fight him, then?"

Harry nodded. "I have to. Sooner the better, right?" He couldn't say anything about horcruxes either, but he could tell Neville about some of the things he'd learned.

"Draco came to visit for my birthday, too," he added, a smile tugging at his lips. Neville's eyes danced.

"Oh, did he, now?" he drawled. "How nice of him." Harry elbowed him in the side, ducking his face to hide his blush. Neville laughed. "Have you seen him yet? Y'know, properly?"

Harry shook his head sadly. "No, and all my new detentions won't make that any easier." With any luck, Umbridge would only keep him for an hour or two, and he'd still have the nighttime free to meet Draco without falling hugely behind on his homework.

Harry doubted it.

"If you need me to cover for you, just say the word," Neville offered. Harry's chest grew warm; Neville really was an excellent friend to have.

.-. .

Flitwick and McGonagall were also of the mind to overload their students with work, each starting their classes with a fifteen minute lecture about the importance of OWLs and how difficult they were going to be. Harry wondered if that was actually the case, or if all the Hogwarts teachers had decided the best way to prepare their students was to over-prepare them, by making them expect much harder exams than they would get.

That seemed more like a surefire way to intimidate students into a breakdown, but perhaps mental fortitude was supposed to be part of it, too. Harry wasn't sure. Either way, he was wondering how he was going to find time for all his extra-curricular activities on top of his existing schoolwork; especially if Umbridge had him in detention as often as she clearly wanted to.

Though it was very entertaining to watch Hermione frantically re-adjusting her revision schedule after every class, once she realised how much time she would have to devote to homework instead of her own study plans.

He kept up his small rebellions against the house divides in class, sitting with Anthony in Transfiguration and Susan in Charms — blending houses was easier, in classes that didn't involve Slytherins. It made Harry's heart ache to see how withdrawn the snake house had become, and he hoped it wouldn't be quite so bad in the lower years; they were far, far too young to be forced to choose sides in such a way.

At lunch, Harry was once again at the Ravenclaw table — this time sat with Cho. “I wanted to thank you again for writing to me over the summer,” she said quietly, offering a shy smile. “It... it’s been hard, without Cedric. I’m glad I’ve still got friends like you, and the Hufflepuff boys.” Cedric’s old roommates, from what Harry could see, seem to have taken Cho under their wing; which, considering she spent most of her time with them before due to hanging out with Cedric, wasn’t surprising.

“Of course, yeah. I’m glad we’re friends, too. Last year was fun, even with all the parts that... weren’t.” He paused, eyeing her in concern. “Are you doing okay?” He couldn’t imagine what it was like for her, being back at school with everyone whispering about Cedric’s death, being confronted with all the memories of her boyfriend.

The smile she gave him was strained around the edges. “I’m getting there. Like I said, it’s been hard. But it’ll get easier.”

Harry wrapped an arm around her shoulders, giving her a quick squeeze. “I’m always here if you need me,” he promised.

“Honestly, just knowing the truth of what happened was a big relief,” she confessed. “If I’d been left with just that vague stuff Dumbledore said last year, I don’t know how I’d be feeling.” She sniffled a little. “I just wish everyone else would believe what you say, too. Patrick and the boys do, when I told them — not the details, just, y’know, how he died,” she added quickly. Harry hadn’t left much out in his explanation to her and the other Triwizard champions, so he was glad she wasn’t spreading the *entire* story about. “But all those people who believe the *Prophet*... it’s like they’re just laughing at Cedric’s death, y’know? Saying it was an accident, or part of the tournament — like he wasn’t *good enough* to make it to that Cup.” As she spoke, she glared pointedly up at Umbridge. Harry wondered if Cho had had a DADA lesson yet.

“As far as I’m concerned, Cedric Diggory won the Triwizard Tournament,” Harry declared plainly. “I wouldn’t have been at the Cup if not for him.” And for Crouch rigging the whole maze in his favour, but that was beside the point. “They’ll see the truth, one day. Voldemort won’t stay quiet forever.”

Cho’s smile became a grim line.

“We’ll be ready, when he does.” Her eyes were fierce, and Harry believed her. Even if he hoped that none of them would need to join that fight.

.-. .

It was tempting, during Care of Magical Creatures, to ask Grubbly-Plank when Hagrid would be coming back. But if he truly was out on a mission for the Order, either she didn’t know or she did and wouldn’t tell him. Instead Harry kept his head down and studied his bowtruckle, quietly hating the guilt he felt from enjoying the calm, informative lesson so much. Hagrid was wonderful, but his classes were always... exciting.

He could have done without Draco and Pansy making cutting remarks about the half-giant under their breath, but most of Harry’s ire in response was feigned; they were doing what was

expected of them, and so was he.

If he took joy out of Draco getting into such an argument with Ron that he hexed the redhead, well, no one needed to know that.

Half of the Slytherins didn't seem to know what to do with the other two-thirds of the 'Golden Trio'. They seemed torn between their desire to belittle Gryffindors, and their animosity — real or otherwise — towards Harry. Seeing Harry equally pissed off with his two housemates seemed to take some of the fun out of the taunting, for them; they were slowly turning their sneers on Neville instead. At least, the ones who were brave enough to risk insulting the Longbottom Heir did.

The ones who were so confident in Voldemort's victory that they didn't think the Longbottom name would be worth anything, in a year or two.

He didn't have much time for dinner before he was due at his detention, and as he wolfed down some food while trying not to make himself sick, Angelina dropped onto the bench beside him. "What's this I hear about you having detention at five on Friday?" she asked flatly, anger underlying her tone.

"All week," he confirmed. "Umbridge."

Angelina scowled darkly. "Harry, I *told* you I wanted the whole team at keeper tryouts."

Harry cursed; he'd completely forgotten about those. "Shit, I'm sorry, Angie. If I thought she'd let me reschedule, I'd ask." Umbridge would likely be delighted to hear she was making Harry miss out on quidditch.

"I'm of half a mind to make you ask anyway," the chaser muttered, glaring at the table. Then the fight seemed to leave her, her shoulders slumping. "I know some things are bigger than quidditch, Harry. I've talked to Fred about stuff." Harry wondered exactly what the redhead had told her. "But — please, for me, try not to get any more detentions? Quidditch this year is *really* important. It's my last chance, *our* last chance. We can't win the cup with our star seeker stuck in detention every bloody night!"

"I'll try my best," he promised, though really it was out of his hands. "And I promise I'll get along nicely with whoever you pick as keeper." Luckily, as the seeker it was less important for him to mesh with the rest of the team, but he could understand Angelina wanting a good bond between them all. It would be hard to replace Oliver.

"Good. Now get moving — it's almost five, and if you're late she might give you even more detentions."

Harry looked at his watch, then swore, jumping to his feet with a bread roll still in his hand and sprinting for the doors. Thanks to a couple of Marauder shortcuts, Harry made it to Umbridge's office just in the nick of time.

When the door opened, he blinked, his eyes taking a moment to adjust to the... pink-ness of it all. The walls were covered in dainty porcelain plates decorated with various cats wearing

bows and sprawling cutely. As Harry walked in, it felt like a hundred sets of eyes were on him; a shiver ran down his spine.

At the desk, Umbridge stood, her overly sweet smile in place once more. “Good evening, Mr Potter,” she said, staring him down until he replied in kind. “Please, sit.”

There was a single desk opposite hers, with a blank piece of parchment on the surface. Harry sat, watching her expectantly. “You’re going to be writing lines for me, this evening. With a rather special quill of mine,” she added, when he moved to grab his own. He watched as she pulled out a jet black quill with a wickedly sharp nib, setting it on the desk in front of him.

“May I have some ink, please, Professor?” he asked evenly. For some reason, that made her giggle.

“Oh, you won’t be needing any ink,” she told him, smiling. “I want you to write ‘*I must not tell lies*’.”

Harry *almost* asked her to please elaborate on the lies he had supposedly told, but even he could recognise that now was not the time for sass. He’d just promised Angelina he wouldn’t get more detentions, after all. “How many times?” he asked instead, mind already on the huge load of homework he had to do.

“As long as the message takes to *sink in*,” Umbridge said, giggling once more. Harry screwed up his nose in confusion, but shrugged, and began to write.

His breath hitched as a sharp pain began on the back of his right hand. The words he wrote on paper — appearing in shiny, dark red ink — also carved themselves into the back of his hand. They healed over immediately, leaving little more than a slight red patch, but it was enough.

Umbridge watched him over her clasped hands, sat behind her desk looking entirely too smug.

Harry put his head down, and kept writing.

He’d heard about these quills — Blood Quills, Bill had called them, when he’d once been explaining to Harry how magically binding contracts were signed. They were used to sign in blood, to prove a person was who they said they were. They were *not* designed for repetitive use.

The pain grew sharper with every line, every time the words reopened and re-healed on the back of his hand. But he didn’t flinch, nor shake, nor slow down for even a second, acting as if he was writing with an ordinary quill.

If Umbridge thought pain was the way to control Harry, she had another thing coming. This was *nothing* compared to what he had grown up with. After ten years and one and a half summers with the Dursleys, Harry was an expert at ignoring pain in order to complete tasks.

He began to tune out the continuous burn and sting of the quill cutting into his flesh, mentally composing his Herbology essay while he wrote the simple lines. It was interesting, the words

Umbridge had chosen for him — he'd expected her to be more upset about his blatant disregard for the Ministry's authority. He hadn't even talked that much about Voldemort in class.

Fudge had definitely sent her to keep an eye on Harry, to try and shut him up and get him to *conform* to the Ministry's party line.

Good luck to them, there.

An hour passed, then two. The sky in the window turned pitch black. Still, Harry showed absolutely no reaction to the pain, turning over his parchment to write on the other side when he ran out of room. He meditated as he wrote, wondering when he would next have free time to practice his animagus transformation. Never again, if his homework load was anything to go by.

At last, Umbridge cleared her throat. "Come here, Mr Potter."

Harry went to her, holding out his hand for inspection. The skin had healed over, but it was red and tender, like a bad sunburn. Umbridge pressed her fingers to it, and looked annoyed when Harry didn't so much as twitch.

Really, she'd have to do better than that.

Letting him go with a snide remark about the message *sinking in* more in tomorrow's detention, Umbridge didn't stop Harry when he stuffed the sheet of parchment in his own bag, leaving the office. He didn't know much about blood magic, but he knew enough not to leave his own blood lying around in the enemy's grasp.

Pausing in a hidden passageway on the way up to Gryffindor Tower, Harry murmured a Healing charm over the back of his hand, sighing quietly in relief when the redness began to fade. It was practically gone by the time he got back up to the common room, where he found Neville and Ginny were still up, sat at the table by the slowly dying fire.

"You guys didn't have to wait up for me." It was midnight already — Umbridge had kept him writing lines for almost seven whole hours.

"Had homework to do, figured we might as well. How was it?" Neville asked, shifting his books over to make table space as Harry began to empty his school bag, looking for his Herbology textbook. He needed sleep, but he could at the very least write the notes he'd made in his head during his detention.

"Just lines," he replied dismissively, hoping they wouldn't notice the tightness to his smile.

He wished Draco still had the other half of the two-way mirror. Or that he'd been able to pass it back to Sirius by now. He would give anything to sit and talk to one of them — even if he couldn't tell them about the Blood Quill, he just wanted to feel that reassurance, that comfort.

But both of the mirrors were still in his trunk, and he had an *obscene* amount of homework to do before he could even think about relaxing.

“That’s not so bad, then,” Ginny said, smiling his way. “A week of lines, a few late nights doing homework — not the end of the world.”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed, though his hand still ached, and would no doubt feel a thousand times worse after a whole week of evenings like that.

He could handle it. He’d had worse.

Chapter 50

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

With every teacher trying their best to drown the fifth-years in work, it was no surprise that the heirs were struggling to find a time to meet up. Susan caught him in the corridor on his way to Divination the next morning, raising a quick privacy ward. “We need to have a study group,” she told him, and he grimaced.

“I’d love to, but I’ve got detention with Umbridge every night this week.” Susan swore, her gaze sympathetic. “Go ahead and meet without me, though. Nev can catch me up. I’ll give him my notes for you, too.”

“That’ll work. I’d imagine you already know what I’m going to say about Umbridge, anyway.”

Harry smiled wryly. “I think I’ve got the gist of it. We just need to make sure she doesn’t catch wind of what we’re up to; the last thing we need is Fudge having enough forewarning to try and worm his way out of consequences.” Sometimes it was utterly galling how long it was going to take for all of them to turn seventeen and be in a position to implement their plans — how long Fudge and his cronies, along with Dumbledore and his ilk, could keep ruining peoples’ lives for their own gain.

“It’s going to be a tough year,” Susan agreed, looking grim.

“I’ll do what I can. I make a rather excellent scapegoat,” Harry said with a wink, making her giggle. “Always happy to bang on about Voldemort a bit more if it’ll get her off your case.”

“Good to know.” She seemed amused. “Aunt Amelia believes you, by the way. She’s trying to do what she can to prepare the Ministry, but they’re all sticking their heads in the sand.”

“I figured as much. If it would help, I caught the names of some of the Death Eaters who were there that night — she might not be able to arrest them, but she can at least keep an eye out.”

Susan nodded eagerly, and Harry made a mental note to write the names down for her later and slip them in with the law notes. “Listen, Susan, I know things are all kinds of chaotic with OWLs and Umbridge and everything, but we need to make sure the wider study group continues. You heard the Sorting Hat — now more than ever, we have to break down those house boundaries.” The last thing he wanted was fear causing people to retreat back into old habits.

“Don’t worry, we’ve got it covered,” she assured. “We’ll especially need it for Defence, Merlin,” she added with a shudder. “You just get through your detentions, alright? Leave the unity to me.” She shot him a confident grin, then glanced down the corridor. “I’ve got to get to Arithmancy, I’ll see you later.”

She dropped the privacy ward, hurrying away just as a crowd of students spilled into the corridor. Harry set off towards Divination at a half-jog, his brain feeling full to bursting with all the information and secrets he was trying to keep straight. After his detention, if he managed to get his homework done in a reasonable time, he decided he would sit up with his password-protected notebook and try and straighten out his thoughts. With Umbridge looming over his shoulder and Voldemort biding his time, Harry needed to have a plan.

. . .

He had Herbology first thing after lunch — which, of course, meant Neville went down to the greenhouses as soon as he'd eaten, to spend some time talking with Professor Sprout before class started. Harry wasn't too keen on joining him, so he finished his lunch alone and then sat in a quiet corridor working on his Potions essay, knowing it was the most difficult piece of homework on his list.

When he finally started heading towards Herbology, a pale hand reached out from behind a tapestry and yanked him into a hidden alcove, and Harry almost went boneless from sheer relief. He immediately pulled Draco close, leaning back against the wall and tugging the blond into a long, slow kiss. Draco pressed him against the stone, fingers cupping Harry's jaw. When they parted, Harry took what felt like the first proper breath he'd had in weeks. "Hi," he greeted, smiling softly.

"I've got a bone to pick with you," Draco murmured, though there was no heat to his voice. "What do you think you're doing getting a week's worth of detention?"

"You were there," Harry pointed out, absently playing with the knot of Draco's Slytherin tie. "I couldn't help myself."

"I saw that." Draco was smirking, and Harry's chest filled with an odd sort of pride. "You were certainly entertaining, knocking her down a few pegs like that. But I do question your intelligence in making enemies so early in the year."

"She had it out for me before I even stepped in her classroom," Harry pointed out, stroking up Draco's pale neck, fingers trailing up into the soft, short hair behind his ear. "We both know why she's here. Bet she'd give me detention for *breathing* at this rate. I might as well earn it."

"Don't push it," Draco warned, even as he arched into the touch. "It's going to be difficult enough to find time with you with her around, let alone with you in detention every bloody evening. I swear, if this level of homework keeps up all year, my brain will have melted out of my ears before I even get to my exams."

"It's the worst, isn't it?" Harry agreed. "We'll find some time to sneak away this weekend, promise. Then we can compare schedules and make plans." They probably wouldn't get to see each other in private as much as they had the year before, but Harry would take any scraps of Draco's time he could manage.

"Sounds good," Draco agreed. He took Harry's hand in his — and Harry wasn't quick enough to hide his flinch. "What's the matter?"

“Nothing.”

“You’re a shit liar, Potter,” came Draco’s immediate retort. “To me, anyway. What’s wrong with your hand?” He lit the tip of his wand, holding Harry’s hand up to his face. “Why’s it all red?”

Reluctantly, Harry told him about the Blood Quill. By the end of the explanation, Draco was flushed with anger. “No wonder my father likes her so much,” he muttered. Carefully, he turned Harry’s hand over in his, bringing it up to his lips and pressing the most gentle, tender kiss to the inflamed flesh. Harry’s heart skipped a beat at the gesture, ears going pink.

“It’s fine, really,” he insisted. Draco gave his hand another butterfly-soft kiss.

“Go to Uncle Severus, after your detention,” he urged.

“If I heal it up, Umbridge will just make me do more lines.” She wanted her message to leave a *permanent* mark. Draco fixed him with a level stare.

“That’s what glamours are for, idiot,” he pointed out lightly. “Go to Severus, see what he can do. Blood Quills are dark magic, you don’t want to mess with over-exposure to one.”

The worry in his voice niggled at Harry’s heart, until he sighed, leaning into Draco’s embrace. “Fine,” he relented. “I’ll go tonight.” He was hoping to avoid the Potions professor ever finding out — Snape knowing meant Remus knowing, which meant Sirius knowing, which meant explosions.

“Good boy.” Draco kissed him in satisfaction. “I have to go to class, and so do you.”

Harry let out a quiet whine at the thought of leaving the darkened alcove, but after one more long kiss and the promise of meeting up properly once Harry was done with detention, they parted ways, one at a time to make sure nobody saw them.

The rendezvous, however brief, was exactly what Harry needed to help him get through the day, right up until his second detention.

If Umbridge was expecting some kind of reaction or pain response this time, she was sorely disappointed — the words bloomed on Harry’s flesh just as easily as they had the night before, though the pain was already worse. Once again, he didn’t even twitch; his mind was on his Divination homework this time, thinking up a dream he could put in his diary that was in no way related to the graveyard or that mysterious corridor.

There was thinly-veiled fury in Umbridge’s eyes when, at the end of the detention, Harry was perfectly content to let her study his hand, pressing down on the still-healing cut.

She had nothing on Vernon Dursley.

Harry bid her goodnight, gathered up his bloodied parchment, and left the office. As soon as he was out of sight, he slung the invisibility cloak over his shoulders and set off towards Snape’s personal chambers.

He answered the door so quickly, Harry wondered if Draco had mentioned something. “What are you doing out this late?” the man asked, once they were safely inside with the door shut. Harry dropped the cloak, offering an apologetic smile.

“Only just finished detention.” One of Snape’s eyebrows ticked up in disapproval.

“So long past curfew? Tut, tut, Dolores.”

“Yeah, so, uh, don’t expect my Moonstone essay to be amazing. I wrote it over lunch break today.”

A brief smirk crossed Snape’s lips. “I’m sure I will delight in finding the flaws,” he drawled, before eyeing Harry over once more. “You didn’t come here just to apologise for the state of your homework.”

Harry dropped his gaze, suddenly reluctant. But he’d made a promise. “I... I told Draco I’d come show you.” Snape looked at him, expectant. “Umbridge is making me write lines with a Blood Quill.” He thrust out his hand, where the faintest outline of ‘*I must not tell lies*’ was still valiantly attempting to heal over.

A low curse escaped the Slytherin’s lips. “Your detentions start at what time?”

“Five,” Harry reported, wincing at the thunderous look on the man’s face. “The pain doesn’t bother me, but she’s going to keep going with it until the message *sinks in*, she says. And, well, I don’t really want to walk around dripping blood all the time, if I can help it.”

“Even I never forced you through a bloody *seven hour detention*, let alone forcing you to mutilate yourself! The *nerve* of that woman. This is not a legal use of Blood Quills.”

“What can we do, report her to the Ministry?” Harry’s tone was wry, and Snape’s thin lips twisted. Between Fudge and Dumbledore, there was no safe *authority* to alert, and attempting would bring far more attention to the castle than Harry was willing to deal with right now.

“It’s fine, really,” he insisted. “I’ve had loads worse, and it’s funny watching how angry she gets that I’m not visibly in pain. I’m only telling you because Draco made me.”

“As he should,” Snape agreed firmly. “Stay there.” He disappeared into his private lab, returning a minute later with a bottle of something yellow and a pad of white gauze. “This is essence of dittany. It’ll speed up the healing.” He reached for Harry’s hand, but Harry pulled back.

“Shouldn’t I wait, until all the detentions are over?” The worse it looked at the end of the week, the more likely Umbridge was to let him go. Snape scowled at him.

“I thought you didn’t want to bleed everywhere?”

“Yeah, I was hoping you might have a charm that would, y’know, heal it just enough to scab over. At the end of the week I’ll put that dittany stuff over it and put a glamour on so Umbridge thinks it scarred.” It wasn’t a big deal. Still, Snape’s lips pursed.

"Remus would kill me if I let you walk out of here with a wound like that," he said flatly, though he made no move to grab Harry's hand. There was a brief staring competition, before Snape pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration. "Salazar save me from stubborn, idiot Gryffindors. Give me your hand."

"No dittany?" Harry checked warily, holding his hand out only after Snape nodded. He waved his wand over Harry's skin, murmuring two spells in quick succession.

"The first should stop the bleeding," Snape explained, watching as the cut quickly scabbed over, but didn't heal any further. "The second spell is one you'll need to learn — it removes the build-up of magic from the connection to the quill." Harry's nose wrinkled in confusion. "Blood Quills are for binding contracts — prolonged use can, in some cases, have the same effect as a magical vow."

The blood drained from Harry's face. "You mean it could make it impossible for me to lie?"

"Not impossible, but... uncomfortable. Misdirection and avoiding the truth will be fine — which, luckily, is more your usual method anyway — but outright lies will trigger the magic. Between those two spells, and the dittany when you're out of her clutches, there should be no lasting damage."

Harry watched as Snape succinctly demonstrated the second spell, then repeated it a couple times himself. "Good. Now, I will hold on to this," Snape said, brandishing the dittany, "and you will come here *immediately* after your final detention on Friday. Are we clear?"

"Yes, sir." Harry really didn't see what the big deal was about leaving the wound until Friday. He wouldn't let it get infected or anything.

"Good, now go to bed. I won't have you falling asleep in your cauldron tomorrow."

The poorly-hidden concern made something warm in Harry's chest, and he bid the man goodnight. "Oh, and I have this for you," he added before he could forget, digging the two-way mirror out of his pocket. "Could you get that back to Sirius, please?"

"He'll have it by the weekend," Snape assured. Harry grinned, then scurried from the professor's quarters, hurrying back up to Gryffindor Tower. He had a dream diary and six inches on the proper handling of bowtruckles to write before he could go to bed.

. . .

In Thursday's detention, the words stopped healing entirely after around three hours, blood dripping slowly down the back of Harry's hand. The sight of it made Umbridge grin sharply. Harry was just glad it meant he was free before nine, instead of at midnight.

As exhausted as he was, he still had homework to do when he returned to the common room, a glamour covering his hand so Neville wouldn't ask about the obvious cut. They seemed surprised to see him back so early.

“Maybe she’s starting to get sick of you,” Neville joked, and Harry managed a weak smile. He should be so lucky.

Ginny, being a fourth year with hardly a fraction of the homework the boys had, returned to the common room barely within curfew. She was smiling, and if Harry wasn’t mistaken there was a love bite on her neck. His stomach gave an uneasy twist when he looked at Neville.

“Better not let your brothers see that,” Harry warned her quietly, tapping his own neck pointedly. She flushed as scarlet as her hair.

“Shit. I told him— shit.” Her brown eyes flicked guiltily to Neville. “I’m gonna go.” She disappeared up to her dorm before either of them could say anything. Eventually, Neville sighed.

“It’s fine,” he said, though his voice was hollow. “She’d tell me if— if things have changed.”

Harry’s heart clenched in sympathy, and he squeezed Neville’s knee. “She’ll come around.” He hoped.

“Whatever.” Neville’s face shuttered, and he raised a privacy ward around them. “We had a study group meeting while you were in detention, by the way. I passed on your notes. You should see the stack Susan has — it’s almost as tall as she is!”

Harry listened intently as Neville relayed the events of the heirs meeting. “We’re going to lay low for now. There’s not much we can do yet, anyway. Even Cassius — his uncle won’t let him take the seat, even though he’s seventeen.” Harry grimaced; he’d only ever heard awful things about Lord Warrington.

“Is he, y’know...” Harry tapped his left forearm pointedly, and Neville shook his head.

“Not yet. After graduation, apparently. If he can’t get out of it by then.”

“I’ll think of a way.” Harry refused to see *any* of his friends forced to let that monster brand them. He knew from Snape how awful it was to have, and how much he regretted the decision. “How are the Slytherins?” The house as a whole had locked up tight, hardly even *looking* at anyone not wearing green and silver.

“Blaise is keeping an ear out for anyone looking to get out of the Dark,” Neville relayed. “The others, too, but I guess Blaise is the figurehead for it. I don’t know — there was a lot of Slytherin double-talk that I didn’t really understand, but Malfoy said they had the in-house stuff covered. We just know not to expect any of them at larger study groups.”

That was a shame, but it was inevitable. “Hopefully we can change things, for the younger years if not our own.”

This made Neville grin. “Parkinson said they’ve been telling the firsties that it’s a mark of Slytherin cunning to manipulate Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs into helping you with your homework,” he told Harry. “Might not be the greatest way to start friendships, but, well.”

“Slytherins,” Harry said with a nod, as if that explained everything. “Brilliant.” That young, homework help would soon turn into casual conversation; they’d be genuine friends before they knew what hit them.

Neville gave an enormous yawn, blushing. “Sorry. I just— it’s been a long week.”

“Tell me about it,” Harry agreed vehemently. “You should go to bed. I’m gonna be up another hour or two finishing this, but at least one of us should get some sleep.” He was determined to catch up on *all* his homework, not just the stuff that was due the next day — if he could get up to date now, he wouldn’t have an even bigger load over the weekend. He could catch up on sleep then — and, hopefully, see his boyfriend.

With a little more convincing, Neville agreed to leave Harry to it, and stumbled drowsily off to the dormitory stairs. Harry turned back to his homework, drawing on all his focus. He wouldn’t let Umbridge and her foul detentions mess up the start of his fifth year.

.-. .

Harry was no stranger to exhaustion, and hardly let it affect him as Friday dragged on, as grey and rainy as the rest of the week had been. The end was in sight, and he focused on that.

Luckily for the Gryffindors, the rain had passed by five o’clock. Harry could sort-of see the quidditch pitch from his seat at the desk in Umbridge’s office — not well enough to make out individuals, but he could see each hopeful keeper fly. He kept an absent eye on the proceedings when he was sure Umbridge wasn’t looking his way. By this point he hardly even noticed the pain in his hand, settling into the same headspace that had served him so well at the Dursleys when he’d been given an endless chore list right after a painful beating.

At last, it was over, and Umbridge surveyed her work, taking great satisfaction in eyeing the deep-cut words on his hand.

As she looked it over, Harry’s scar burned — he couldn’t help but flinch at the abrupt pain, but it was enough for Umbridge’s smile to widen. “Yes, I think I’ve made my point. You may go, Mr Potter.”

Harry didn’t need telling twice. As promised, he headed down to Snape’s, his mind still on the ache in his scar. What was Voldemort up to? His emotions didn’t usually creep through to Harry like that, not while Harry maintained his Occlumency shields.

He pushed it from his mind; whatever it was, there was little he could do.

Snape was waiting for him, and he directed Harry into a chair while he gathered the dittany and the gauze, carefully tending to the cursed wound. “I would quite like to kill that woman,” the Slytherin said evenly, making Harry look up in surprise.

“That makes two of us,” he agreed after a beat. “But also I would quite like to see her face when Susan and her aunt make Fudge regret even *thinking* about entering the world of politics. And when she’s given undeniable proof that Voldemort’s back.”

From the look on Snape's face, he would still find murder more satisfying.

"I suppose with all these detentions you haven't had time to work on your studies from the summer?"

Harry scoffed. "I've barely had time to do my bloody homework. This first week back really has been ridiculous." Snape's lips twitched in amusement. Bastard. "I'm going to spend some time on my animagus form on Sunday, if I can. Wandless magic is getting a bit harder to practice in my dorm, now I'm up to the bigger spells. And, well, I can hardly work on my duelling by myself." Or the darker spells Snape had taught him for battle purposes.

"The Dark Lord is being remarkably... restrained, for now," Snape said. "With luck, this will allow you to take a little more time with your training. Get your classwork under control. Should things... escalate, we will adjust as needed."

Harry nodded, though part of him itched at having yet another part of his life he could do nothing but *wait* through. With the Triwizard Tournament the year before, it had felt like everything was moving so quickly. On the contrary, he could already tell fifth year was going to *drag*.

Snape didn't keep him long, healing up his hand and then watching as Harry cast a suitable glamour to mimic a scar. Afterwards, Harry made his way up to Gryffindor Tower, keen to see the results of the quidditch tryouts. The team was gathered by the fire, and Angelina approached him with a dark-haired third year girl Harry vaguely recognised. "Harry, meet our new keeper," she introduced proudly. "This is Vicky Frobisher."

"Nice to meet you," Harry said, shaking her hand. "Welcome to the team." He wondered which of the hopefuls she'd been, whether he'd seen her fly from Umbridge's office.

Her return smile was a little shy. "Thanks, I'm really excited to play with all of you!" She glanced at Angelina, then hurried off to a small cluster of other third years, who had goblets of butterbeer from Merlin only knew where.

It was then that Harry saw the storm cloud in the form of Ron Weasley, scowling at them from across the room. When he looked back at Angelina, her gaze was knowing. "He tried out," she said quietly. "He wasn't *bad* — I almost thought about giving him the position. Vicky's in a million different clubs and societies, I wasn't sure if she'd have enough time for the team too. But his attitude *really* isn't what this team needs, and Vicky flew better as well. I figured if I can deal with you in detention half the time, I can deal with her occasionally missing practice for Charms club," she added wryly.

"I appreciate the assumption that I'll get more detentions," Harry said, making her laugh.

"Prove me wrong, then," she challenged, sticking her tongue out. "I *am* sorry if it makes Ron even more pissed at you, though. He seems to think you and the twins *poisoned me against him* or some shit. As if I'd listen to any of your opinions," she joked.

The news wasn't surprising, but it still made Harry sigh. "He's pissed at me anyway, can't make it much worse." He was getting pretty good at avoiding Ron Weasley. "And I really am

“Sorry about missing tryouts.”

“It’s fine,” Angelina waved him off. “We’ve got practice at two tomorrow, so you can make it up to me then.”

“Deal.” Harry grinned at her, then turned his gaze longingly towards the dormitory staircase. If he could go to bed now, it would be the first time all week he’d slept before midnight.

“Go on. You look knackered,” Angelina said, giving him a gentle shove towards the stairs. “I want you on top form tomorrow!”

“Aye, captain!”

Dean and Seamus were the only ones in the room, and Seamus eyed Harry suspiciously. Harry ignored him, grabbing his pyjamas and heading to the bathroom, determined to take a nice long shower and then pass out.

Chapter End Notes

So many comments screaming at Harry for not telling anyone. Friends, have a little faith in me :P

Chapter 51

Despite his wish for a restful weekend, Harry naturally woke at the usual time on Saturday morning. While it was tempting to roll over and go back to sleep, he didn't want to risk oversleeping and being groggy the rest of the day.

He promised himself an afternoon nap, and dressed quietly so as not to disturb his still-sleeping dorm-mates. Grabbing his writing supplies, he headed down to the common room. It was nice, being around while everything was still quiet and calm. The first week back had been so hectic, he'd almost forgotten what a peaceful Hogwarts felt like.

He settled himself in his favourite armchair by the fire, set out his parchment and ink, and began to write.

Dear Bill and Charlie,

Hope you don't mind me writing to both of you together. Just thought I'd check in, see how things are going back where you are. Hope all is well at Gringotts/the dragon reserve!

OWL year has started off with a ridiculous amount of homework, and I hate you both for insisting it wouldn't be that bad. Of course, it would have been more manageable if the new DADA professor (Umbridge, if you haven't heard already) didn't put me in detention til midnight every night this week. It's a new record for me, getting so many detentions this early in the term! All I did was question the logic in the Ministry refusing to let us use spells in DADA class, when we'll need them to pass exams. I'm innocent, I tell you!

Anyway, I'm all done with that, so hopefully it'll be a while before she finds a reason to give me more. She will find one eventually, though — as I'm sure you're aware, the Ministry isn't thrilled that I'm warning everyone about Voldemort, because it means people might actually expect them to do something about it, instead of just pretending it's all fine.

If either of you have any tips for surviving the homework situation, I'm all ears. All the rest of my extra-curriculars are going fine — we have a new keeper, so quidditch practice starts back up today — but I'm still busier than I expected to be. It's going to be a long year!

Give everyone my love,

Harry

That was vague enough that it wouldn't look suspicious, should someone like Mrs Weasley accidentally come across it. Not that he didn't trust the older Weasley boys, but he knew how nosy certain people in the Order could be.

His next letter took a little longer to compose, though it was shorter.

Dear Fleur,

*How's the internship going? More importantly, how was your date with Bill the other week? He didn't tell me **anything** in the summer, just that you'd agreed to go out with him. I need details!*

Being back at school is keeping me busy; I'm sure you remember what fifth year is like. I'm glad the tournament was last year — if I'd had to deal with that on top of OWL preparation, I would have exploded! I have no idea how you and Viktor both managed to do the tournament on top of your NEWTs.

I know you're hoping for juicy Hogwarts gossip, but either it's too early in the year or I am out of the loop, because other than the eternal debate over whether I'm a lunatic or not thanks to the Prophet, nothing really interesting is going on. Our new DADA teacher is awful, but that's nothing new. At least this one is actually who she says she is.

Looking forward to hearing from you,

Harry

He still wasn't quite as secure in his friendship with the French witch, and writing to her felt awkward at times. Things had been much easier when she was at Hogwarts and he could socialise with her as part of the group — they didn't actually know each other that well, even now, but the tournament was the kind of experience that bonded people in a way that was different to friendship. Especially with the way it ended. Besides, as she was now Bill's girlfriend, Harry was keen to keep up correspondence.

Finally, he wrote his last letter of the bunch.

Dear Viktor,

How are you doing? Your season has started up now, right? What's it like being on a league team as well as the national one? I bet you're really busy with training!

I've got my first house quidditch practice of the year later today, and I'm so excited to get back on my broom. I really want to try out that dive you were telling me about in your last letter, though I don't know how my captain will feel about it. She already thinks I'm too reckless.

I managed to figure out how to get the European Quidditch League commentary in English on my Wireless, so I'll try and keep up with your matches. It'll be a good break from the enormous amount of homework I have!

What else have you been up to since I last wrote?

Good luck in your next match,

Harry

Again, that friendship was new and a little unsteady, but at least they had the common ground of quidditch to fall back on. Viktor was much more verbose on paper than he was in person, his dry sense of humour sneaking out the more Harry got to know him.

There wasn't anyone else outside of the castle that he could think to write to — he'd speak to Sirius when Snape got the mirror back to him, and possibly Remus, too. Although Tonks had made him promise to write...

Quickly, he scrawled out a short note to her, asking how things were going and only complaining a little bit about Umbridge. He wasn't sure what else to say; there was a lot she didn't know, and a lot he wasn't sure he could trust her with. But she was family, of a sort, and Harry was happy to work on getting to know her.

With four letters sealed and ready to send, Harry left the common room and set off towards the Owlery. Hedwig was waiting for him, and he stroked her head softly, affixing the letters for the Weasley brothers and Tonks — they were likely to be delivered at the same place. She took off, and Harry quickly used a couple of school owls for the letters to Fleur and Viktor, choosing a stout-looking eagle owl for the trip all the way to Bulgaria.

Just as he carried it to the window, the Owlery door opened. It was Cho, who halted in surprise. "Oh. I didn't think anyone else would be up here this early."

"I wanted to get it out of the way," Harry said with a shrug. Cho had a parcel in her hands, and Harry helped her secure it to the leg of a large brown owl.

"It's my mum's birthday," she said by way of explanation, then blushed. "I should've sent it yesterday, actually, but I forgot until about five minutes ago. It's been a bit of a week." Harry hummed in sympathy. "Ooh, yeah, not as bad as yours, though," she agreed ruefully. "Are you all done with detentions now?"

"For now," Harry confirmed. Cho's lips twisted in a scowl.

"She's foul," she muttered. "The way she talks about... about what happened. The things she says about you, and Cedric, and Dumbledore. I hate her."

"Try not to let her get to you."

Cho snorted. "Bit rich, coming from you." Harry ran a hand through his hair, not denying it.

"Rather me than anyone else."

For some reason, that made Cho's dark eyes soften sadly. Before she could say anything, the door slammed open abruptly.

"Aha!" Filch crowed in delight, pointing one gnarled finger at Harry. "There you are. I've had a tip-off that you're planning to place a massive order for dungbombs."

Harry shared a bewildered look with Cho. "Says who?"

"I have my sources," Filch scowled. "Whatever you're sending, hand it over."

"Can't. I sent it already."

The caretaker's expression turned thunderous. "What?" He scanned Harry suspiciously. "How do I know you aren't hiding it in your pockets?"

Harry turned out the pockets of his jeans, revealing nothing more than a sweet wrapper.

"I saw him send it," Cho declared, meeting Filch's gaze. "It didn't look like an order form, though. Just a normal letter."

The caretaker didn't seem convinced, but he left after a half-muttered threat about blaming Harry for even the slightest hint of dungbomb. When he was gone, Cho shook her head. "That was weird." She paused. "You weren't ordering dungbombs, were you?"

"Of course not. I've got the twins for that."

Cho giggled, then sobered. "I reckon someone wants to read your mail," she remarked. A cold sensation dripped down Harry's spine. There was one person that it would be assumed he was writing to — one person the Ministry wanted very much to get their hands on.

"I think you might be right," he agreed grimly.

He was going to have to be a lot more careful with his post, in future.

.-. .

Cho and Harry parted ways at the base of the Owlery stairs, and Harry wandered down to get some breakfast, mentally arranging his day. He was quite happy to leave all the homework he'd been set the day before until Sunday — and was applauding himself for having done all the rest of it during the week, even if it meant a few hours less sleep. His Saturday could be all about enjoyment — Quidditch, time with friends, and if he was lucky an evening with Draco.

Neville was sat alone at the Gryffindor table, which made Harry frown. He scanned the room, eyes landing on a head of long red hair, over at the Ravenclaw table. Ginny was sat with Michael Corner, which wasn't unusual — but they had their hands clasped on the tabletop.

That was new.

It also explained the morose expression on his friend's face. "You alright?" Harry asked, squeezing onto the bench beside Neville. The boy blinked, then followed Harry's gaze.

"I'm fine," he said shortly. "They're dating, now. Officially."

There was no need to ask who 'they' were. Harry winced. "And... how do you feel about that?"

The smile Neville gave in return was almost painful to look at. "I'm fine. Happy for them, even." He stabbed viciously at the yolk of his fried egg, watching it ooze over his plate.

"...Right." Harry continued to watch him warily for a few moments. If Neville didn't want to talk about it, Harry wouldn't force him, but... God, he did not understand what the pair of

them were doing.

He wasn't sure he could sit back and watch Draco date someone else, no matter how much he loved him, how many promises that he'd come back to Harry at the end of it. But of course, this was Neville, so he'd never say anything. He still hadn't quite figured out how to stand up for himself.

Harry sighed, and reached for the bacon. It wasn't his business, he reminded himself. If they wanted his opinion, they'd ask for it.

"What are you up to today?" he asked, wishing Neville had sat on the other side of the table, so they weren't staring directly at the Ravenclaw table.

"Meeting with Susan and the rest after breakfast. If you're up for it," Neville added, eyebrows drawn together.

"Sounds perfect."

"Great. Then homework, I guess. Though Professor Sprout was telling me about this new delivery of these hybrid venomous tentacula plants she just got — they sound really interesting — so I might go down and have a look, if she'll let me." Neville brightened at the idea of spending time in the greenhouses, and Harry smiled; just the thing to take his mind off Ginny.

"I've got quidditch practice at two. Suppose I'll do homework after."

"How about I go to the greenhouses while you're at quidditch, then we meet back up to do homework together? If— if you want to, that is." Neville looked hesitant, and Harry wondered how long it was going to take the other boy to realise that he was Harry's *best friend*, of course he wanted to do homework together.

"Sounds like a plan to me." He leaned in closer, dropping his voice. "I'll probably be, ah, *out* this evening, though, if you know what I mean." He hadn't checked with Draco yet, but he couldn't see his boyfriend having objections.

Neville looked confused for a moment, then grinned with the realisation, wiggling his eyebrows. "*All night?*" he asked softly. Harry choked on his toast.

"No!" he hissed, blushing brightly. "Not— we aren't there yet." He was *not* going to get into that with Neville, certainly not in the middle of the Great Hall. "An hour or two after curfew, tops." As much as he loved Draco, he was still severely lacking in sleep, and didn't want to be out too late.

Neville was still smirking, but he didn't say anything more on the subject. Not even when they left breakfast to go to the empty classroom Susan had told Neville to meet at, and Draco was already there. Harry smiled at him, hoping he wasn't blushing as he dropped into the seat beside the blond. "Morning."

“Morning, Scarhead,” Draco greeted, voice just edging into fondness. His knee bumped Harry’s under the table, and Harry felt a piece of parchment brush his fingertips. He grabbed it quickly, stuffing it in his pocket.

Susan herself was the last to arrive, though she looked pleased to see them all there. “Good. This won’t take long, I know we’ve all got a shit-ton of homework.”

“You all have *no idea*,” Cassius muttered ominously, in all his seventh year wisdom. Susan ignored him, taking her seat.

“So, we’re all agreed that Umbridge is a Ministry spy, yes?” she declared, making Harry snort.

“Got that bit, yeah. Can’t tell if she’s here to keep an eye on me or Dumbledore most, though.”

“Why can’t it be both?” Daphne pointed out. “Fudge has always hated how Dumbledore runs this school like it’s entirely separate from the Ministry. He’ll want to get this place to *conform*, and you along with it.”

The very idea made all of them grimace. A Ministry-approved Hogwarts would be a very dull thing indeed.

“Do we need to worry that much?” Ernie remarked, leaning back in his chair. “Every other Defence professor that’s had it out for Harry has ended up dead — no offence, of course,” he added sheepishly. “But why don’t we just let nature take its course?”

Harry wasn’t sure how to feel about his previous years being described as *nature taking its course*.

“The professors don’t end up dead until the last few weeks of the year,” Padma pointed out. “There’s a lot of damage she can do before then.”

“Are you asking me to hurry it up?” Harry asked, entirely deadpan. Draco snorted quietly at his side.

“If you wouldn’t mind,” he drawled, eyes flashing. “As long as she’s here, we’re at an impasse. Now that Fudge is interim Chief Warlock, he’s going to be even more worried about losing control of the Wizengamot. Not that we can do much until we’re of age, but if he gets even a *hint* that we’re all planning on taking our seats this early, well — he can’t even be happy about Dumbledore losing his proxy seats, because they’ll be going to you.”

“I agree with you. But that doesn’t mean I’m going to kill Umbridge,” Harry said mildly.

“Shame,” Draco replied in a similar tone.

“Sometimes I wonder what the rest of the school would think if they saw you two like this,” Parvati said, shaking her head. “But I don’t think any of them are ready for it.”

Harry and Draco shared an amused look — if only they could see what the pair of them were like among family.

“*The point is,*” Susan said somewhat impatiently, “we can talk about laws we want to change all we like, but without our family heads on board, we’re useless. What we *can* do, however, is make the Ministry regret trying to interfere in our school.”

A stab of fear went through Harry at the prospect of all his friends getting detentions with that awful quill. “Surely if she’s here to get Dumbledore out, we should leave her to it?”

“That certainly wouldn’t hurt, but it’s not just Dumbledore she wants out. It’s anyone and anything who doesn’t fit her *standards*,” Susan replied coldly. “You know what her voting record is like, Harry. She’d ban anyone with an ounce of creature blood from the school if she could.”

“She said the most awful things about Professor Flitwick the other day,” Anthony Goldstein said, angry on behalf of his Housemaster. “He’s the best Charms Master in the country, and she doesn’t think he’s fit to teach!”

“But what can we do, though?” The quiet words came from Neville, on Harry’s other side. “Realistically, what can we do that isn’t going to make everything worse? She’s already shown she’s happy to give detention to anyone who stands up to her.”

“We don’t all need to be quite so brazen as Potter,” Millicent Bulstrode drawled. “Umbridge is a control freak. She wants *order*. All we have to do is make her realise it’s a lot harder to control a castle full of teenagers than she seems to think.” A smirk slid across her features. “Socialising with other houses. Running in the corridors, messy uniforms, late homework. Behave for all the teachers except her. We get enough people doing it, she won’t be able to put all of us in detention.”

“Of course, when Millie says *we*, she means *you*,” Pansy piped up. “It’s not worth the risk of our parents finding out if we were to join in this *rebellion*.”

They all knew that the Death Eaters were trying their best to infiltrate the Ministry and ingratiate themselves to Fudge, so of course their children couldn’t be seen going against Umbridge’s word.

“We’ll hide in plain sight,” Padma agreed. “Keep up our study groups, make sure it doesn’t look like the Wizengamot heirs are banding together — be so obvious she can’t possibly think there’s something wrong. And if she tries to restrict things, well — we’ve already had plenty of experience reading laws and regulations in search of loopholes, after Susan’s little summer project.” The smile that crossed her face was positively devious in its innocence. “We’ll follow her word *to the letter*.”

“If it makes the Ministry angrier at Dumbledore, all the better,” Parvati agreed with her twin. Susan hummed thoughtfully.

“I’m talking to Aunt Amelia about it, trying to see if there’s a way to get her removed. After what Harry said about her teaching qualifications, we’re trying to see if that can be used

against her, but it looks like Fudge pulled an awful lot of strings to get her where she is.”

Harry didn’t doubt that; especially if Fudge had condoned the Blood Quill. Suddenly, he remembered his run-in with Filch, and frowned. “Be careful what you put in writing,” he warned. “Filch tried to read my mail this morning — said he’d been told I was ordering a load of dungbombs. I’d already sent it off, but... if Umbridge was the one who sent him, it might not just be my letters she’s after.” She could be after Sirius — or she could just be looking for more information to use to slander Harry. He didn’t want to take the chance that she might go after someone else, too.

They all looked horrified by the idea, promising to be careful.

“So we just wait until she makes her move, and then the chaos begins?” Cassius asked.

“Normal students until our freedom is threatened?”

Harry mulled the idea over in his head, grinning slowly. Millicent was right.

Hogwarts was a big castle, and Umbridge would soon learn that she couldn’t possible control all of it.

.-.-.-.

Harry was practically skipping by the time he made it down to the quidditch pitch, Firebolt slung over his shoulder. His whole body vibrated with the need to get up in the air — the month at Grimmauld was the longest he’d gone without flying since the summer before his third year.

He arrived before the rest of the team, and amused himself by flying laps, getting progressively faster and turning tighter until he was practically doing a backflip to change direction. A sharp whistle caught his attention, and he looked down to see Angelina and the others stood in the middle of the pitch. He landed, a breathless grin on his face.

“All warmed up?” Alicia teased, tossing the quaffle his way. “Captain says we’re passing. Spread out.”

Harry offered a jaunty salute, speeding off to the other end of the pitch. He ended up between Fred and their new keeper, who had a determined set to her jaw. The quaffle started making its rounds, and Harry was pleased to see Frobisher seemed to be able to handle it fairly well.

“I wanted to try out last year,” she said, raising her voice so Harry could hear despite the distance. He tossed the quaffle her way, impressed when she leaned far back on her broom to catch it. “But there was that whole tournament thing. At least it’s given me an extra year to practice.”

‘*That whole tournament thing*’, as if she wasn’t describing the most horrifying series of events in Harry’s young life.

“Angelina said you’re in a load of other clubs,” he commented. He hadn’t had much interaction with any third years before now. Half the time he sort-of forgot the younger

students existed.

"Charms club, Arithmancy society, Debate club, and last year some of the Ravenclaws in my year started a book club, but that's more of an informal thing," she relayed, tossing the quaffle hard to Alicia. Harry was caught off guard when the ball then came his way, but managed to catch it with his fingertips, passing it on to George across the circle.

"Blimey," he remarked. "I didn't even know half those things existed."

Vicky laughed. "Guess you've always been a bit busy with other stuff." That was an understatement if Harry had ever heard one. "My mum warned me about you, y'know." Harry's heart sank, wondering if he was in for another lecture about his sanity like Seamus had, but then he realised the girl was grinning. "She said you were trouble, but at least you paid well for it."

Abruptly, Harry realised why her name was so familiar. "Your mum is my lawyer," he said, eyes widening at the connection. Vicky grinned wider, nodding. "Wow. Didn't realise she had a daughter at the school." No wonder she'd been so keen to get Skeeter off Hogwarts grounds.

"I'll tell her you say hi," Vicky replied.

"Please do. Though I hope she won't be offended when I say I *really* hope I don't need a lawyer this year."

That made the girl laugh so much she almost missed the quaffle, but a quick dive and a barrel-roll had the ball secured.

"Right, I think that's enough of a warm-up," Angelina announced, looking very satisfied with her choice of keeper. "Fred, George, get your bats and let the bludgers out. We're gonna put the newbie through her paces."

Harry glanced to Vicky, wondering if she was going to get nervous. On the contrary, she looked excited by the challenge. She shot off to hover in front of the goal hoops, braced for impact, no hesitation whatsoever.

Suddenly, Harry was feeling *very* good about their chances for the cup that year.

... .

The quidditch team played right up until dinner time, and would've played even longer if they weren't so starving. It felt good, being back in the air, and while Harry wasn't as involved with the main plays, being a seeker, he could see that Vicky was going to fit in just fine. They didn't get the snitch out — Angelina had no doubt in his ability to catch it, and wanted him focused more on the team — so Harry's job was to essentially be as annoying as possible, trying to distract and disrupt the chasers and keeper. It was fun, and he was beaming as he walked with George up towards the castle; Fred had hung back in the changing rooms with Angelina, and Harry and George had no intention of waiting for them to finish.

“You doing alright, kid?” George asked, slinging an arm around Harry’s shoulders. Harry leaned into him, still smiling.

“Better now I’ve flown.” The redhead hummed knowingly. “I’ll be even better after tonight.”

George wiggled his eyebrows. “Post-curfew plans, eh?” Harry blushed, but nodded. “Catch me before you go; I’ve got some potions questions for your brainiac beau.”

“Will do. Though don’t expect any answers tonight.”

“Course not,” George agreed, smirking. “He’ll be too busy snogging your face off.”

Harry’s silence was an answer in itself.

“Ron’s not giving you too much trouble, is he?”

Harry shook his head. “He’s actually left me alone more than I expected. I don’t know if he’s just given up trying to do what Dumbledore wants, or if Dumbledore thinks I’m having some kind of teenage angst rebellion and will come crawling back to them in a month or two, but other than a few remarks, they’ve both been fine.”

Hermione seemed to take it as a personal offence that Harry was excelling in classes. He’d been the only one other than her to complete the Vanishing spell in class, and he’d actually beaten her to the punch in Charms. She had been studying even more diligently than usual, from what he’d seen.

“Glad to hear it. I live in hope that a bit of time alone will make him get his head out of his arse, but he might just be a lost cause.” George shook his head sadly. Harry frowned; it had to be hard, watching your little brother act in such a way.

“Lots of people are idiots when they’re fifteen,” he said. “Maybe he’ll come around eventually.”

“Maybe. Until then, we’ve got plenty of products to test on him.” George smirked mischievously. “Business is booming, and it’s all thanks to you.”

“You two are the ones with the brains,” Harry insisted. “I just invested in talent.”

That actually brought a blush to George’s freckled face, and he ruffled Harry’s hair. “We owe you, big time.”

“No you don’t,” Harry waved him off, “you’re family.”

George pulled him closer, smacking a loud kiss to his cheek. Harry groaned, wiping at the slobber-mark exaggeratedly. “Go pester Lee,” he mock-grumbled, turning through the doorway to the Great Hall. George laughed, but obediently disappeared.

As he headed to his table, Harry couldn’t help but glance across the room in the direction of the Slytherin table, where Draco was holding court in the centre of a cluster of fifth and sixth

year Slytherins. His hair was mussed, and the sleeves of his dark green button-down were rolled up to his elbows.

Harry almost tripped over his own feet, eyes so fixed on the curve of Draco's wrist, the line of his forearm.

He blushed, tearing his gaze away, heat filling his veins.

The note Draco had passed in the heirs meeting asked him to meet at eight. Those three hours were going to *crawl* by.

. . .

Sitting in the unused classroom Draco had selected, Harry watched the little dot on the Marauder's Map labelled *Draco Malfoy* as it steadily made its way up from the dungeons. He'd already checked they were clear — Umbridge was in what Harry assumed was her personal quarters, and the only teacher out on evening patrol was Sprout, who was two floors up. There were prefects out, but Draco was one too; Harry wasn't worried about him getting caught.

He put the map away when the dot reached the corridor outside, and was grinning when the door slid open. Draco immediately locked and warded it with his wand, while Harry jumped to his feet.

"Merlin, I've been waiting all day for this," he declared, tugging Draco into a kiss. Draco's hands landed on his hips, steadyng him.

"It's been far too long," the Slytherin agreed, smile soft. "I'm glad I had that mirror of yours, the last half of summer. I... I don't know what I would've done without it." Harry tensed at the reminder of the guests in Draco's home, pulling his boyfriend closer.

With a few Cushioning charms, they got comfortably cuddled up in the back corner, Harry leaning against the wall while Draco tucked himself against Harry's chest. "Can you stay at the school over Christmas?" he asked, tangling Draco's fingers with his own.

"Probably. Even Father will agree that the atmosphere at home isn't really conducive to studying. And of course, I must do well on my OWLs, or I'll disgrace the family name." The bitterness in his tone made Harry frown, kissing his temple.

"You're going to do better on your OWLs than your father could even *dream* of doing," he insisted.

"I hope so," Draco sighed. "I suppose you'll be spending Yule break with Sirius?"

"Maybe. I rarely get to decide these things." Perhaps he would be allowed to go back to Grimmauld for the holidays. If the Weasleys were going too. If Dumbledore wasn't pissed off with Harry by then. "I wish we could all spend it at Seren Du."

The idea of a family Christmas — a *proper* one, in their real home, with Draco and his mother there too — made Harry's chest clench painfully.

“We will one day.”

Harry sighed, squeezing Draco’s hand, then raised it up to his lips. He pressed a kiss to the side of his wrist — the sight that had been so distracting at dinner.

“What?” Draco remarked, looking up in confusion. Harry just smiled.

“I like your wrists. Your arms,” he said, trailing his fingers up the silk-soft forearm. “This whole sleeves-rolled-up thing is a good look for you.”

Draco smirked, and the next thing Harry knew his boyfriend was sat up, straddling his lap. “You like me looking all disheveled, do you?” A wicked light entered his eyes. Harry hummed, letting his hands rest on Draco’s waist.

“Yeah. But it’s better when I know I’m the one who made you that way.”

They kissed, lips parting eagerly, and though Harry could feel that both of them were hard, he felt no pressure to *do* anything about it. His mind flashed back to their conversation on his birthday — they had plenty of time to figure all that out, there was no need to rush things.

Though he wouldn’t mind seeing Draco with his shirt off again.

Tentatively, he set his fingers on the first button of the blond’s shirt, toying with it before he popped it open. Draco’s eyes were hot with want when he broke the kiss, both hands in Harry’s hair. “Go on,” he urged, then kissed him again. A moan rose in Harry’s throat. With that permission, he slowly undid the rest of the buttons, eventually pushing the soft shirt back off Draco’s shoulders, revealing endless creamy skin. Harry’s breath hitched at the sight, and as Draco pulled his arms out of the sleeves, Harry ran a hand over the blond’s shoulder. There was more muscle there than he remembered, though his lithe frame was deceptive. His body was starting to look less like a teenager’s, more like a man’s.

“You’re so gorgeous,” Harry murmured in awe, watching the blush travel all the way down Draco’s neck and chest. For someone who projected such a cocky demeanour, Draco still struggled to take an earnest compliment.

“Says the boy with annoyingly perfect abs,” he retorted breathlessly, tugging Harry’s t-shirt up to stare at the abs in question. It was Harry’s turn to blush — he had spent so much of his life not thinking about how his body looked, aware of how scrawny and awkward he was. Now that Snape’s nutrient potions had corrected the damage done by the Dursleys, Harry wasn’t used to having a body to be proud of. A body others admired. As long as they didn’t see the scars.

He didn’t fight Draco pulling his shirt all the way over his head, setting his glasses aside when they tangled in the fabric. “Salazar,” the blond sighed, sitting back against Harry’s thighs to take in the sight. “Not a hint of that weedy little third year I started fancying, is there?”

Harry grinned, stealing a kiss, skin sparking with electricity when it pressed them closer together at the crotch. “D’you still fancy me, then?” he asked teasingly, arching his neck as

Draco dropped his head to mouth at his shoulder.

“Mm, a bit, yeah,” he murmured, sucking a dark bruise on Harry’s collarbone, safe where his uniform would cover.

“That’s good,” Harry sighed. “I fancy you, too, a bit.” His back pressed against the cold stone wall as Draco adjusted himself, getting in a better position to attack Harry’s neck. It was the most glorious torture, and Harry never wanted it to end.

“I’m glad half the school thinks you’re a lunatic,” Draco said, once he was done leaving his mark. Harry raised a bemused eyebrow. “Means they’re too busy calling you crazy to realise how fucking hot you got over the summer. I’ll be hexing people all over the place once they finally figure it out.”

Harry ducked his head to hide his blush, kissing Draco’s sternum. “Doubt it,” he muttered. Draco was only saying that because he was Harry’s boyfriend. He was positively plain compared to someone like Blaise, or Justin Finch-Fletchley, or Draco himself. There were plenty of other boys in their year for people to thirst after.

“I know you’re half-blind without those glasses, Potter, but surely even you see it,” Draco teased softly, fingers sliding up Harry’s chest.

“I don’t, but I’ll take your word for it,” Harry replied. “As long as you think I’m hot, that’s all I care about.” He didn’t want anyone else looking at him like that, not when he had Draco.

“Just don’t come crying to me when all the bent boys in school start chasing after you,” Draco joked, cupping Harry’s chin to kiss him deeper. “I’ll be too busy cursing their dicks to fall off.”

That startled a laugh out of Harry, and he shook his head, grinning up at his ridiculous boyfriend. God, he was so in love.

Maybe he’d tell him that, one day soon.

Chapter 52

After an excellent weekend, Harry was smiling as he made his way to breakfast on Monday. He'd played quidditch; made out with his boyfriend; finished all his homework *and* finally spoken to Sirius. His godfather had the mirror back, and Harry was satisfied he was doing okay by himself — apparently Mr and Mrs Weasley had moved back to the Burrow now the kids were at school, so it was easier for Sirius to spend more time at Seren Du.

Harry's good mood died as soon as he saw the front page of the *Prophet*.

Susan grabbed him on his way to the Gryffindor table, redirecting him to Hufflepuff instead, and as soon as he sat down she thrust the newspaper in his direction. Reading the headline made his heart sink. "Oh, she *didn't*."

"She did." Susan's glare was enough that Harry was surprised the paper didn't burst into flames.

Umbridge had made herself 'Hogwarts High Inquisitor'. Which, Harry learned as he read the article, basically meant she could create whatever school rules she wanted, and decide which teachers were deemed *suitable* for their positions.

"Look," Susan urged, pointing to the very end of the article. '*Wizengamot elders Griselda Marchbanks and Tiberius Ogden have resigned in protest*'.

"Resigned?" Harry echoed quietly. "What does that even mean?" How could someone *resign* from a hereditary seat?

"They've given their seats to Dumbledore by proxy," Susan explained, a sour look on her face. "As a gesture of *support*."

Harry's stomach squirmed. While he was all for thumbing noses up at the Ministry, he didn't want Dumbledore to get more power in the process. "Great." That was two more seats they'd have to try and wrestle out of Dumbledore's control. Worse; two seats they were currently unaware of the heirs for. "Marchbanks is the Tremblay seat, right?" he checked, and Susan nodded.

Tremblay and Ogden were both lines who had not made any public record of their family trees in the last century. Neither Marchbanks nor Ogden had kids that anyone knew of, and both of them were somewhat elderly.

If anything happened to them while Dumbledore held their seats, it would be nigh on impossible to reclaim them from the headmaster.

"Mr Potter." Harry straightened up, turning to see Umbridge stood in front of him, eyes cold. Her gaze darted down to the paper in his hand for a moment, and a tiny, smug smile crossed her lips. Harry hated her. "Might I ask what you're doing?"

“...Having breakfast?” Harry replied, confused. Her smile tightened.

“This is the Hufflepuff table. You are a Gryffindor.”

Oh. It was like Dumbledore all over again — the entire hall was filled with students at the wrong house table, and yet Harry was clearly the problem.

“Susan and I were discussing the latest *Prophet* articles. The Ministry does *approve* of students taking an interest in current events, I hope?”

Beside him, Susan was still as a statue, watching as Umbridge’s eyes narrowed.

“Ten points from Gryffindor, Mr Potter,” she declared sweetly. “Back to your table, please.”

Susan placed a discreet hand on his arm before he could argue, shooting him a warning look with the tiniest shake of her head. Harry held back a sigh. “Yes, Professor.” He gave Susan her paper back, and got to his feet, heading to sit with Neville at Gryffindor. He was scowling by the time he sat down. “I hate that bitch,” he muttered. Neville hummed in agreement.

“Brace yourself. She’ll only get worse from here,” he warned sadly. Harry’s jaw clenched — if she wanted to play games, he could play.

He had half the students of Hogwarts on his side, after all.

.-. .

Another Hell Monday began, thankfully without Umbridge’s interference in History of Magic. In that class, Harry sat in the back with Susan, mostly watching her silently get angrier and angrier about the whole situation. When he wrote her a note asking if she had a plan, she just scowled at him.

It was all too tempting to use Potions as an opportunity to let out his anger, but Harry didn’t want to push Snape too far; if anyone noticed he was being even slightly more lenient with Harry than usual, there would be questions. As it was, there was a spiky red ‘D’ on his Moonstone essay, even though Harry knew it was of *at least* A quality, if not E.

He grumbled about it for show, and made a few remarks that got points docked by the stern professor, but Harry wasn’t worried about it. He was doing well in his other classes, he could make those points back easy.

He had hoped Divination might be a bit of a reprieve from his bad mood, since Parvati and Lavender had promised to help him out with his dream diary — that hope deflated very quickly, when the trapdoor opened just as Trelawney was handing out copies of *The Dream Oracle*, and a familiar squat figure appeared through it. “Good afternoon, Professor Trelawney,” Umbridge greeted cheerfully.

Beside Harry, Lavender’s grip on her quill tightened so much the stem snapped, dripping ink onto the tablecloth. Parvati was trembling with rage.

Harry wordlessly vanished the mess, before either of the teachers could notice. “Easy,” he warned the girls under his breath, watching Umbridge take up a position at the front of the class, clipboard in hand.

Professor Trelawney was not one of Harry’s favourite teachers — indeed, considering she was the Seer who made the prophecy that resulted in the death of his parents, Harry would be perfectly happy to never see her again in his life — but even he had sympathy for her, being inspected by Umbridge. It was clear the woman thought that Divination was a load of rubbish; and, indeed, that Trelawney was a fraud.

If looks could kill, Umbridge would be dead twice over from the glares Parvati and Lavender were sending her way. The two had almost entirely given up on their dream interpretation, shamelessly listening in as Umbridge harassed Trelawney about giving her a prediction. “That’s not how the Sight works, you *hag*,” Lavender whispered venomously.

Hands trembling and eyes even wider than usual behind her glasses, Trelawney stuttered out her usual go-to prediction; grave danger. Which, honestly, seeing as Umbridge was a DADA teacher at Hogwarts, probably wasn’t too far off the mark. Especially if she carried on the way she was going — Lavender Brown would murder the woman herself.

Harry was only half surprised when Trelawney came his way, snatching up his dream diary to begin interpreting them; naturally, each one heralded a gruesome and painful death. After every *prediction*, Trelawney’s eyes flickered hopefully to Umbridge — as if predicting the death of the student she was known to hate the most would score the Seer some brownie points.

Harry couldn’t really fault her for trying.

Sadly, it did not seem to impress the toad-like woman, and as the bell rang Umbridge stared Trelawney down, promising to be in touch with the results of her inspection soon, then daintily clambered down the ladder.

Somehow, she still managed to beat all of them back to her own classroom for their next lesson. Harry studied her carefully, smirking when he saw the telltale distortion of glamour magic around her cheeks, the slight heaving of her chest — had she run all the way there, just so she could be waiting at her desk in an attempt to look imposing?

He hoped someone had seen her.

The two Gryffindor girls were still fuming from Divination, so Harry left them to it, taking his usual seat beside Neville. It wasn’t a surprise when Umbridge set them to read chapter two — nor was it much of one when Hermione threw her hand in the air, and announced that she had read the entire book, and she had Opinions.

She might be an annoying little spy for Dumbledore, but her dedication to learning in this particular instance was proving deeply entertaining for Harry, even as his anger at Umbridge grew with every word out of the foul woman’s mouth.

"I am here to teach you using a Ministry-approved method that does not invite students to give their opinion on matters about which they understand very little," Umbridge said nastily, looking far more pleased about shutting down a sixteen year-old girl than a grown adult should. Harry snorted quietly — after two summers with Remus Lupin, he would bet that he understood far more about jinxes and their classification than both Umbridge and Hermione combined. But he wouldn't speak up. He was trying to be good.

"Your previous teachers may have allowed you more license, but as none of them — perhaps save Professor Quirrell — would have passed a Ministry inspection—“

"Professor Lupin has a Mastery in Defence as awarded by the International Society of Defensive Magics," Harry burst out; the slight against his beloved godfather was one step too far on his already frayed temper. "He was more qualified to teach this class than you'll ever be. Professor Quirrell, on the other hand, had Voldemort sticking out of the back of his head — but sure, maybe the Ministry would *approve* of that."

Umbridge stared him dead in the eye, nostrils flaring with fury. Harry heard Neville let out a quiet, resigned, "*Harry, no,*" but it was too late.

"I think another week's detention would do you some good, Mr Potter," Umbridge told him. He didn't flinch.

It was worth it.

.-. .

"I can't believe you accused the Ministry of being on You-Know-Who's side," Neville hissed as soon as they were free of the classroom.

"She was the one who said Quirrell would pass inspection!" Harry retorted. His friend shot him a deadpan look — that wasn't an excuse, and they both knew it. "I couldn't just sit there and let her talk shit about Remus like that."

"You defending him is only going to make it worse, you know that."

Harry was saved having to reply by the sight of Hannah Abbott sidling up to Parvati ahead of them, whispering something in the girl's ear and hurrying along the corridor. As she passed, she gave Harry and Neville a pointed look and a tiny nod.

"Right now?" Neville murmured, and Hannah nodded again, then kept walking.

Harry heard Parvati say something to Lavender about needing to go to the loo before dinner, promising to catch up. He and Neville casually detoured away from the flow of students all heading down to the Great Hall — and Harry led the way into a passageway that would take them to just outside the classroom Susan liked to meet in.

"This is the *worst* timing," he grumbled, checking his watch — he had to be in Umbridge's office at five — but he wasn't going to skip the meeting. Umbridge had only been High Inquisitor for a day, and the whole atmosphere of the school had changed.

People were scared of her, now. And Harry wouldn't stand for that.

The Hufflepuffs had been as diligent as their house animal; all the heirs were gathered in short order, all looking disgruntled. "I can't be here long," Harry warned. "I've got another detention with Umbridge at five, and I really want to make sure I eat something." If he was going to be shedding blood all night, he didn't want to give her the satisfaction of him passing out.

"*Again?*" Ernie asked incredulously.

"You need to learn to keep your mouth shut, Potter," Pansy drawled. "Though, out of interest — what did you mean about Quirrell having the Dark Lord on the back of his head?"

All eyes whipped to Harry, and he waved them off. "Long story, I'll tell you another time." Of course, most of his end-of-year adventures had been a total mystery to the rest of the school. "What did you need us for, Susan?"

"This whole High Inquisitor shit changes things. I take it we've all had at least one inspected lesson?" Everyone but Sullivan nodded. "Well, it's clear she's out for blood."

"She was *awful* to Professor Trelawney," Parvati huffed.

"Forget Trelawney," Cassius dismissed. "She pulled out a *measuring tape* on Flitwick."

Harry sucked in a sharp breath — *how dare she??*

"Now she's got the power, she can add any rule she likes to the Hogwarts Charter, as long as Fudge signs off on it," Susan explained to the grim-faced group. "We can't let it stop us, but we have to be careful."

"You read the paper," Anthony piped up, "she's here to get Dumbledore out. That's what she's going to focus on."

"Yes, but she wants him out because she thinks he gives students too much *freedom*," Susan spat. "She'll curtail any freedoms she can, to try and make the headmaster angry."

"Like actually using magic in classes," Padma muttered derisively. That reminded Harry of something Sirius had said, on the mirror the night before.

"I heard from — *a friend*," he stuttered evasively, "outside Hogwarts, who says Fudge doesn't want us using magic in Defence class because he thinks Dumbledore is training students up as his own personal army, to take over the Ministry."

At first thought, it sounded like something straight out of the *Quibbler*. But Harry could see the words settle in the minds of his fellow heirs with a heavy resonance.

"How in *Merlin's name* did we end up with such an absolute moron in charge of our country?" Susan sighed in despair, head in her hands. Harry grimaced in sympathy.

Dumbledore running the school meant people left it oblivious and complacent; oblivious and complacent people naturally voted in oblivious and complacent leaders.

No wonder it had been so easy for the Dark to thrive.

“We’re all going to fail our OWLs,” Padma moaned, voice trembling. “I’ll never get into the Warding Academy without at least an E in Defence!”

“Why don’t you get Harry to teach you,” Blaise suggested quietly. When Harry looked at him, the tall boy was smirking. “In fact, why don’t we *all* get Harry to teach us. Not just how to pass our exams. Fudge might have trifle for brains, but... becoming an army to take down the Ministry sounds rather fun, doesn’t it?”

Harry blinked incredulously. “You... you want me to what?”

“It’s not a bad idea, actually,” Hannah said, looking thoughtful.

“I’m not training you all up to storm the Ministry!” Harry protested — how would he even *go about* that?

“No, that’s my job,” Susan replied with an aggressive grin. “But you’ve been saying since last year that the fight is coming, and now You-Know-Who’s back... we ought to be prepared. We’re all targets, as heirs. We need to know how to defend ourselves.”

Harry could hardly believe what he was hearing. “I’m just a fifth year. I don’t know anything.” Sure, he’d been training with Snape and Remus and Sirius over the summers, but... half of that wasn’t anything he could teach students.

“You’ve faced the Dark Lord more than anyone else who’s still alive,” Draco reminded him gently. His silver eyes were earnest as he locked gazes with Harry. “You know what it’s like. The fact that you *duelled* him and lived, last year...” He trailed off, shaking his head.

“You’ve always been the best at Defence. And I know you — you know more combat spells than any other student in this school, I guarantee it.” His lips curled at the edges, a challenging smirk. “If nothing else, think how peeved Granger will be when we all get better OWL results than her.”

Harry snorted despite himself — that last point was *very* tempting.

Susan was right, though he hated to admit it. They were all targets, and Voldemort had already proven that he didn’t care whether someone was a student or not before he killed them. The idea of any of his friends being caught in a fight and unable to defend themselves, when Harry had the chance to help... it made his stomach turn to lead.

“Fine,” he agreed. “But if we’re doing this, it’s not just us. We’re not the only targets — muggleborns and half-bloods, he’ll go after all of them. They need to be able to defend themselves, too.”

“The more people involved, the higher the chance of Umbridge finding out,” Anthony warned dubiously.

"We'll only ask those we can trust. Half the school thinks I'm a lying madman anyway, they won't be interested. But... it's a thought." He looked at his watch, then cursed. "I need to go. Think it over, get back to me. I'll brainstorm some ways to keep it all secret."

He threw a hasty wave over his shoulder to cut off any protests, sprinting from the room. That would give them something other than Umbridge to talk about, at least.

There was barely time for him to throw together a hasty roast beef sandwich when he reached the Great Hall, scoffing it down while speed-walking to Umbridge's office and trying his best not to choke. He arrived just in time, took half a minute to compose himself, and walked into the office. As before, the desk with its lace doily had the Blood Quill and some parchment lying on it, and Umbridge sat at her own desk, smiling with daggers in her eyes. "You know what to do," she told him, gesturing to the empty seat.

Harry sat down, and began to write. The second he felt the pain on the back of his hand, he let the glamour drop; it wouldn't do if the fake scar didn't re-open like Umbridge anticipated. It hadn't healed entirely — Snape had warned him it would take weeks, even with the dittany — and the pain was worse than ever as the skin split open, blood welling up and dripping down his hand.

He didn't flinch, didn't falter, didn't make a sound. Satisfaction burned within him — it had to be so *galling* for Umbridge, to watch him be entirely unbothered by the torture she was putting him through.

She didn't know he'd spent his entire childhood being trained to do all sorts of tasks without showing pain. If he hadn't so much as sniffled when Vernon had sent him to school with three broken fingers at the age of eight, a little cut on the back of his hand wasn't going to do it.

Hours passed. At around ten, Umbridge beckoned him over, inspecting his hand. A frown crossed her lips. "Not quite as much of a *permanent reminder* as I'd hoped," she muttered. "No matter. By the end of this week, I'm sure we'll get there."

She dismissed him with a saccharine smile, and Harry strolled away breezily. Only when he was alone did he use the spells Snape had taught him, cleaning off the blood dried to his skin.

Really, she was losing her touch already, letting him go just an hour after curfew. The loss of homework time was more of a punishment than the pain could ever be.

.-. .

Angelina caught up to him at breakfast the next morning, a foreboding look on her face. "George told me you got *another* week's detention."

"I'm sorry," he told her, grimacing. "I just—"

"Couldn't help yourself, could you?" she snapped, then faltered. "Harry, I know it's hard. I know she's got it out for you. But, *please*, for my sake, can you try and keep a hold of your temper? We'll never win the Quidditch cup if my star player is always in detention!"

She said this just as McGonagall happened to be walking past the Gryffindor table. The grey-haired witch froze, turning on her heel to stare down Harry. “Did I hear correctly?” she said, raising an eyebrow. “*More* detention, Potter?”

“Another week with Professor Umbridge,” he confirmed meekly. McGonagall’s lips thinned.

“After the conversation we had last week?”

“She said unsavoury things about Professor Lupin,” Harry argued, jutting his chin defiantly. Her expression softened for a moment, but it didn’t last long.

“I think we both know that Professor Lupin would not want you to go to the trouble of arguing on his behalf,” McGonagall said shortly. “Especially against someone whose opinion he values so little.”

That addition, a quieter remark than the beginning of her sentence, made Harry grin. “Of course, Professor. Won’t happen again.” She was right, naturally; Remus wouldn’t want Harry to waste his breath on Umbridge. She was just so *infuriating*.

“See that it doesn’t,” was his housemistress’ terse reply, before she carried on up to the head table.

Angelina looked taken-aback by the conversation — perhaps at McGonagall’s blatant, if quiet, disregard for her fellow teacher. “Well,” she stuttered, frowning at Harry once more. “You’re missing Thursday practice, but there’ll be another one on Saturday. You’re lucky I know how good you are, Potter.”

“I really am sorry.”

Angelina waved off his excuses, giving him one last stink-eye before heading back to sit with the twins.

After his little exchange with McGonagall at breakfast, Harry was quietly delighted when he walked in to Transfiguration later that morning to see Umbridge settled in the corner of the classroom, while McGonagall greeted her students as if entirely unaware of the intrusion.

What followed was perhaps the most entertaining Transfiguration lesson of Harry’s *life*. McGonagall was absolutely masterful in her curt, bone-dry take downs of Umbridge’s every interruption; Harry was impressed by her even temper, and even more impressed by the way she made Umbridge look like she’d been slapped in the face on multiple occasions. She made a point of listing all her qualifications and accolades — of which there were many — and briefly caught Harry’s eye as she did so, gaze shining with well-hidden amusement.

She had heard the specifics of his criticisms of Umbridge, then.

It was beautiful to watch; there was no teacher in the school more qualified, competent or accomplished than Professor McGonagall, and even Umbridge knew it. Even more, McGonagall had been both Transfiguration teacher and Head of Gryffindor for such a long

time, there would be absolute *outrage* from the general public if she were to be ousted by the Ministry. A lot of ex-Gryffindors went into Ministry jobs, after all.

“Well,” Umbridge said somewhat weakly, after a well-placed stab at her own teaching prowess. “You’ve certainly been at this for quite a while. One might even say, *too long*.” She giggled girlishly. “We wouldn’t want standards to drop with complacency, after all.” A devious light entered Umbridge’s eyes. “Perhaps a demonstration from one of your students? Just to make sure you aren’t *losing your touch*.”

McGonagall’s nostrils flared. “If you had been paying attention, you would have noticed the students have all been practicing their spellwork for the entirety of our conversation, Dolores,” she bit out. That just made Umbridge smile wider.

“Then they won’t mind doing it for me one more time.” She turned to face the class, eyes sliding right past Hermione as the girl confidently raised her hand. Harry knew what was coming long before she said it. “Mr Potter, perhaps?”

McGonagall gave him a look, and Harry let his lips flicker in the barest of smiles. A year or two ago, this might have spelled disaster, but not now — now, Harry was quickly rising to the top of his class in most subjects. Transfiguration was no exception.

“May I have a new mouse, please, Professor?” he requested, the epitome of a model student.

“Lost your first one, Mr Potter?” Umbridge remarked snidely, but was ignored; McGonagall fished a brand new mouse out of the box on her desk, setting it down in front of Harry. There was a warning in her eyes not to let her down, but Harry wasn’t phased.

He raised his wand, spoke the incantation clearly, and flicked his wrist.

Instantly, the mouse vanished entirely.

“Very good, Potter. Five points to Gryffindor,” McGonagall awarded with a decisive nod. She turned back to Umbridge, whose face was once again turning that Vernon-Dursley-colour. “Does that satisfy your curiosity, Dolores?”

Umbridge let out a quiet huff, and went back to scrawling notes on her clipboard, right up until the bell rang.

Harry wasn’t sure what felt better — the absolute outrage Umbridge showed at Harry being a competent wizard, or the indignant expression Hermione wore; on her desk, beside the still-wriggling tail of Ron’s half-vanished mouse, was one single mouse paw.

.-. .

Friday night, Umbridge kept Harry in detention until half past eleven; she seemed determined to do as much damage as possible before she had to let him go once more.

“This should do for now,” she declared in satisfaction, once she’d inspected his hand. “I do hope you have finally learned your lesson, Mr Potter.”

Harry just nodded, bidding her goodnight, and head down to the dungeons.

To his combined surprise and trepidation, Snape was not alone in his quarters.

“I’m going to *kill her*,” Remus growled, eyes glowing bright with the wolf as he cradled Harry’s hand between his own. “How *dare* she harm my cub like this.”

“Moony, I’m fine,” Harry assured soothingly. “This is nothing, really.” It was going to scar, he could tell, even with Snape’s attention. But it could just join the other scars on his body.

He wondered what Umbridge might think if he showed her all the marks his uncle had left on him, if he told her she had something in common with *muggles* — that the muggle methods were more effective, really, so she had best up her game.

“It’s not *nothing*, this is illegal!” Remus argued. Snape set a hand on his shoulder, and the man slumped wearily. “I don’t want you getting any more detentions trying to defend me, Harry. I love that you’re willing to fight for me like that, but really, she isn’t worth it.”

“It wasn’t just for defending you,” Harry said, trying not to squirm as Snape rubbed dittany onto the bleeding wound. “It was mostly for pointing out that Quirrell was possessed by Voldemort.”

“Also not a worthy cause,” Snape pointed out flatly. “For Salazar’s sake, Potter — do us all a favour and learn to keep your mouth shut.”

“If I’m in detention, she doesn’t have the time for anyone else,” he retorted stubbornly. As far as he knew, Umbridge only had one Blood Quill.

“You are not responsible for the entire damned school!” Snape hissed. “How long will it take for us to knock out that senseless drivel Albus has been filling your head with?”

“Please, cub,” Remus tried earnestly. “I worry about you enough as it is, with Dumbledore so close to you. Don’t give me another thing to go grey over.” The attempt at a joke was weak, but it made guilt squirm in Harry’s stomach.

“I just... I hate her, so much. She’s putting so many people in danger with her ridiculous *Ministry-approved curriculum*.”

“But that isn’t something you’re going to fix by getting detention with her every night,” came Remus’ response. When Snape pulled back from Harry’s mostly-healed hand, the werewolf swooped in for a hug. “Let her do what she came here to do — make life difficult for Dumbledore. We all know it’s temporary. As soon as the Dark Lord goes public again, Fudge and Umbridge will lose all credibility, and she’ll be out on her arse.”

Harry pursed his lips. “That’s relying an awful lot on Voldemort to make a move.” He eyed the adults suspiciously, gaze dropping to Snape’s forearm. “What do you know that I don’t?”

“Very little, actually,” Remus assured. “Just that Voldemort is clearly going after the prophecy. You saw what happened to Podmore in the paper, I assume?”

“Imperius?” he presumed, and Remus nodded.

“We think so. They’re certainly trying quite hard to get into the Department of Mysteries — luckily, the Unspeakables are one of the few genuinely competent departments of the lot.”

“I wish my connection with him was more useful,” Harry grumbled. “I’m trying to block off my end the best I can, but with the dreams... I don’t know if he’s not holding meetings or just purposefully keeping me out of them, but all I’m getting from him is this bloody endless corridor with a locked door.”

Snape’s spine stiffened. “May I take a look?”

Harry nodded, and dark eyes met his. He forced himself to relax as he felt the intrusion, pushing his dreams to the forefront of his thoughts. Snape didn’t linger, and when Harry blinked away, the man was scowling. “That’s the Department of Mysteries,” he confirmed. “He’s trying to get you curious.”

“Does he think I’d have any better luck at breaking in than he would?” Harry muttered, rolling his eyes. At least now he knew why his dreams were so repetitive. Suddenly, his blood went cold. “If he’s giving me these dreams on purpose, do you think he knows? That I’m a horcrux?” Worse; did he know that Harry was *aware* that he was a horcrux?

Snape’s face was grave, but he shook his head. “I doubt it. There is little to no information on a human vessel for a horcrux — furthermore, given what happened the night— the night you got that scar, I doubt him splitting his soul was intentional. Likely the magical backlash was enough to splinter off a piece, since it was already so fragile from the previous horcrux rituals. He likely just thinks it is some magical residue from the failed killing curse.” A grim smile crossed his thin lips. “I may not be privy to as many of his plans as Lucius Malfoy, but I am the one the Dark Lord comes to for difficult and obscure magical research. If he were looking into the possibility, I would know.”

Harry tried to be soothed by the confidence in the man’s tone, but he still felt cold.

At least his hand didn’t hurt so much anymore.

Chapter 53

With the heirs study group keeping a low profile since Umbridge's new appointment, Harry spent his Saturday morning with Neville, Luna and Ginny — the weather wasn't quite good enough to be outside, but it wasn't raining, so with some warming charms and a privacy ward they managed to make a cosy little spot for themselves under a tree by the lake. Harry and Neville had both brought homework with them, though Harry wasn't particularly enthusiastic about his — Friday's DADA class had ended with Umbridge setting them an essay on the defensive theories outlined in chapter two of Slinkhard's book, and it was such utter garbage he was having trouble holding his tongue.

"Have you thought any more about what Susan said, Harry?" Neville asked him. It took a few moments for Harry to realise what he was referring to — and he sent a cautious glance towards the two fourth year girls. Of course, if they did start a secret defence club, Luna and Ginny would absolutely want to be part of it.

"A bit." Harry enjoyed daydreaming about it during his detentions, thinking up increasingly outlandish ways to annoy Umbridge without her even realising. "It's a good idea — though I'm still not sure I'm the best person to be teaching it. And we'll have to be careful. If Umbridge catches us..."

"What are you two talking about? What did Susan say?" Ginny pressed. Setting his parchment aside, Harry told her about the idea for the study group — framing it as a conversation with some of the Hufflepuffs, rather than a secret meeting of Wizengamot heirs — and her brown eyes lit up with glee. "That's brilliant. Oh, please say you'll do it, Harry! I'm *dying* of boredom in Umbridge's classes."

"It does sound like fun," Luna agreed. "I think you'll be a great teacher, Harry."

"Thanks, Luna." Harry smiled at the blonde girl. "I'm certainly game for the idea. I'm just wondering how we'll pull it off. The number of people who might end up getting involved... It'll be hard to hide a group that size." Even if the publicly-dark-aligned Slytherins couldn't risk being present, that was still eleven heirs, plus anyone they deemed trustworthy — Ginny and Luna, the twins, the Gryffindor chasers, Cho Chang. And those were just the people Harry might want to invite.

"Hogwarts is massive, though," Neville pointed out, looking up at the castle towering over them. "There's bound to be somewhere we can hide a study group. Especially with all the privacy wards you know, Harry."

"It's not like it's a History of Magic group, though — Defence needs space for people to move about. If I'm teaching people how to survive in a real fight, they need to be able to get up and dodge." Duelling and defence were very physical forms of magic. They might be able to cram enough people into an empty classroom, but if Harry had to have people take turns to try their hand at spells it would take forever to teach them anything useful.

"Why don't you ask the castle for help?" Luna suggested dreamily. Ginny sniggered.

"Don't know if it quite works that way, Lu," she replied. "Would be nice, though." Then she made a face of disgust. "There's always the Chamber of Secrets, I suppose. It's certainly big enough. And hidden enough." She didn't seem thrilled by the suggestion. Harry shuddered.

"And full of basilisk corpse," he reminded her.

"Oh, yeah." She shrugged. "Maybe you can split the group into smaller groups. Do it by year, or something."

That sounded like an enormous time commitment to Harry, and he said as much. "I know I said I'd try and stop getting detentions, but I still have homework to do," he pointed out. A frustrated sigh escaped his lips. "We'll sort something out. Maybe. It's a nice idea, at any rate."

He reluctantly went back to his essay, tapping his quill against his lower lip in thought. Luna's words, ridiculous though they sounded, stuck in his head.

He was Slytherin's heir; the castle's magic had helped him out plenty of times last year, avoiding Crouch and such. Always small things, but there was definitely some sort of sentient presence there.

...Asking couldn't hurt, right?

.-.-.

That night, once the rest of his dorm-mates were asleep, Harry snuck out beneath his invisibility cloak, Marauder's Map in his pocket just in case. Stood unseen in the corridor outside the tower entrance, he closed his eyes, and *reached* with his magic.

It was hard, but after an evening spent meditating in search of his animagus form, the magic came easier than it might have done otherwise. He stretched it towards the ambient magic of the castle, one thought echoing in his mind.

I need a place we can all learn. Help me, help the students.

He stood there for several minutes, magic thrumming, feeling like a bit of an idiot as he silently begged the castle for help. He let out a long breath, disappointedly letting his magic fade — and then there was a nudge.

He froze. Another nudge; a familiar feeling, the castle's magic reaching back, urging him. A grin split his face, his breathless laugh echoing in the empty corridor. "Show me," he whispered, focusing on that nudge.

The magic pulled, and he followed.

It didn't tug him towards the main staircase, like he anticipated. Instead, Harry followed the pull through the winding corridors of the seventh floor, keeping his footsteps quiet and a careful eye on the map, just in case. He didn't pay much attention to where it was leading him, focused so hard on not losing the feel of the magic.

Eventually the pull stopped quite abruptly, and Harry looked around. He was in one of the corridors between Ravenclaw Tower and the North Tower, home only to a pair of disused classrooms and a boys' bathroom.

And a door, which Harry had never seen before.

It was right in the middle of the wall, bold as brass, and yet Harry was quite sure it hadn't existed the last time he'd walked that corridor. The castle's magic was encouraging as he reached out to open it.

The room he found had his mouth agape. It was *perfect*.

The room was easily twice the size of an ordinary Defence classroom, the walls lined with bookshelves. Harry recognised a lot of the titles — both from the school library, and from the library at Seren Du. In one corner was a pile of soft-looking cushions, while another held a trio of mannequin-like figures; duelling practice dummies. One wall was taken up by an enormous mirror, perfect for someone to watch their own duelling form as they attempted spells.

"This is amazing," Harry breathed in awe. "What is this place?"

The castle's magic, so much stronger in this room, was suddenly wiggling into his mind. *Room of Requirement*, it said, barely a whisper. This was followed by a brief flash of an image, like a memory; Harry himself pacing up and down three times in front of the blank wall, and then the door appeared. Suddenly, he knew how it worked — this room could give him *anything*.

A grin playing at his lips, he narrowed his gaze in concentration. A squashy sofa, identical to his favourite one in the library at home, appeared in the centre of the room. Harry laughed, throwing himself down on it.

This was incredible. A room that could change and cater to his every desire, that could hide away the door once they were all inside — even better, it was several floors up from Umbridge's office, in a part of the castle hardly anyone bothered to think about.

A thought popped into his head, and his joy faltered. It would be easy to access for the Gryffindors and Ravenclaws, but it was a long way to travel for the two houses in the lower half of the school. Not that Harry expected many Slytherins, but there would be at least a few. The Hufflepuffs especially had no reason to be up so high in the castle; it would be tricky for them to get back to their common room without getting caught.

As he thought that, a door suddenly appeared opposite him, sprouting between two bookshelves. Warily, Harry approached it.

It opened up not in the seventh floor corridor, but in a narrow staircase. Harry followed it all the way to the bottom — perhaps two or three floors — and emerged from behind a tapestry of Helga Hufflepuff.

Twenty feet down the corridor from where he knew the entrance to the Hufflepuff common room was.

He gaped again, slipping back behind the tapestry and hurrying up the stairs. The room was exactly as he'd left it, but for three more doors, each engraved with a house crest. Harry knew that were he to follow them, he would find himself not far from each house common room.

"Amazing," he said again, beaming.

It was everything he could possibly need to keep his friends safe. "And other people can use this room too?" There was a vague affirmative feeling in his mind. Harry hummed. This room was incredible, that was for sure — it was also clearly one of the best kept secrets in Hogwarts. And in this room it would be all too easy to assume they were safe. It would just take one untrustworthy person to let the location slip — if not to Umbridge, then bragging to a friend, or wanting the room for their own personal use — and everything would be ruined.

There had to be a way to make sure their secret was kept safe. To make sure this room wouldn't be misused.

But this was an excellent start.

"Thank you," he declared vehemently, feeling the castle's magic warm and happy in his chest. It made him smile. "You don't like Umbridge sticking her nose in any more than the rest of us, do you?"

A feeling of strong dislike, followed by a hint of mischief. Harry laughed, suddenly flooded with a huge wave of confidence.

If the castle itself didn't like Umbridge, she didn't stand a chance.

.-. .

Harry felt like he was walking on air the next morning, his smile so bright that Neville gave him weird looks over breakfast. Harry refused to explain anything, just grinning and eating his scrambled eggs.

He had to look into a few things, and he didn't want to get anyone's hopes up before his plan was fully formed. If they were going to do this, it would be done properly.

Neville quickly begged off to go spend time in the greenhouses — which, Harry wondered, might have had something to do with Ginny practically sitting in Michael Corner's lap over at the Ravenclaw table — so Harry was left to his own devices. That sounded like a perfect Sunday to him; he could finish off his Potions homework, get in a little animagus practice, and maybe if he was lucky find the time to sneak away with Draco for a while.

With that plan in mind, Harry went up to grab his books from his dorm, then made his way to the library; the homework Snape had set required them to cross-reference some research in books other than the set text.

Since most of his free time had been taken up by detentions since he'd arrived at school, Harry had hardly spent any time in the library so far. Compared to the endless hours of the year before, it felt strangely unfamiliar when he walked in. Madam Pince eyed him warily, but didn't say anything.

He made his way towards the Potions section of the library, a smile tugging at his lips when he saw half a dozen clusters of students gathered around tables, all from mixed houses, all studying diligently together. His friends had promised they would keep the study groups going, and it looked like they had succeeded.

A familiar head of copper curls caught his eye, and he peered into one of the darker corners to see Susan sat with Justin Finch-Fletchley, both of them gesticulating wildly as they spoke soundlessly — under a privacy ward, clearly.

Unsure if he was intruding, Harry edged closer. Luckily, when Susan spotted him, she grinned. A wave of her wand had the ward coming down. "Hiya, Harry."

"Hey, guys." On the table, he spotted one of the enormous law books Susan had had all the heirs searching through over the summer. One dark eyebrow rose. "You two look busy."

Justin's gaze was wary, and he hunched his shoulders a little as if to cover the notes on the table. Susan waved him off. "It's fine, Harry's with us," she assured. She raised the ward once more, pulling out the chair beside her. Harry sat.

"What are you up to? I thought this stuff was... private?" *Not for anyone outside their group*, he thought, watching as Susan lit up with a devious grin.

"Harry, did you know Justin's dad works for the muggle government?" she said. Harry blinked, perplexed.

"I didn't, no." He knew the Hufflepuff was a muggleborn, but that was the extent of it.

"He's an MP," Justin supplied proudly. "Labour, not Tory."

The only bit of muggle politics Harry knew was that Uncle Vernon was a staunch Tory supporter, so he assumed Justin's dad being in the opposite party meant he was probably a fairly solid bloke.

"Justin has been teaching me a bit about how the muggle government works," Susan continued. "With their elections for the governing seats as well as their Prime Minister. It's fascinating, really."

"I'm sure it is," Harry agreed mildly. It wasn't a topic he'd ever been particularly interested in. "What are you plotting, Bones?" He knew that look on her face all too well by now.

"Me? Plotting?" She feigned innocence, and even Justin laughed. "Okay. So, the Wizengamot is great — or, at least, it will be, once we've sorted it all out," she said, waving a hand dismissively like that was a simple task. "But it's still so very... pureblood. And obviously, we need to uphold wizarding traditions and culture — half the problems we're having is that

things are being suppressed so as not to offend muggleborns who don't understand it. But that doesn't mean that they shouldn't get to have a say in how things are run, just because they don't have magical parents."

"If the purebloods are the only ones with power to make legal changes, we risk going too far in the other direction," Justin explained. "Forcing the muggleborns and half-bloods to abandon any trace of their muggle heritage. Or worse, removing them entirely from the muggle world, like the Americans used to do — Obliviating their parents and stealing them away, banning people from interacting with muggles, all that rot."

"That's definitely not what we want." Harry couldn't imagine how bad things might get if the pureblood supremacists felt even more validated than they were already.

"Exactly. And the muggles have some really great technology and stuff that we could do with adapting — you know how I feel about pens, Harry," Susan added with a rueful smile.

"We're already dangerously unaware of modern muggle society; the last thing we need is to be separated even further. Not while the muggles are working on all those surveillance cameras and stuff. *So*," she said, patting her law book, "Justin and I have been talking about how we can adjust the Wizengamot to make it more representative of the community. We can't get rid of any of the existing seats — except the five that have totally died out — not without causing an absolute riot. So my plan is to add *more* seats, that are a bit like the muggle ones. People run for office, get elected to join the Wizengamot, if they've a mind for that sort of thing. New-bloods, half-bloods, muggleborns — even creatures, maybe, one day. If we can get the law to allow it."

Justin puffed out his chest. "I'm as much of a politician as my father is, and I'll be damned if I'm going to let being a muggleborn keep me out of the profession." There was a challenge in his voice, his blue eyes daring Harry to argue.

"I think that's a brilliant idea," Harry enthused. "You're right that it's not fair to keep all the power in pureblood hands. Do you really think you can make it happen?"

Susan reached over, patting the back of his hand in a fondly patronising manner. "Chief Warlock by the time I'm thirty, remember?" she said. "I'll get it done."

Harry absolutely believed her.

"Well, you know where I'm at if you need me to throw my weight around. I get enough grief for being the Boy-Who-Lived, might as well use the name for good," he joked. Opposite him, Justin's pale cheeks flushed faintly; the curly-haired boy was no doubt remembering the way he'd treated Harry after the Chamber of Secrets debacle.

Wishing the pair luck, Harry left them to it — Susan was a girl on a mission, and he had far too many missions of his own to get sucked into that aspect of her crusade as well.

He had Potions homework to complete.

.-. .

Through some stroke of luck, the dormitory was empty after lunch — the perfect chance for Harry to get in a little animagus practice. He spelled and warded the drapes around his bed, made sure his meditation stone was under his pillow, and closed his eyes.

It was getting easier and easier every time, to reach for that place within him where the fox slept. The animal's body was so familiar now, as familiar as his own — he felt *so close*.

He would get it before Christmas, he was sure of it. His wandless magic had come on in leaps and bounds over the past year; this was just like that.

Harry felt a strange sensation over the backs of his hands and arms, and opened his eyes. Immediately, he was hit with a wave of astonishment — where he had once had regular human hands, he was now staring at two front paws, the dark red fur trailing all the way up almost to his elbows. He stared at his new paws, flexing the sharp claws and the short toes, feeling the way the pads of his feet felt on his bedsheets. A laugh bubbled up from his chest.

"I hope I can undo that before dinner," he said to himself, closing his eyes to concentrate once more.

It would be really awkward to explain away if he couldn't.

.-. .

Ever since the High Inquisitor announcement, the students of Hogwarts had wondered what Umbridge's first move would be to bring the school to *order*.

On Monday morning, they got their answer.

There was a crowd outside the Great Hall at breakfast, and Harry frowned — one of the huge double doors was closed, and it had a large piece of parchment pinned to the front. He squeezed his way past some chattering second year Ravenclaws, trying to get a good look. When he drew close enough to read it, his heart sank like a stone to his gut.

EDUCATIONAL DECREE NUMBER TWENTY-THREE

By Order of the Hogwarts High Inquisitor,

All students are to remain seated at their assigned house tables during every meal.

Failure to comply with this rule will result in loss of house points, detentions, and/or other necessary punishments as decided by the High Inquisitor, Dolores Jane Umbridge.

At the bottom was an enormous Ministry seal, with two signatures below it; Umbridge, and Fudge.

"That's ridiculous!" Ginny complained loudly beside him. "Why can't we sit where we want?"

Harry wondered how much of this rule was down to him. Still, the joke was on Umbridge — if she was implementing this new decree to try and get at Dumbledore, she clearly hadn't

noticed the headmaster hated the inter-house mixing just as much as she did. Indeed, the man looked quite jovial up at the head table, happily spreading jam on a slice of toast.

It made Harry's stomach turn, to see rows of only red-lined robes at the Gryffindor table. Everyone looked disgruntled, picking morosely at their meals and muttering to each other in annoyance, sending longing looks at friends on other tables. It was funny how this would have been a perfectly ordinary thing in Harry's first or second or even third year; while a few people might occasionally join a friend elsewhere, the majority of students stuck to their own houses.

How quickly things could change.

The only person more pleased than Dumbledore was Umbridge, who was surveying the students with smug glee. Just for a moment, Harry was so very tempted to send a wandless, wordless hex in her direction. No one would even know it was him.

Knowing her vendetta, he'd probably get blamed regardless.

Not nearly as hungry as he had been before he'd read the announcement, Harry reached for some scrambled egg, nibbling on a corner of toast. And that's when he saw it.

Over at the Ravenclaw table, Cho was sat the wrong way on the bench. Her back to the table and her plate in her lap, she grinned at the boy sat at the Hufflepuff table opposite her. Patrick, Cedric's best friend.

Harry watched as Patrick turned around, raised his eyebrows, then grinned. Suddenly, he was swinging his legs over the bench, copying Cho's position; plate in his lap, sat facing Cho, conversing happily as if there were an invisible table between them.

A hush fell over the hall. Then, Parvati Patil shuffled down the bench at the Gryffindor table, until she was sat opposite her twin sister. They copied Cho and Patrick, resting their plates on their knees, facing away from their own tables. Across the room, a Hufflepuff fourth year turned around to face the Slytherin table, and was met by a Slytherin third year. One by one, students swivelled around on their benches, facing whoever happened to be sat opposite them. Students who had never spoken before started up cheerful conversation, reaching back to add food to their plates. Harry shifted around to face the Ravenclaw table, and found himself staring at one of their chasers whose name he couldn't remember for the life of him. The boy grinned. "Think you're ready for the first match of the season, Potter?" he asked, challenge in his eyes.

Not every student moved. Plenty stayed put, and obviously those on the far sides of the Gryffindor and Slytherin tables had nothing but a wall at their backs. But it was enough — the hall filled with chatter, the bright energy returning to the room at large. Up at the staff table, Sprout was beaming widely, and Flitwick looked so proud Harry thought he might faint.

Umbridge, on the other hand, was spitting feathers. "ENOUGH!" she screeched, chair scraping on stone as she stood abruptly. "This is— all of you, sit properly! This is *most* inappropriate, put your plates back on the tables! Five points from each of you, every student

facing the wrong way!” Immediately, the stones in all four house point hourglasses began to fly upwards. Slytherin lost fewer than the rest, but the other three houses were so even it made little difference to the overall scores. Umbridge stormed down the aisle between Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw, careful not to trip over the legs of all the students sat incorrectly, until she was stood in front of Cho. “Detention, Miss Chang. My office, five o’clock this evening.”

Cho’s eyes hardened. “Yes, Professor,” she replied, smiling unrepentantly. Umbridge huffed, and kept walking, all the way out of the Great Hall.

A flood of excited murmurs started up, even as people swung their legs back over the benches to sit properly. They were all wide-eyed and grinning, flushed with exhilaration.

To them, it felt like a victory. But Harry’s eyes were on Cho, being congratulated by Patrick for her ballsy move, and his stomach felt like it was full of lead.

.-. .

Harry waited outside Umbridge’s office that night, under the invisibility cloak, watching the door with anger in his blood. Cho had entered at five on the dot, and it was eight, now.

Thankfully, by half past the door opened; Cho walked out, cradling her right hand, cheeks flushed but no tears in her eyes. As soon as the door shut behind her, Harry stuffed the cloak in his bag and stepped from the shadows, calling her name softly. She jumped, whipping around.

“Harry.” Her eyes went wide, her lower lip trembling. “Harry, she—“

“I know,” he said softly, sympathetic. “Come here.” He reached gently for her hand, first doing the Healing charm Snape had taught him, then the spell to drain the magic. After only one detention, the words were faint, but Harry could just about make them out.

I will not be disruptive.

“I’ll teach you the spells tomorrow, if you come find me,” he promised. “In case she gets you again. Or anyone else.”

“She did that to you, too? Every night?” Cho looked utterly horrified, and Harry attempted a reassuring smile.

“I’ve had worse. Look, see, it’s basically healed.” He showed her the back of his hand, where the words *I must not tell lies* stood out pale pink against his dark skin.

“That’s awful,” Cho breathed. “She just sat there, watching me cut myself over and over — I tried not to cry, I didn’t want to give her the satisfaction, I—“ The dam broke, and with a quiet sob, tears began to spill from her brown eyes. Harry pulled her into a tight hug, letting her cry on his shoulder.

“You did so well,” he soothed. “Brave as a Gryffindor, you are.” That earned a weak laugh. Eventually, she pulled back, wiping her face with the sleeve of her jumper.

“Tomorrow after dinner, in the library?” she suggested, only the hint of a wobble to her voice. “Whatever those spells you used were, they helped a lot — it feels better already. I want to know them, in case she gets anyone else I know.” Then she smiled shakily. “In case I get another one.”

“Cho, you don’t have to—“

“*Don’t*,” she cut him off sharply. “Don’t tell me what to do, Harry Potter. I made my choice this morning, and I’d do the same again. You aren’t the only one who hates that *hag*. Let people make their own choices.” She blinked away a few more tears. “Like Cedric made his choice, to stand with you.”

Well, when she put it like that, there was nothing he could say. “I’ll meet you there,” he promised. “Let me walk you back upstairs.”

Cho didn’t argue, and the pair of them walked side by side, completely silent but for Cho’s occasional sniffles. At the top of the staircase, Harry gave her one last tight hug before they parted ways. On the way back to Gryffindor Tower, rage burned deep within him.

Dolores Umbridge was going to regret the day she decided to take on Hogwarts.

.-.-.

Tuesdays were awkward, lunch break splitting Harry’s double Transfiguration period right in half. He went straight to the Tower from class to exchange his books, then wolfed down a meal, giving Snape an intent look that the man couldn’t possibly ignore. He waited for the tiniest nod, then left the hall, ignoring Neville’s confusion.

Despite the small rebellion of Monday morning, everyone was sat at the correct house table. By the way some of the older Ravenclaws looked at him, Cho had told a few people what detentions with Umbridge entailed.

They eyed him with respect, that he had endured two weeks of it so stoically, but their gazes made Harry feel sick.

It was much better when people didn’t know.

He beat Snape to the man’s office, but only by a minute. The Potions Master strolled in, locking and warding the door in his wake. “What?” he snapped irritably. Harry just smirked.

“Hypothetically,” he began, dragging out the words.

Snape’s eyes raised skyward. “Merlin help me.”

Ignoring the mutter, Harry continued. “If I were to need a way to secure the secrecy of a group of people — say, thirty-odd students of varying age and house — in order to *hypothetically* lead a secret Defence Against the Dark Arts study group right under Umbridge’s nose, do you have any suggestions for how I might go about doing that? Hypothetically.”

The stare Snape gave him was utterly unimpressed.

“Explain.”

Harry told him about Blaise and Susan’s idea, and the secret room the castle had shown him. “I’m just worried about people talking about it too much and letting it slip to someone they shouldn’t. Both the group itself, and the room in particular. They need to stay secret.”

Snape looked like he would very much like to go and investigate the Room of Requirement for himself. “Will any Slytherins be involved?”

“Some will,” Harry assured. “Some would like to but can’t, like Draco. But hopefully enough will join that they can take what they learn and teach it to those who can’t.” Blaise and Daphne would be able to pass on information to those who couldn’t be seen so publicly on Harry’s side.

The Slytherin’s lips pursed, something like approval in his eyes. “This is reckless, and very likely to get you expelled,” he pointed out evenly.

“I know, but I’m willing to take that risk.” If he could teach even a handful of students enough to protect themselves before Umbridge shut him down, it would be worth it.

“Just like your bloody mother,” Snape grumbled, making Harry beam. That was the biggest compliment the man could offer him, and they both knew it. “There’s a spell — more of a ritual, really. A combination of incantation and potion, soaked into a piece of parchment; it’s borderline dark, used by old families to keep contracts secure. Anyone who signs the parchment will not be able to discuss the contents of the parchment with anyone whose name is not also present.”

“What will it do to them if they try?” Harry asked warily, not wanting to cause any pain or potential disfigurement. He’d heard all sorts of horror stories from Sirius about magical contract breach.

“Wipe their memory of everything related to the terms of the contract. They won’t remember what they signed, who else signed it, any of the details — if yours is regarding your meetings, they won’t remember attending any once they break their oath.”

Harry shuddered, imagining having a huge chunk of his memory just *gone*. “Bit drastic.”

“Need I remind you what you are risking?” Snape pointed out sharply. “I believe that is far more reasonable a consequence than what Umbridge will do to you if you are discovered.”

“Fair point,” Harry conceded. “And I suppose if everyone’s trustworthy, it won’t be a problem.” If Snape was suggesting it, it was likely the best option. “Is it magic I can do under school wards?” The last thing he wanted was Dumbledore finding out.

“No. Give me ten days to brew the potion, and I’ll do the magic for you at home. The contract will need to be written before it’s soaked, so make sure you have *everything* covered.”

Harry grinned; even *Snape* thought of Seren Du as home, by now. “I can handle that, after all the laws I’ve read for Susan.” He was pretty confident he could write a contract without any loopholes.

“Then bring me the contract on Saturday. I’ll take care of the rest,” Snape assured, before pinching the bridge of his nose in frustration. “I’m not sure if Remus will be proud or disappointed that I’m aiding in your rule-breaking.”

A laugh burst from Harry’s throat. “It’s to piss off Umbridge, he’ll be delighted.” Sirius, too, would think it a fantastic idea.

Snape didn’t look entirely convinced, but he agreed all the same, then sent Harry off to Transfiguration, warning him to stay out of trouble for the next week.

“Really, it’s like he’s never *met* me,” Harry murmured to himself with a shake of his head, hands in his pockets as he walked. He couldn’t keep the grin off his face — his plan was all coming together.

. . .

Sadly, his good mood only lasted as far as the end of lessons. After Herbology, Harry was walking across the grounds back to the castle with Neville and Hannah when a small white blob appeared in the sky, moving jerkily in Harry’s direction. Harry froze, heart leaping to his throat — it was Hedwig, and she was hurt.

The snowy owl flew awkwardly towards him, one wing set at a strange angle, a crumpled letter tight in her grasp. Instead of landing on Harry’s outstretched arm, she missed, flying with a soft thump straight into his chest.

“Sweet Helga!” Hannah exclaimed, hand flying to her mouth. “Is that your owl?”

“Is she okay?” Neville asked urgently. Harry ran gentle fingers over the malformed wing, heart clenching when Hedwig flinched visibly.

“I don’t know. I think it might be broken.” He eased the letter out of her claws. It was a thick one, still sealed, though that didn’t mean much with magic. When he looked, there was blood speckling the envelope. Panic flooded him — but there was no blood matting Hedwig’s white feathers.

There was, however, blood on her talons.

“I need to get her to Grubbly-Plank,” Harry said, looking up in the direction of Hagrid’s cabin. The woman may teach outside, but she lived in the castle, as far as he knew. To his relief, he could see her walking up from the edge of the forest.

Not waiting for Neville and Hannah, Harry tore off in her direction. “Professor! Professor!” She turned at his call, brow furrowing.

“Potter? What is it? What’ve you got there?”

"It's my owl, Professor." He skidded to a halt in front of her. "She's hurt. Her wing—"

"Yes, I see." Grubbly-Plank's frown deepened, and she studied Hedwig carefully. "Looks like she's been attacked. Odd; the animals around here are used to owls, they tend to leave them alone. Especially a larger one like this."

Harry could think of one thing that might have reason to attack Hedwig, and it wasn't an animal. "Can you help her?"

"I should be able to get her back to rights, if you leave her with me for a few days," the professor assured. "Seems like a fairly straightforward wing dislocation."

That sounded painful, and Harry stroked Hedwig's head. She cooed feebly, butting into his hand. "You'll be alright, girl," he promised, carefully handing her over to Grubbly-Plank, careful not to touch her damaged wing. Her eyes were sad, and it broke his heart. "It'll all be better soon."

"I'll take good care of her, Potter," Grubbly-Plank assured, her usually brusque manner softening in the face of his care for the owl.

"Thank you, Professor. She's— Hedwig means a lot to me." She was his very first friend in the world. He wasn't sure what he'd do without her.

Grubbly-Plank nodded in assurance, then set off towards the castle at a brisk pace; hopefully to take Hedwig somewhere to set her wing. Harry watched her go, feeling like she was taking part of him with her.

He wished Hagrid would come back. Grubbly-Plank was perfectly competent, he was sure, but... Hagrid was the one who had given him Hedwig in the first place. He knew how important she was.

He looked down at the crumpled letter in his hands. It was Bill's writing, on the front. Perhaps that was why the letter was still unopened; the curse-breaker took privacy very seriously. His magic was all over the parchment, though it dissipated when Harry broke the seal.

There were four pieces of parchment inside. Bill, Charlie, Tonks and Fleur. Harry's stomach churned.

Thank Merlin Bill had warded the letter — that particular combination of people, all coming from the same place, could have been *very* suspect. That was before he even got to the potential contents of the letters.

He pocketed them, jogging back towards Neville and Hannah, his heart heavy.

If Umbridge had damaged Hedwig in any kind of permanent way, Harry would *end her*.

.-.-.-.

Remus sipped at the large mug of hot chocolate Ceri had given him, smiling at the sight of Sirius sprawled in front of the fire. It was a rare evening they could both get away, and they were making the most of it.

Suddenly, Sirius tensed. "Snape's here," he announced, scrambling into a sitting position. Remus' eyes widened, but before he could ask further, the living room door opened and the man himself strode in. He was still dressed in his teaching robes, obviously come straight from dinner.

"What's happened?" Remus asked, fearing the worst. Severus rarely left the castle on weekdays, just in case he was needed.

"That *brat*," the Slytherin declared, and Remus let himself relax; he sounded annoyed, not worried or angry, that was okay.

On the floor, Sirius snorted. "What's he done now?"

Severus sank down on the sofa beside Remus, waving off the offer of a sip of hot chocolate. "Your godson," he told the pair of them, dark eyes narrowed, "has decided, at the behest of his peers, to begin teaching his own underground Defence Against the Dark Arts club. Apparently, several of his year mates worried about their ability to pass their OWLs under Umbridge's instruction — and their ability to face what may greet them outside of Hogwarts' walls."

A slow grin crossed Remus' lips; there was *pride* in that tone, buried under annoyance, and dare he say it, even *fondness*. Severus couldn't fool him, not for a second.

"That's my boy!" Sirius crowed in delight. Gently, Remus bumped his shoulder against Severus'.

"I think you've got at least *some* claim to his actions, after the last two summers." Severus had put in more time instructing Harry than either him or Sirius combined. No doubt it was that knowledge which gave Harry the confidence to teach his peers.

"Absolutely not," Severus groused. "I've got enough on my plate with Draco deciding to date the bloody Chosen One right under the Dark Lord's nose. Potter is all your responsibility."

But the fondness was still there — Sirius might not recognise it, but Remus did, and it made something warm settle in his chest. Hiding his smile with his mug, he leaned against Severus' side. Having him close in the middle of the week was a nice surprise, one he would take full advantage of, no matter how many childish faces Sirius pulled.

"If you say so," he placated, pressing a brief kiss to the Slytherin's sharp jaw. "Tell us what our boy has got himself into now, then."

Severus could deny it all he wanted, but he couldn't hide it from his partner. Harry was as much his as he was Remus', by now. And that was exactly how it should be.

Chapter 54

Chapter Notes

The boys are getting bolder ;) And things are starting to get a little more interesting~

October had arrived by the time the contract was ready to be signed. Miraculously, Harry managed to stay entirely detention-free for the whole two weeks — Umbridge had seemingly gotten bored of trying to provoke him in class, instead letting them sit and mindlessly read a chapter at a time of Slinkhard's book. All of them wondered what she would do when they ran out of chapters.

Hedwig had made a full recovery, and Harry was now sending his letters to Grimmauld Place by Ceri, who would pass them on to Remus. The others seemed confused at first, but after a quick lie about Harry befriending a Hogwarts house elf — entirely believable, after the Dobby situation — they quickly accepted this new, more secure form of communication. Not that they had much of importance to talk about; Bill and his team were still working on the horcrux situation, and he and Charlie were quietly preparing to take over their family seats, but no one wanted to make any drastic moves with Umbridge so firmly ensconced in Hogwarts. They were wary of causing Fudge to have a complete breakdown and do something he couldn't take back.

Still, it was nice to hear about the more mundane things; Bill and Fleur's relationship, Charlie's dragons. He was getting to know Tonks better, too, through letters. She had a similar sort of humour to Sirius, though the Hufflepuff in her definitely shone through. She was dating someone as well, but Harry had yet to figure it out, and Tonks was taking far too much joy in keeping it secret.

His letter from Viktor returned, not on the school owl, but on the razor-clawed hunting falcon that was the Bulgarian's personal mail carrier. He mentioned having heard from Fleur that Harry had mail difficulties, and promised his falcon would not let anyone steal his burden. Looking at the bird's wickedly sharp beak, Harry almost hoped Umbridge would try.

Still, though school seemed to be business as usual — Umbridge's attempts at control aside — word spread very discreetly around certain people, and on the first Hogsmeade weekend of the year, Harry was up early and sneaking across the dew-soaked grass to a clearing just inside the tree-line of the Forbidden Forest, where Hagrid used to teach lessons that required a bit of tree coverage. He was under his invisibility cloak, with Neville pressed close behind him.

Harry could have called everyone to gather at the Room of Requirement, but he didn't want to reveal the secret of the room until everyone had signed the contract. So, after a little brainstorming with his friends, the forest had been decided as their best bet for a meeting.

He hadn't expected there to be quite so many people.

He and Neville ditched the cloak once they were covered by the trees, circling round to approach from a different angle. A few people were already there, but more were appearing in drips and drabs — the heirs, of course; Ginny, with Michael Corner, Terry Boot and Mandy Brocklehurst; the rest of the Gryffindor quidditch team; Cho, with a couple of Ravenclaw friends, closely followed by Cedric's three Hufflepuff dorm-mates; the Creevey brothers; Luna, surprisingly accompanied by a couple of Slytherin fourth-years. More and more people began to arrive, and by the time the flow of students stopped, Harry counted nearly forty of them.

Merlin.

He cleared his throat, suddenly nervous. Beside him, Neville gave a discreet thumbs-up.
"Right, then. Thanks for coming, everyone; I promise I'll make it quick. You all know why we're here, I assume."

A crowd of faces grinned back at him. "To show Umbridge who's boss!" one person chirped, earning several whoops.

"To learn to fight You-Know-Who and his followers," Luna called out. A prominent silence followed.

"Yes, to both of those things," Harry said, heart hammering against his ribs. "I won't claim to be an expert, and I honestly don't care if you think I'm mad or not. If you're here for some war stories, you can bugger off."

"Why should we believe you if you won't tell us what happened?"

It took a second for Harry to locate the owner of that voice; one of the three Hufflepuff fifth year boys that Harry didn't really interact with, Zacharias Smith. The blond was sneering at Harry, looking skeptical.

"I never said I won't tell you, I said I'm not here to share stories right now," Harry retorted irritably. "Quite frankly, I don't fancy standing around in this forest any longer than I have to be. The acromantulas don't like me."

There were a few weak giggles from people who thought he was joking, and wary glances at the forest proper from the rest. "Voldemort is back. That's a fact; whether you believe it or not, it won't change. I don't know what he's up to right now, but just because he's been quiet for all of a few months doesn't mean he'll stay that way. War is coming, and we'll need all the capable wands we can get."

He noticed a few wary glances directed at the small cluster of Slytherins in the group, and it made him huff. "If you believe someone's house is an indicator of their moral alignment, leave now. The Slytherins are here on my invitation. I trust them — if that's not good enough for you, that's not my problem." Blaise flashed a smile his way. Harry felt a pang of regret in his chest, that Draco couldn't be stood with him.

"I can't guarantee anything. I've not even taken my OWLs yet, so I can't promise you'll pass them. But we can all agree that sitting around reading bloody Slinkhard books while Umbridge tells us to shut up and trust Fudge isn't going to get anyone very far."

"Hear, hear!" George crowed.

"I've faced Voldemort, in some form or another, four times, and lived to tell the tale. Which I will do, sometime when I'm not taking up valuable Hogsmeade time. I can't promise I can teach you to fight him, but I can teach you everything I do know. I can tell you what it's like to stare death in the face, but I can't *show* you how it feels. But, if you work hard, then you should know enough spells to hopefully come out the other side the first time you discover what it feels like for yourself."

His voice was hard, and every single person in the crowd was captivated. "This has to be secret. Umbridge can't hear about what we're doing here. None of the teachers can." He reached into his jacket pocket, pulling out the roll of spelled parchment. "Everyone who wants to learn needs to sign this, before I tell you where we're going to meet. It'll help us keep the secret. You won't like what happens to you if you try and spill the beans, once you've signed."

That sent a wave of unease through the crowd. "I won't force you, but I also won't teach you if you don't. I'll be expelled if Umbridge knows I'm doing this, or worse. I refuse to put my neck out for anyone who doesn't trust me."

"I'll sign," Susan called out, stepping forward. Harry transfigured a branch into a short, somewhat stubby-looking table. As soon as he set the contract down on it, Susan pulled a quill from her bag. Naturally, she read the contract carefully, but by the end of it she was scrawling her name with a flourish. "Nicely worded, Harry," she complimented, making him grin.

Right behind her, Neville signed, not even bothering to read the contract — which made sense, since he'd helped Harry write it.

The twins were next, and they too didn't stop to read it. When Harry raised an eyebrow, they grinned at him. "We trust you!" they declared in unison, George passing his quill to Lee so he could sign too.

One by one, every single one of them signed their name on the contract — even Zacharias Smith, though he made a face as he did so. Once the last person had signed, Harry reached for it.

"Hang on, Potter; you didn't sign it," Zacharias called. Harry resisted the urge to roll his eyes — who had brought him??

"If we want to add any future members, I need to be able to tell them about it, don't I?" he pointed out patiently. "All the rest of you will be able to do is tell them to come talk to me. Besides, I'm the one with most to lose out of this; I'm not likely to go to Umbridge about it."

“Don’t be a tosser, Smith,” Fred complained. “We’ve got to have one person able to talk about the group, as a failsafe.”

“In case someone hexes your scrawny arse to smithereens and we need to ask Pomfrey to put you back together again,” George added, eyes alight. Smith paled, gulping.

“Right. Of course. Yeah.”

No one else seemed to have a problem, so Harry pocketed the contract, planning on getting it somewhere safe as soon as possible. “Great. First meeting will be Thursday at seven. Meet on the seventh floor, the door opposite the tapestry of the trolls doing ballet.”

Several people exchanged dubious glances. “Harry, there isn’t a door opposite that tapestry,” Cho pointed out in her quiet Scottish burr. Harry smirked.

“There will be.”

.-.

The meeting ended without fanfare, everyone keen to get down to Hogsmeade and enjoy the remainder of their weekend. Harry walked along the forest’s edge with Neville and Luna, headed in the direction of the village.

“That went well, I think,” he said, once they were out of earshot of the rest.

“You were great, Harry,” Neville enthused, clapping him on the back. “I can’t wait to see this room of yours.”

Harry hadn’t taken Neville to the Room of Requirement yet, wanting his friend to be as surprised as everyone else. “It’s brilliant, you’ll love it.” And that reminded him. “Thanks for the tip, by the way, Luna.”

She smiled back dreamily, bobbing her head. “Glad I could help.”

Neville looked at them both in confusion, but didn’t question it. Perhaps he’d forgotten about that conversation, weeks ago now. Or perhaps he, too, knew what it was like to feel the castle’s magic.

.-.-.

That evening after curfew, Harry was slipping into an empty classroom on the third floor — empty, that was, aside from a lone Slytherin.

Draco smiled at him, beckoning him over for a kiss. “How did your secret rebellion meeting go, then?” he asked, only a little mulish. Harry kissed him a second time.

“Don’t be jealous,” he teased. “It went well, actually. Everyone who showed up signed the contract.” Draco was the only one who knew the truth of the contract; even Neville didn’t know what it would do, just that it was enchanted.

“Good. With any luck, that’ll keep Umbridge out of it. And Dumbledore.” The headmaster would probably be a fan of going against the Ministry, but he wouldn’t like the Slytherin inclusion — nor would he like that Harry was in charge. Another rebellion from his Golden Boy, after all.

“Dumbledore has hardly even looked at me all term,” Harry remarked with a shrug. “Starting to wonder if he’s actually feeling threatened by Umbridge.” After the way Harry had acted in the summer, and his continued spurning of Ron and Hermione, Harry thought for sure the headmaster would try and lure him back onto the ‘correct’ path sometime soon. But, on the contrary, the old man was practically ignoring Harry!

“Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth,” Draco said, and Harry hummed in agreement. “So who showed up? How many Slytherins did you have?” He gently shoved Harry into a chair as he peppered him with questions, and Harry chuckled.

“Way more people than I expected. And again, more than expected. Blaise and Daphne were the only ones from our year, but there were some younger ones.” None of the sixth or seventh year Slytherins were secure enough to do something as bold as support Harry Potter, even if they might have wanted to.

“What are you going to teach them first?”

“Disarming charms, and Shield charms. Start with the basics,” Harry said. His first lesson curriculum was already mostly-planned in his head. He didn’t want to start out with anything too intimidating or difficult, especially since there were third years in the mix. Besides, for all Umbridge’s hateful poison, she was right about one thing; their DADA education had been inconsistent at best. Knowledge was likely to be patchy, and Harry wanted to see where everyone was at before he started delving into the more dangerous magic.

“Oh. That’s boring,” Draco pouted. Harry couldn’t resist kissing the pushed-out lip, nipping at it playfully.

“Sorry I’m not going straight into teaching them spell-chains,” he teased. “Got to make sure they won’t curse their own eyebrows off, first.”

Draco hummed, shuffling his chair closer. “You’ll let me know when you start on the more... interesting magic, of course?”

“Promise,” Harry assured, squeezing his knee. “You might not be able to come to meetings, but I’ll keep you in the loop.” Green eyes darkened. “Just means I’ll have to go over it with you, privately.”

“Ooh, one-on-one lessons,” Draco drawled, leaning forward with dancing eyes. “Will there be rewards for hard work, *Professor*? ”

The breathy purr sent a pulse of want straight through Harry’s core, and he swallowed as his throat suddenly became dry. “You’re the prefect, of the two of us,” he pointed out, a little hoarse. “You’re the one who can give house points. I suppose I’ll have to think up something else, instead.”

Draco moved quickly, sliding off his chair and straddling Harry's lap. The chair groaned ominously under the weight of both of them, but held, and Harry let his hands fall to the blond's hips. "Careful you don't tip us back," Harry warned. "You'll have a hell of a time explaining to Pomfrey why you found me in a classroom with my skull split open at this time of night."

Draco scoffed, threading his fingers through Harry's hair, cradling the back of his skull gently. "Have a little faith, Scarhead," he murmured. "There's spells for that sort of thing."

Arching up for a kiss, Harry hummed, shoulders relaxing with the pleasure that flooded him. All the day's stress, the anxiety about the meeting; it all melted away when Draco kissed him.

His hands started to wander; first up the blond's firm chest, then down, settling on his thighs, fingers teasing at the inside seam of his trousers. Draco let out a strangled whimper when Harry's fingertips danced too close to the bulge pressing against his fly. "Don't tease, Potter," he gasped. Harry, suddenly feeling bold, looked up to meet lust-blown eyes.

"Not teasing," he assured, heart pounding. "Can I...?" He let his fingers move to the buckle of Draco's belt, his intentions clear.

The Slytherin sucked in a sharp breath, going tense.

"We don't have to," Harry hurried to say, moving his hands back. "No pressure. But if you want it, I'd—" He was cut off by lips pressing firmly to his. Then;

"*Please.*"

He swallowed hard. Okay, then.

He unhooked the belt buckle, and slowly, with shaking hands, undid each button of the boy's fly. His trousers parted, revealing grey silk underwear, tented in a very obvious way, a growing wet spot on the front.

Harry could hardly breathe as he reached with reverent fingers, peeling down the waistband. Draco shifted to assist, until his underwear and trousers were pushed down to mid-thigh, his cock standing proudly at attention between their stomachs.

A quiet, keening noise wrenched from Harry's throat. He'd never seen an erection other than his own before, and the illustrations in the book George gave him. He hadn't expected to be so *painfully* aroused just by the sight of it. Slowly, he wrapped his hand around the hot length, giving it an experimental squeeze. Draco's breath hitched, his hands tightening on Harry's shoulders.

"Potter, I swear to *fuck*," he bit out, face absolutely wrecked, lips swollen from Harry's earlier attention. He was beautifully flushed, and not for the first time Harry was hit by how fucking *lucky* he was to call this boy his.

Using a handy bit of silent, wandless magic to lubricate his palm, Harry got to work, determined to bring Draco to pieces.

Harry's own hardness was pressing against the fly of his jeans, against the inner curve of Draco's thigh — but he didn't care about himself, not when Draco was *right there*, sat in his lap, giving tiny bucks of his hips in time with Harry's hand movements. His head was thrown back, quiet moans falling from his lips, one hand gripping Harry's shoulder for dear life while the other tangled in his hair, just the right side of painful.

"Ohh," Draco sighed, lurching forward for a fierce kiss. "Come on, Harry. Faster."

Harry did as bid, glancing down in fascination to watch the reddened head of Draco's cock beneath his fingers. It was so different to doing this to himself, in the privacy of his four-poster bed.

For a moment, he got a mental image of Draco splayed out on Gryffindor-red sheets, naked and flushed and *Harry's*, and he almost came in his own jeans. He moved his hand faster, trying to figure out what made Draco moan louder, loving the tiny sounds he made with every thrust into Harry's palm.

"Fuck, close," was all the warning Harry got, before suddenly Draco's spine arched and he came with a shout, spurting hot over Harry's hand and both their laps. As he did, he pressed down hard in Harry's lap, and Harry was *gone*, sparks exploding behind his eyelids as he followed his boyfriend into orgasm.

And then the chair broke.

Only an instinctive wandless Cushioning charm saved Harry a very painful landing, as the legs of the old chair gave out, sending them both tipping backwards to the stone floor. Harry ended up on his back, Draco sprawled on top of him, his spent cock and the sticky mess pinned between them.

Harry looked up, meeting Draco's bewildered grey eyes, still hazy with lust. A beat, and they both burst out laughing. "Fucking *Merlin*," Draco groaned, shaking his head. "That's not how I wanted that to go."

"At least it happened after you came," Harry pointed out, blushing as he looked down at the mess of his hand, and both their shirts.

The pink flush rose on Draco's cheeks again. "Yeah. That was... thank you." He kissed Harry softly, suddenly shy. "Do you want me to..."

"No need," Harry assured. Draco frowned.

"Yeah, s'pose the chair was a bit of a mood killer."

Cheeks hot, Harry shook his head. "No — well, yes, but — I, uh, already. When you did. I." He stuttered helplessly, while Draco was wide-eyed.

“You... Just from me...?” Harry nodded. “Wow. Okay.” The Gryffindor ducked his head, but Draco caught him by the chin, kissing him again. “I’ll just have to do you next time, then.” Those words sent a shiver down Harry’s spine, his teenage libido making a valiant attempt at starting a second go already.

“Only if you want to,” he insisted all the same. “I did that because I wanted it, not because I expected anything in return.”

“Yes, but seeing as you *enjoyed* it so much,” Draco drawled, gaze intent, “I’d quite like to see what all the fuss is about.”

“Oh.” Well. That was alright, then.

As sticky became unpleasant, Harry did a Cleaning charm on the pair of them, helping Draco right his clothing. They stayed where they were, sprawled on the floor, Harry gazing up adoringly at Draco. But the moment was gone, and both of them burst into giggles.

“Can’t believe we broke the fucking *chair*,” Harry spluttered, laughing into the curve of Draco’s throat. The blond snorted in a very undignified manner that he’d never allow in front of anyone other than Harry.

“Thank Merlin for Silencing charms, is all I can say,” he replied. “That crash would’ve woken half the castle.”

Harry winced — yes, thank Merlin for Silencing charms, indeed.

.-.-.-.

Harry hated Mondays.

Not only because his class schedule on a Monday was positively soul destroying, but Umbridge always seemed to drop a new bombshell on a Monday morning. This was no exception; a new Educational Decree was posted on the notice board in every common room, declaring that all extra-curricular clubs, teams and societies required permission from the High Inquisitor to continue. Reading it made Harry’s heart stop.

“She knows,” he murmured, dread filling his voice. Ginny shook her head.

“She can’t. It’s too soon.” Harry raised a pointed brow. “Maybe she overheard someone talking about the meeting in the forest; someone who didn’t go. Not everyone who was told about the idea actually showed up.”

Harry could hardly fathom there being *more* people who might have liked the idea, but he would take Ginny’s word for it.

“We’ll see.” If someone who had signed the contract had talked, he would know soon.

A few people sent him worried looks at breakfast, their questions clear, but Harry just tilted his head in the barest of nods; they were still on. Umbridge might have banned them, but she couldn’t catch them.

“This is awful!” Angelina moaned, head in her hands.

“We’ll be fine, Angie. She won’t find our practice room,” Harry assured, surprised she was so wound up about the defence club. She looked up, gaze furious.

“I don’t care about that! *Quidditch*, Harry! The notice said all *teams* needed permission.”

Harry’s jaw dropped. “What? But— that’s ridiculous! She can’t ban us from quidditch!”

“She can, and she will, so don’t you *dare* do anything else to upset her, alright? No more detentions.” The look in her eye was every bit as ferocious as Oliver Wood had been in his captaincy, and Harry nodded quickly.

“Yes, captain,” he said obediently.

“Good boy.” Then she was off, no doubt hunting down Fred and George to warn them of the same; they’d pulled a few pranks on Umbridge, and Harry knew they’d earned a detention each for it — he’d taught them the spells to heal their hands.

First the house tables, now the clubs; Harry wasn’t beginning to wonder if Dumbledore and the Ministry had more in common than any of them thought.

.-. .

History of Magic went by Umbridge-free, which Harry was actually quite disappointed by. It would have been amusing, watching Umbridge try and interrogate the ghost professor, while Binns blithely continued lecturing, entirely unaware what year it was or that he was even deceased. Truthfully, if there was one professor he’d support Umbridge getting rid of, it was that one.

Things got interesting in Potions, though. When the Gryffindor contingent arrived at the classroom, Draco was outside, bragging about how easily the Slytherin team was given permission to continue playing. Several loud remarks about whether the Gryffindors would be so lucky made it easy for Harry to bare his teeth and snarl, continuing their public vendetta.

It was good that there were so many other things going on this year, or someone might have noticed that Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy really weren’t trying as hard to fight each other as they usually did.

Snape interrupted their posturing, docking Gryffindor points and urging them all into the classroom. He looked extra surly, and Harry realised why as soon as he sat at his bench.

Umbridge was in the corner, perched on a stool, ever-present clipboard balanced on her knees.

“Oh, blimey,” Neville yelped under his breath.

“Why is she always in our classes? Doesn’t she have her own to teach?” Harry remarked in a whisper. He’d only heard of two other occasions Umbridge had inspected a class that was not

one of his. Was she really so desperate to see him fail, that she was stalking him around his lessons?

She was starting to replace Fake-Moody as ‘creepiest DADA professor’ in Harry’s mental ranking.

“As you can see, we have a guest this morning,” Snape drawled, and Harry was sure only he and Draco saw the well-hidden contempt in the man’s gaze as he looked at Umbridge.

It was going to be one hell of a lesson.

Despite straining his ears to try and hear Umbridge questioning Snape, Harry did his best to try and brew his Strengthening Solution properly, as well as keep an eye on Neville. Admittedly, the other Gryffindor was getting better in Potions with Harry’s quiet encouragement, but the nerves of having both Snape and Umbridge observing the lesson were clearly throwing him off.

Harry just hoped Snape wasn’t feeling extra vindictive towards him. A few times, the Slytherin had vanished Harry’s perfectly good potion for some perceived flaw, giving him a zero for the class — and, in private, offering a proper criticism and grade. It was necessary to keep up the public animosity, and as it wouldn’t mess with Harry’s OWL grade he didn’t really care, but— he really hoped Snape didn’t do that in front of Umbridge. If the man could offer no other support, he could at least do that.

Umbridge seemed very interested in what Snape did *before* teaching, as if he were going to respond to her prying with a blow-by-blow recount of his Death Eater days. All it did was give him the chance to quietly brag about being the youngest Potions Master in a century, sneer at her for questioning his curriculum, and offer for her to direct her complaints at the ICW if she wished to change what appeared on the OWL exam syllabus. Through it all, Harry was trying his best to hold in his laughter. Snape was having *far* too much fun tearing Umbridge to pieces.

Perhaps a pensieve memory of the class could be his Christmas present to Remus.

“Despite applying for the Defence Against the Dark Arts position every year, you have been refused the appointment repeatedly. Do you care to suggest why Professor Dumbledore will not allow you the position?”

Someone from the Slytherin side of the room sucked in a sharp breath; Harry wasn’t the only one eavesdropping.

“I suggest you ask him yourself,” Snape drawled, unperturbed. “Though I would imagine it has something to do with the lack of suitably qualified Potions Masters in Britain. Defence Against the Dark Arts is a much more... *forgiving* subject to teach.”

Umbridge smiled, a little confused, like she wasn’t sure if she’d just been complimented or insulted. Harry couldn’t *breathe*, he was so close to laughing.

When it came time for Umbridge to speak to the students about the teacher under inspection, the pink-clad woman paused, eyeing the class, considering her dilemma.

Did she speak to the Slytherins, who would only sing the praises of their Housemaster? Or did she go to the Gryffindors, and risk further infuriating the one teacher in the school who seemed to hate Harry Potter as much as she did?

Harry was not surprised when she chose the Slytherin side of the room, quietly sidling up to Pansy.

Snape passed their desk, sneering at the bubbling tar-like substance in Neville's cauldron, before surveying the oily grey substance in Harry's; an entirely adequate Strengthening Solution, ready to cool. Harry looked up at him imploringly, mentally begging him not to vanish it.

A long moment passed, before Snape simply huffed. "You will have to do better than that, Mr Potter, if you want even a chance of a passing OWL grade. And five points from Gryffindor for interfering with Longbottom's work."

Harry just nodded; that was as much as he could hope for, under the circumstances.

.-.

With Gryffindor quidditch practice cancelled while Umbridge *considered things*, Harry found himself at a loose end for the evening. He had homework, of course, but the idea of going and sitting in the common room to try and do it made his head pound. Gryffindor territory was not exactly conducive to focus and learning.

Just as he was mentally debating between the library or an abandoned classroom, Hannah appeared, tugging on his sleeve. "Come study with us," she urged. He raised an eyebrow, and she smiled. "*Actual* studying. It's been a while."

She had a point, and when Harry entered their usual empty classroom — now warded to the gills, to keep Umbridge out — most of the heirs were gathered, their books spread out over the desks, clustered by subject. Neville was already there, getting Divination help from Parvati, who seemed to take Trelawney's probation as a personal call to make sure every one of them got as high a grade as possible.

It was nice, not having the conversation be about Umbridge, or the Wizengamot, or anything serious — just all of them studying together, like they had last year.

"Hey, does anyone mind if I put my Wireless on?" Harry asked, pulling the device from his bag. "Not too loud, I swear. But Puddlemere are playing." Their keeper had been injured in the last game, and while reports said he was fine to play, Harry was quietly hoping Oliver might get subbed on. His ex-captain hadn't taken to the field yet this season, but from the chatter going on, the Puddlemere main keeper wasn't quite up to scratch, and there was a chance Oliver could make his way to the main team for good, if he played well when he was able.

"Hey, set it up over here," Cassius urged, making room on his side of the table for Harry to join him. No one seemed to object, so Harry did, tuning the Wireless to the right station and pulling out his DADA homework. It was just the kind of mindless drivel he could complete while listening to quidditch.

"It's Puddlemere United versus the Ballycastle Bats, and the snitch is off!"

The quiet commentary was soothing as he worked; much nicer than the chaos of Gryffindor Tower. Puddlemere were playing well, too. At least to start, they were.

"Perkins shoots, and — oh, that's a nasty hit! Puddlemere keeper Nicholas Hornby takes a bludger to the side right as Perkins scores another for the Bats. Puddlemere's captain has called for a time out; Hornby is not a pretty sight, ladies and gents, and — yes, that's it, with a round of quite spectacular projectile vomiting, Hornby is escorted from the pitch by the medics. On flies Oliver Wood, heading to goals, and play is resumed."

Harry straightened up, essay abandoned in favour of the quidditch. Beside him, Cassius' quill had gone still, the Slytherin's head cocked intently towards the Wireless.

"Bats are in fine form tonight, but Puddlemere are not taking it lying down. Puddlemere chasers have possession, heading it up the pitch — and Perkins steals the quaffle! She's headed for another goal, tearing down the pitch, passes to Gladwell, back to Perkins — what a spectacular block from reserve keeper Oliver Wood! Puddlemere back in possession."

"Yes, Ollie!" Cassius hissed quietly, the faintest grin tugging at his lips. Harry eyed him strangely.

"You and Oliver kept in touch?" he asked, keeping his voice pitched low so as not to disturb the others. Cassius' eyes widened, and the faintest blush touched his olive cheeks.

"Some," he dismissed evasively. "But I was a Puddlemere fan before he signed with them."

That didn't quite excuse Cassius' excitement at Oliver specifically — nor the tiny, pleased smile he got when the commentators talked about how well Oliver was performing for his first game of the season.

Harry continued to watch him, suspicion growing.

Interesting.

. . .

His evenings blessedly free of detention, and less-blessedly free of quidditch practice, Harry decided to undertake a little adventure that had been lingering in the back of his mind since before he'd discovered the Room of Requirement.

Invisibility cloak and Marauder's Map in use, Harry left the Tower after curfew, and headed for the second floor.

If Myrtle was present in her bathroom, she didn't pop out to say hello, even when Harry removed his cloak. He wasn't sad about that — it meant there was no witnesses when he stared at the tiny snake engraved on the tap, and hissed. "*Open.*"

The yawning entrance to the Chamber of Secrets revealed itself. The blast of stale, decaying air made Harry wrinkle his nose, directing a Cleaning charm at the pipe.

Without delay, he clambered over the edge, and slid down.

The first section of the Chamber was just as disgusting as Harry remembered, littered with small animal skeletons and scraps of snakeskin. Performing a Bubblehead charm on himself to keep out the smell, Harry forged onwards, pushing past the insistent press of memories from his second year.

The hole that he and Ron had dug for him and Ginny to escape through, in the pile of rubble caused by Lockhart's failed Obliviation, might have fit twelve year-old Harry but certainly would not fit fifteen year-old Harry. A flick of his wand and an astonishingly overpowered Repairing charm fixed that, the magic rushing eagerly through Harry, reminding him of how little opportunity he'd had to truly stretch his magical core.

That was why he was down here. Partly, anyway. He could have used the Room of Requirement, but... he wanted a place that was outside the student wards, where he could use as much magic as he wanted and not risk getting caught by the wrong person.

As he grew closer to adulthood, his magic grew stronger, his connection to his family magics much deeper. He was noticing it in classes; spells came easily, and if anything he was having to worry about them being *overpowered* rather than under. When conjuring in Charms, he'd almost conjured a dozen pillows instead of the requisite two. If Umbridge had allowed them to use spells in class, he likely would have had to worry about injuring one of his classmates.

And that's why he had to train. If he was going to be teaching his friends, he didn't want to hurt anyone. He wanted to grow his magical core, but he *needed* to control it.

His heart was beating hummingbird-quick when he stepped into the enormous main chamber, laying eyes on the basilisk for the first time in two and a half years.

It was... really quite large.

He hadn't had the chance to properly appreciate it back then, given the basilisk was trying to *eat* him, but it had to be at least sixty feet long. Harry edged closer, expecting the smell of rotting meat, frowning when it didn't hit his nostrils. The basilisk was astonishingly well preserved; he'd expected it to be little more than a pile of putrid flesh and sagging scales by now. Was it magic, keeping it in tact? Or something else? Something that clearly didn't work on all the rodents and other creatures that died in the bowels of the Chamber.

With a little cleaning and some proper lighting, the Chamber really could be very impressive. It was impressive *already*, but mostly in a creepy dungeon lair kind of way, with the pool of stagnant water in the corner, and the centuries of grime built up.

And the basilisk corpse. That wasn't great for the atmosphere.

Harry looked around the enormous room, at the huge statue of Salazar himself, still with his jaw wide open for the snake to pass through.

What was it all for?

Surely he hadn't built such a massive chamber just to house his pet snake and his own ego? Especially since the snake seemed to have a space of its own past the statue guardian.

It wasn't like he would be entertaining anyone down here; why make it the size of a grand ballroom?

Harry walked up to the walls, looking for any more markings, or signs. Mostly, he saw snakes. Snake-shaped torch holders on the walls, snakes carved into columns, snakes engraved on the walls. The man really, really liked snakes.

"*Show me your secrets,*" he groaned — or he tried to, at least, but with his eyes on the snake carvings the words naturally came out in Parseltongue.

And the bricks in the wall began to move.

Rolling away from each other like the entrance to Diagon Alley, the wall soon revealed an arched entrance. Harry gaped, stepping inside.

It was an office. Clearly untouched for a very long time, though surprisingly dust-free. One wall was entirely bookshelves, while another held shelves of potions ingredients, jars of odd substances and labelled wooden boxes. An ornate wooden desk sat off to one side, while a small sitting area filled the other half of the office.

"*Well, now,*" a voice hissed, making the hair on the back of Harry's neck stand on end. "*It's been quite some time since I had a visitor. Who might you be, then?*"

Slowly, Harry turned, until he was facing an enormous portrait on one wall.

A portrait of a man who looked an awful lot like Salazar Slytherin himself.

Chapter 55

Chapter Notes

Here we are at the halfway point! Still plenty more fic to come~

Harry's jaw dropped, and he continued to stare at the portrait. The man, dressed in a very old-fashioned dark green robe, with long black hair and skin much the same shade as Harry's, crossed his arms over his narrow chest and stared back.

"Are you daft, lad?"

He was speaking Parseltongue. That shouldn't have been a surprise, given who it was, but Harry had only heard one person speak the language before and it was under very different circumstances.

"I'm sorry," he replied, having to look at the painted snake wrapped around Slytherin's shoulders to make sure he didn't speak English. *"I wasn't expecting you. My name is Harry. Harry Potter."* A pause. *"I'm your heir."*

"Potter, eh?" Slytherin said, raising one imperious eyebrow. *"A strong family, good line. Though I don't recall our main lines combining — is it a recent tie? I confess, it's been so long since my last visitor, I rather thought the Slytherin line had died out."*

A sudden, awful thought hit Harry. *"When was your last visitor? Was it a boy named Tom Riddle?"* Surely if Voldemort had found Salazar Slytherin himself, he wouldn't have left the portrait under the school. Nor all of these books, most of which looked as old as Hogwarts itself.

"Riddle? No, no. It was a Gaunt lad, I forget the first name. Quite some time ago, now. Seventeen-something, maybe early eighteen hundreds."

Harry wasn't ready for the punch of relief that hit him, his knees buckling for a moment.

"Should I know the name Tom Riddle? What year is it now, anyway?"

"Nineteen ninety-five," Harry relayed, watching the painted man's eyes widen. He swore, in a language that wasn't English but wasn't *not* English, shaking his head.

"Good lord. What happened? The knowledge is supposed to pass down the line!"

Harry gave a heavy sigh, Scourgifying the sofa before taking a seat.

He hadn't anticipated spending his evening relaying recent history to the thousand-year-old painting of Salazar Slytherin, and yet.

He was Harry Potter, after all.

.-.-.

It took over an hour, explaining to Slytherin what he knew — which, admittedly, wasn't much. He knew nothing of the original Slytherin line, just that it culminated in Tom Riddle, who was childless. That led to an explanation of how Harry had ended up the conquering heir of the Slytherin line, and everything that came after.

He'd never spoken so much continuous Parseltongue in his life before, and his lips and tongue felt weird by the time he finished. Slytherin's heavy brow was furrowed. "Well," he hissed eventually, stroking at the short black beard on his chin. He looked to be in his fifties or so; painted long before his death, evidently. "*That is quite the tale. I can assure you, this Tom Riddle never found his way into my private office as you have.*"

Harry let out a breath of relief, then a startled laugh.

How arrogant of Riddle, to find this Chamber, and the basilisk, and think he had discovered everything.

"*I, uh, I'm sorry I killed your snake,*" he said sheepishly. Slytherin's lips pursed.

"*A tragic event, but necessary. It is a shame my poor girl ended up so lonely she could not recognise a true heir, but I do not blame you, child.*" Then he smiled, expression warm and entirely unlike anything Harry expected to see from the famed dark wizard.

He remembered what the goblins had told him before his third year, about how Salazar's father was the one who did the terrible magic, but history had confused the two. "*I have so many questions,*" he admitted, running a hand through his hair.

"*I would be happy to answer them for you, lad,*" Slytherin assured. "*But perhaps another time. You have given me a lot to think about.*"

Harry looked at his watch, and winced at the late hour. "*Yes, I should get back to Gryffindor Tower. But I will come back, when I can.*"

Slytherin chuckled. "*To think, my heir, in Gryffindor!*" He shook his head, amused. "*Perhaps you making your home there is the most Slytherin act of all — a cunning man disguises himself in plain sight.*"

That was definitely a compliment, and Harry preened slightly.

"*Speak to the snake on the wall three columns to the left of my office,*" Slytherin advised, "*Behind it is a passage that will take you up towards Gryffindor Tower.*"

"*There are multiple entrances?*" Harry asked, surprised. "*Other than the bathroom?*"

Salazar sneered. “*Of course! Did you truly think I would only have one entrance — and that it would be in a **lavatory**?*” He looked entirely disgusted by the concept. “*I built this chamber as the last defence for the students, should we become over-run with Witchfinders. There are entrances all over the castle, in case of emergency. If you look, you will notice the carvings. As my heir, Hogwarts will guide you.*”

The words echoed in Harry’s head, a million questions sparking. The Chamber had been built for *protection!* Not as a secret lair to plot the death of all muggleborns. No wonder it was so large, if it was designed to house the whole population of Hogwarts through a siege. There had to be dozens of passages to explore!

But it was late, and he had to get back to bed. “*Thank you. I’ll be back soon,*” he promised, offering the painting a short bow on his way out. A quick hiss had the stone wall returning; there was no sign of the office entrance, but for the tiny snake scratched on the surface.

“Holy shit,” Harry muttered, wild-eyed. He had just had a conversation with *Salazar Slytherin*.

His body was tired, but his mind and magic were buzzing. He hadn’t done what he had come down to do, thanks to that unexpected detour. He needed to shed some energy, fast.

Harry looked around the room, at the dirt and detritus filling the expansive space.

He might not be able to do anything about the basilisk corpse, but he *could* practice his cleaning charms.

Twenty minutes and an exhaustive amount of magic later, Harry felt much calmer, and the Chamber was on its way to being habitable. It would take many more visits to get it properly clean, but Harry was pleased with his progress. Now it was time for bed, if he could possibly sleep with all the new information circling his brain.

Heading for the section of wall Slytherin had suggested, Harry hissed to the snake, and the passageway revealed itself.

Like with the main entrance in the bathroom, it sealed itself once Harry was through it. He was left in a pitch black stairwell, and quickly conjured a ball of light to float ahead of him.

There was certainly magic in the passageway, as the number of stairs did not equate to the actual distance between the Chamber and Gryffindor Tower. Sure enough, he emerged from a blank section of wall only a few feet to the left of the Fat Lady’s portrait. When he turned back to study it, safely covered by his invisibility cloak, there was the tiniest little snake scratched into the stone.

Well, then.

That was unexpected.

....

Harry thought about it for a long time, but ultimately he decided not to tell anyone about Slytherin's office. Not even Draco. Not yet, anyway — not until he'd had a bit more time to process things, and to investigate the room's contents. The way Slytherin had talked, it was supposed to be a room only for those of the Slytherin blood and family. He didn't want to risk upsetting the portrait by bringing a stranger to the office.

Besides that, he had bigger things to worry about — the first Defence Club meeting had arrived.

Harry arrived at the Room of Requirement a good twenty minutes early, determined to make sure everything was in place and ready. The doors offering passages to the house common rooms were there, he had plenty of cushions in case people got a little rough with their Disarming charms, and there was enough space for — hopefully — everyone to practice at the same time.

As the clock on the wall ticked closer to seven, the nerves started to rear their head. Harry paced anxiously, wand in hand, wishing he'd asked Neville or someone to come wait with him. Someone to calm him down, assure him he could handle it.

You'll be fine, Potter, his inner voice insisted, sounding remarkably like Draco. Thinking of the blond made Harry think of the last time they'd met up, and as such he had a slightly dazed smile on his face when the door opened and the first group of people arrived.

"Wow," Ginny said in awe, looking around the room. "This is brilliant, Harry!" She was not, as Harry might have expected, with Michael and the usual Ravenclaw entourage. Instead she was with Neville and Luna, who were both equally impressed.

Soon, Harry could hardly keep up with all the people flooding in, arriving in pairs and threes and hopefully having been discreet on their way up. They were all astounded by the room, murmuring about how they'd never seen anything like it in Hogwarts before.

"That door definitely didn't exist when I walked up here the other day," Cho remarked, making Harry grin.

"Sometimes if you ask nicely, Hogwarts provides," he replied in an appropriately mysterious tone.

At last, everyone was safely inside, and Harry shot a small firework from his wand to get their attention. "Right, then. Thanks for coming, everyone. I thought we'd start off with something simple today, just to get to know each other. How do you all feel about Disarming charms?"

There was a brief silence. Then, "What use is a Disarming charm against You-Know-Who?" Of course, Zacharias Smith had some opinions. Harry was going to find whoever invited that prick, and he was going to put itching powder in all of their school robes.

"It saved my life last June," Harry answered without missing a beat.

"It's a *second year* spell." Zacharias still wasn't impressed. Harry smirked, eyes flashing.

“Go on, then.”

The Hufflepuff froze. “What?”

“Disarm me,” Harry challenged. “It’s a second year spell. You’re a fifth year. Should be easy, right?”

Suddenly, Zacharias was not quite so confident. Harry heard the Weasley twins snigger.

“It might be basic, but there’s a reason it’s taught so early. If you can get your opponent’s wand away from them, you’ve ended the fight.” Unless they were capable of wandless magic, but that was fairly uncommon. “Of course, it’s a fairly easy spell to block, too, but it’s worth trying if you can get your opponent off guard.”

Everyone was listening intently, and Harry kept going. “Pair up, take turns disarming each other. If you find the spell itself easy, practice trying to block it, or resist it. It’s all a matter of willpower — someone else wants your wand, you want to keep your wand. You have to make your will stronger than their magic.” There were enough sixth and seventh years in the group that he expected at least some of the group would find this first lesson simple. “In a fight, your opponent isn’t going to wait for you to be ready before they start casting spells. They’re not going to politely take turns. You have to be ready to react to *anything*. It’s not just about knowing lots of spells, or complicated magic. That’s flashy competition stuff. I’m teaching you to survive a life or death, no rules, anything goes fight.”

Had Harry been watching himself, he would’ve realised how much he was channelling Severus Snape — which, considering Snape had been the one to teach him such things, only made sense. He was pacing in front of his gathered students, a serious look on his face. They *needed* to understand that real life was not like school.

“So give it a try, and we’ll see how it goes. Then, if it goes well, maybe I’ll tell you all about the time I disarmed Voldemort,” he added with a wink, sending a ripple of shock through the group.

He didn’t mind talking about bits and pieces of his past, if it helped people understand what was coming for them. What it was like to face the Dark. Besides, many of these people were Cedric’s friends, his classmates — they deserved a better explanation than the bullshit Dumbledore had given them.

He clapped his hands together, and immediately everyone scrambled into action.

.-

Harry was disappointed, but not surprised, to see how many people struggled with a simple Expelliarmus. Despite Zacharias Smith’s derision over the second year spell, it seemed many people had not brushed up on it in quite a while. Even the people who could successfully cast the charm were doing so with exaggerated wand movements or wide open weak spots, giving their opponent plenty of time to figure out what they were doing and respond in turn.

After observing for a few minutes, Harry shot up another firework, grabbing their attention. “Okay, not bad,” he said, rolling up his shirtsleeves. “But certainly room for improvement.” He surveyed the group, wondering who might be best for a little demonstration. “George, can I borrow you for a minute?”

The redhead grinned, happily strolling to face Harry. “I’m going to disarm you, and I want you to try and resist me.”

George nodded, face set determinedly. In an instant, Harry’s wand was raised, a spell was spoken — and George’s wand was flying into his hand. The redhead blinked, shocked. “Blimey, Harry.”

Harry couldn’t stifle his smirk as he handed the boy his wand back. “Did everyone see that?”

“See what? That was bloody quick!” Lee Jordan called out, to several nods of agreement. Harry’s smirk widened.

“Exactly. In here, you’re not trying to show off your perfect wand movements or your excellent pronunciation. Hell, if you can manage it, wordless magic is much better in a fight.” To demonstrate, he disarmed George silently; this time, the redhead just looked amused.

“You all know the proper form, that much is obvious. But you have to *mean* it. Intent goes a long way with magic. The stronger your intent, the less effort you need to put in with the movement and incantation. And the smaller your movement, the more you’ll keep your opponent off guard. They can’t defend against something they don’t see coming. And if a well-placed Expelliarmus is your first spell, it could well be the only one you need.”

He could see in their eyes, the slowly dawning understanding. He grinned. “Keep going. Anyone who finds it easy, do what you can to make it harder. Just watch out for the people around you.” The room might be big enough, but there was still risk of disaster from a wide-flying spell.

The room was soon full of shouted incantations, and Harry walked around the pairs of students, offering advice and corrections. “Try and bring that elbow in a bit tighter,” he said to Ernie, who was giving his wand an extra wide flourish when he cast. A few times, Harry would repeat the spell himself — slower than his instinct, but still quicker than most in the room — to show someone what it looked like.

Slowly, he began to see improvement. People who before had been miscasting entirely or failing to put enough power behind it were now sending their opponent’s wands soaring. People who had cast well enough at the beginning of the lesson were stepping up their game, trying to dodge or defend against it. He saw Angelina with a vicelike grip on her own wand, while Alicia tried her best to magically wrench it from her grasp.

“If you’ve got the hang of it, practice directing their wand back to you,” he called over the din, putting a little Sonorus magic in his throat to make himself heard. “If you can get their wand away from them, great. If you can get it in your own hand, even better.” Sending the wand flying was nice, but came with the risk of them being able to run and grab it, or summon it back. “In a real Death Eater fight, I’d be telling you to get your hands on their wand and snap it.”

That seemed to shock a number of people. “Snap someone else’s wand?” Parvati asked, horrified. Harry nodded.

“Not necessarily every time. But if they’re shooting Unforgivables, you don’t want to risk them getting their wand back and continuing the fight. Wands can be replaced, lives can’t.” His expression was grim, but he saw several hard-eyed nods of understanding at his words. He would bet at least half the people in the room had lost a family member in the first war against Voldemort.

If his training could save even *one* life, Harry would consider himself successful.

—

That evening, still riding high on the exhilaration of a successful first lesson, Harry got comfortable in his bed and called Sirius on the mirror.

“There’s my little freedom fighter,” his godfather greeted, grinning. “How’d it go?”

Harry gushed about the meeting, proudly declaring that by the end of the first session, every single one of them was able to disarm their opponent competently. “If they practice, they’ll all be great,” he enthused. “I’m going to do Shield charms next week, so they can take turns disarming and blocking. Might add in a Stinging hex to mix it up a bit.” He was well aware that most people had signed up to the club to learn spells for their exams, not to fight a war. He wanted to keep a good mix between real-life necessities and curriculum spells.

“Sounds great, pup. And how did they take the rest of it?” Sirius’ brow furrowed in concern, and Harry’s smile faltered.

Telling the huge group of people about the events of the graveyard had been... hard. “I think they believed me.” It was hard to tell, when most of them had just seemed too shocked and horrified to really respond. “I gave them something to think about, at any rate. And I gave them closure for Cedric. I hope.”

“You did the right thing, kiddo,” Sirius assured. Harry leaned back against his headboard, sighing.

“I hope so.” He didn’t want to seem like he was sensationalising Cedric’s death for credibility points. He just wanted people to know the truth. “Anyway, tell me about what you’ve been up to. How are things with the Order?”

Sirius scowled briefly. “Useless as always. Dumbledore’s got everyone taking shifts guarding the Department of Mysteries. And of course, whenever he’s here he takes great care to remind me that the best thing I can do is *stay in the house*.”

“Has he seemed suspicious to you? Of anything?” Harry was still worried about how little attention Dumbledore seemed to be paying to him these days. Was the headmaster truly just focused so much on Voldemort, or was there something bigger at play?

“He’s very interested in how often you write to me,” Sirius remarked. “I told him about Umbridge trying to steal your letters, though, said you’d decided not to risk it anymore. He wasn’t too pleased about that. Think he wants to know how you’re *feeling*.” He rolled his eyes.

“God forbid he just *ask me*,” Harry muttered derisively. Not that he would tell the truth if he did. “Feels like he’s forgotten I exist. It’s actually quite nice.” If the headmaster could keep ignoring Harry, that would be great. That felt like far too much to ask for, though.

Sirius told Harry about the most recent visit from Bill and Charlie, a grin on his face as he recounted their raucous game of exploding snap.

“I’m glad you’ve got more company,” Harry said, smiling. Sirius was a social creature; he needed people around him other than Remus and occasionally Snape. And the two eldest Weasleys were perfect for that. “You said Tonks has been around a fair bit, too?”

“Yeah, she tries to stop by a couple times a week. Asks for all the juicy stories of her mum as a teenager,” Sirius joked. Then, he grew a little more serious. “I think her and Kingsley would be willing to follow you over Dumbledore, y’know. Both of them are getting a bit fed up with Order meetings, and from what Tonks has said to me, Kingsley is still suspect of Dumbledore for not letting the guard interfere in you being locked in your room all summer.”

“You think we can trust them with the truth?” It would be good, having two aurors on his side, but it was a big risk to take.

“Maybe?” Sirius looked thoughtful. “Tonks certainly has the Black family loyalty. And Kingsley is the only one in the bloody Order who seems to accept that we aren’t getting through this war without a fight. Dumbledore’s got the rest thinking we can bring down Voldemort and his Death Eaters with the *power of love* or some shit, as if we’ve just got to *band together* and they’ll lay down their wands and come quietly.”

“That’s because Dumbledore’s hoping I’ll play sacrificial lamb and no one else will have to get hurt,” Harry pointed out, bitterness in his tone. Sirius’ gaze darkened.

“Over my dead body,” he growled. “Even if you do have to be the one to face Voldemort — when you’re ready, when his horcruxes are dealt with — everyone seems to forget that there’s a whole bunch of Death Eaters who will be happy to kill as many people as they can while your duel is going on.”

“We’ll deal with that when we get there,” Harry assured. “Hell, even if it’s only students on that battlefield, they’ll be the best damn battle-ready students this castle has seen.” He would make sure of that.

“Too right they will, with you in charge! That reminds me,” Sirius added, “Moony said he’s got a list of suggestions for you — some of his OWL and NEWT curriculum stuff, adapted a little bit. Y’know, a little less intense than the training you got.” The dog animagus’ lips twitched. “He’s handing it over to Severus, so it should find its way to you soon.”

“Brilliant.” Having Remus’ input on his teaching was invaluable. Sirius was right — the kind of training Harry had gone through in the summers was not exactly appropriate for the average Hogwarts student.

“Happy to help, kiddo.”

In some ways, Harry was glad Umbridge was such an incompetent teacher. He’d never have gained such a perfect way to prepare his peers for what was to come if she’d been decent.

.-.-.

Umbridge was still considering the necessity of the Gryffindor quidditch team by the weekend, so Harry was grounded — though, with the weather the way it was, he couldn’t be too devastated about that.

And he had the perfect idea for a rainy day activity.

Making an excuse to Neville about needing to do some stuff by himself — which still felt novel, being able to tell his best friend he was just ‘doing things’ and not needing to give every little detail — Harry snuck down to Snape’s private quarters, wearing some of Dudley’s better fitting cast-offs beneath his invisibility cloak.

“Hi. Are you busy today?” he chirped, once he was safely warded inside the living room. Snape eyed him warily.

“That very much depends,” was the drawled response.

“Well, I was just wondering. Basilisk parts are quite useful in potions, aren’t they? And quite rare?”

The sudden interest lighting Snape’s gaze almost made Harry laugh. “Explain.”

Harry told the Slytherin about his little late-night jaunt down to the chamber; leaving out the whole part about Salazar’s secret office.

“I wanted somewhere to work on magic without the school wards catching it. But the massive dead snake is a bit... off-putting. So, if you’re free, I thought you might like to come help me figure out what to do with it. Since Remus keeps telling me I need adult supervision for dangerous things.”

Dark eyes narrowed. “If you cared about adult supervision, you would have fetched me before you went down there alone,” Snape pointed out, sighing at Harry’s unrepentant grin. “Give me ten minutes.”

Harry sat on the sofa, waiting for Snape to change and gather the equipment for harvesting the remains. Ten minutes later, the tall man was ready to go, a bulging satchel slung over his shoulder.

Having already done some exploring, Harry led the professor to a small snake carving on the wall not too far from his quarters. With a hiss, they were safely ensconced in the passageway.

This one, too, was full of animal skeletons and moss, so Harry happily blasted it with cleaning charms as he walked.

“Everything is disgusting,” he warned, but Snape just hummed.

When they made it to the main Chamber, even the reserved Slytherin couldn’t hide his gasp. Harry stepped aside, letting Snape get the full view of the Chamber proper — and the huge dead snake within.

Snape slowly approached the basilisk, his wide eyes trailing over its immense size. “Jesus fucking Christ, Potter,” he breathed, and Harry almost tripped over his own feet; he had never heard Snape use such muggle swears in his life. “This thing was living under the castle the whole time?”

“I did tell you it was big,” Harry said, only for the man to round on him.

“Big? Big! This has to be at least sixty foot of deadly serpent!” Snape turned back to the basilisk, running a gentle hand over the scales. “In remarkably good condition, too, having been dead for several years.” He walked further up beside the body, finally coming to the mangled head.

“Fawkes clawed out its eyes,” Harry said with an unnecessary gesture to the bloody holes gauged in its face. “And if the brain is useful for anything, I don’t know what shape this one is in, because I sort-of stabbed it with a sword.” Here he pointed out the hole in the roof of the snake’s mouth. “Also there might still be venom in one of the fangs but the other one broke off in my arm.” It was still there, actually, lying on the stone floor next to the congealed black ink-spill from Riddle’s diary. “But whatever you can get from it that’s useful, you’re welcome to keep. I just want it out of here.”

Snape looked like he was about to faint. Whether that was at the idea of Harry facing the snake at twelve, or the concept of being allowed to harvest and keep the entire thing, he wasn’t sure.

“This snake; the Chamber?” Snape rounded on Harry, “*these* are the things you need adult supervision for.”

“In my defence, we did bring Lockhart. An attempt at supervision was made.”

From the look on Snape’s face, Lockhart absolutely did not count.

“This is millions of galleons just of scale alone!” Snape actually looked conflicted. “I can’t keep this, Potter. By all rights, this whole thing belongs to you. You could sell it for half the gold in Gringotts.”

“I don’t *want* half the gold in Gringotts,” Harry pointed out dryly. “I don’t want any of it. Except maybe enough scales for some battle armour, I *do* want that.” Over the summer, Tonks had shown him her dragon-hide battle armour, and Harry was incredibly jealous.

"You're just handing me a fortune in rare creature parts?" The Slytherin looked skeptical, and a little nauseous. "What do you want in return for such a gift."

"Buy Remus a decent pair of robes," came Harry's immediate response, a smile crossing his lips. "Seriously, Snape; take whatever you want. If it really makes you uncomfortable, just take the useful potions' ingredients and we can put the money from the scales in a vault for the school, or something." Once Dumbledore was long gone and unable to get his greedy hands on it, of course. "You're risking your neck *and* your job trying to keep me alive long enough to take down Voldemort. The least I can do is make sure you have plenty of money to live on if it all goes tits up."

The Potions Master shook his head, incredulous. "I could live a dozen lifetimes on the money from the fangs *alone*."

"Brilliant. Remus won't have to worry about keeping a job."

Harry was still grinning, even when Snape narrowed his gaze at him. "I know what you're doing, Potter," he declared. "Trying to sway me into accepting by using Remus. As if he would be any more likely to accept such a fortune from you."

"Then it's a good thing I'm giving it to you instead." Harry didn't back down. "We can argue all day if you want, but I've made my mind up. Whatever you can harvest, you can keep. I'll be over there practicing the Evaporation charm." He jerked a thumb at the pool of water, already on his way over. For a moment, he thought Snape might continue arguing — then there was a quiet sigh, and a call for Ceri.

The little elf appeared, and squeaked in fright at the sight of the snake. "Don't worry, it's dead," Snape assured her. "I'm going to skin it. I need you to bring me a large chest, something I can add an Expansion charm to."

Ceri nodded and vanished. From the other side of the chamber, Harry watched as Snape set down his satchel and began to remove various tools and jars from within. Then, to his surprise, the man shed his robe, revealing worn jeans and a threadbare black long-sleeve t-shirt. That was only for a moment, however — out of his satchel, he pulled a protective over-robe, shrugging it on.

Harry thought about offering to help. But, watching the way Snape began to cut into the snake's gums, carefully avoiding the sharp points of the fangs, he figured it was probably best left to the experts.

Knowing Harry's luck, he'd stab himself on another fang entirely by accident, and then where would they be?

.-. .

At last, with a bit of assistance from McGonagall, the Gryffindor quidditch team was given the High Inquisitor's permission to reform. Angelina was so delighted, she scheduled a practice for that evening, determined to make up for lost time.

Naturally, that day also heralded one of the worst storms they'd seen all term.

"Oh, Harry!" George called across the Gryffindor common room, he and Fred grabbing Harry by the shoulders. He had just come back from dinner, planning on taking a little time to work on his animagus form before practice.

"Darling, favouritest little brother of ours," Fred continued sweetly. Harry tugged free of their grasp, eyeing them suspiciously.

"What do you want?"

The pair grinned innocently. "Well, my brother and I are in a bit of a predicament," Fred drawled.

"A predicament that is going to make tonight's quidditch practice exceedingly uncomfortable."

Harry looked out the window, where the sky was practically black with clouds, rain pouring down in sheets. "More uncomfortable than it's already going to be?" he asked doubtfully. Both redehads nodded.

"We've been working on a new Snackbox, see," Fred started.

"Fever Fudge," George said. "It's working great, gets your temperature right up and everything, except..."

"Except it keeps giving us these huge, pus-filled boils, and we can't figure out how to, ah, fix that." Fred shifted uncomfortably. Harry frowned — he didn't see any boils.

"Boils that will make it quite difficult to sit on our brooms for two hours."

It took a moment for Harry to figure it out, but when it clicked he grimaced in horror. "Oh, fuck."

"Quite," Fred agreed. "Angelina is already quite *unimpressed* with that situation, I don't think she'll be any more forgiving if we bail on our first practice in ages because of it."

"We've tried every counter-spell and healing charm we can think of," George huffed. "Ointments, potions, the lot. If we can't get them to go down, we'll have to go to Pomfrey." Both redheads looked horrified at the idea of taking that particular predicament to the school mediwitch. Harry didn't blame them.

"Seeing as you're fast becoming the new brain-box of Gryffindor," Fred complimented, "and we know how much Moony worries about your continued health and safety—"

"We were hoping you might have some ideas?" George's brown eyes were hopeful. Harry stared at them.

"You want me to look at your arses?"

“Only if your boyfriend won’t get jealous,” George teased, wiggling his eyebrows.

“If they’re in as bad a shape as you say they are, I can’t see it being a problem,” Harry replied, deadpan. He frowned in thought; he did know quite a bit of healing magic now, after the three adults at Seren Du decided to cover all bases necessary for the occupational hazard of being Harry Potter.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Harry agreed, and was immediately tackled in a tight twin hug.

“Fantastic!” George slung an arm over his shoulders. “We thought we’d head down to the changing rooms early, if you’re willing? Probably the best place to, ah, get a good look in private.”

Harry sighed. “I’ll go get my stuff.”

The twins beamed at him, each kissing one of his cheeks. “Definitely our favourite little brother,” Fred declared firmly.

Across the common room, Ron scowled.

.-.-.-

Severus didn’t get the chance to see Remus until the weekend, when the werewolf flooed into his private quarters, immediately leaning in for a kiss. Severus relaxed into the embrace, a flicker of amusement within him as the greying man let his nose slide down Severus’ neck, scenting him quite blatantly. “Feeling possessive, are we?” he drawled. When Remus straightened up, his cheeks were flushed.

“It’s been two weeks,” he defended feebly.

The pair made themselves comfortable on the sofa, and Severus braced himself for what he was about to share with his partner. He could still hardly believe it himself.

“I promised you an explanation for why I did not visit last weekend,” he began, trepidation gathering. Remus frowned.

“You said something important came up.”

“I did,” Severus assented. “I… perhaps it would be best if I just show you.” He couldn’t quite find the words.

Remus’ frown grew puzzled, but he met Severus’ gaze without hesitation, his eyes warm and trusting. So trusting, Severus’ heart clenched. Would he ever get used to such a sight?

Pushing past his foolish flutter of emotion, he prodded out with his Legilimency, careful at first. As expected, the wolf reared to the forefront of Remus’ mind, growling protectively. Severus pressed no further, waiting for the mind to recognise his own.

Mate, came a quiet, satisfied rumble, and the wolf began to retreat. Not far, but far enough for Severus to offer up his own memory in Remus’ mind.

He started out at the beginning; Harry appearing at his quarters, dressed like a street urchin and looking entirely too pleased with himself. He let the memory play out, feeling Remus' sense of realisation dawn.

The memory continued; Severus preparing for Merlin only knew what — with a predictable surge of arousal in Remus' mind when the memory showed Severus changing into more appropriate clothes, something that left Severus equal parts amused and flattered — but as memory-Severus and memory-Harry stepped into the hidden passage down to the Chamber of Secrets, Remus' mind went quiet and still.

When they reached the basilisk, all Severus could feel was horror — his own, and his partner's.

He kept the memory going, long enough for Remus to see his cub's entirely too blasé attitude about facing the huge, deadly predator, only ending it when memory-Severus began the harvest. He pulled carefully out of Remus' mind, meeting glowing amber eyes.

"No wonder he hardly even blinked at fighting that dragon in the first task," was Remus' immediate response. He gripped Severus' hands tight. "It was so *big*, Severus. Those fangs..."

Severus made a noise of agreement. The bigger fangs had been the length of Severus' entire forearm.

To think, that idiot little Gryffindor, spelled to the gills with recklessness-inducing magic, had gone to face such a thing with only his useless sidekick and *Gilderoy Bloody Lockhart* for assistance.

Worse; from what Harry had told him, neither of the two even made it that far.

"There's a pensieve in the Potter family vaults," Remus said, apropos of nothing. "I know there is, because it used to belong to Monty. Next time Harry's at Gringotts, we are making him retrieve that pensieve, and we are sitting down and he is going to put in every memory of every ridiculous, *foolhardy, terrifying thing* that he has ever done. I can't take any more bloody surprises like that, Severus, I swear."

"You and me both," Severus agreed. He *still* didn't know the full details of what happened with Quirrell and the stone. Potter was remarkably evasive; like he knew none of them would approve of the situation.

"Thank Merlin the goblins broke the spells on him," Remus murmured, running a hand through his hair. "Can you imagine what he'd be like now if he was still under Dumbledore's influence?"

The thought made Severus scowl; Potter would very likely be the arrogant, idiotic little brat Severus had anticipated the day he'd started Hogwarts. The brat Dumbledore wanted Severus to see him as.

"I can't believe he just *gave* me the harvesting rights to that monstrosity," he muttered, incredulous. At that, Remus' smile softened.

"Generous to a fault, our cub," he mused fondly. His honey eyes grew teasing. "Once you're rich from it, you can take me out for a proper night on the town," he drawled lightly. "Muggle, of course." They couldn't risk being seen together anywhere magical, and they both knew it.

Severus smirked, bombarded with achingly fond memories of a time long-past. "Fish and chips on Brighton pier, two litre bottle of Strongbow, and that awful underground poetry bar?"

Remus laughed, the sound still fully capable of stopping Severus' heart. "Oh, you do know how to spoil a man," he declared, leaning in for a kiss. "It's not a poetry bar anymore, though. It's a drag club, I think. Or maybe a leather bar. Something queer and seedy."

Severus frowned. He supposed it was too much to ask for things to stay entirely the same, after sixteen years. "Hmm." He let one long arm curl around Remus' shoulders, pulling him close. "Could still be entertaining. Queer and seedy used to be right up your alley."

Remus snickered. "You never complained too much about any of those places," he reminded. His head came to rest on Severus' shoulder, and so Severus felt it when the man's whole body tensed. "Whatever it is, it'll have to wait a bit. Albus is sending me back to the werewolf packs."

Severus' hand curled tighter around the Gryffindor's bicep. "When?"

"I leave on Monday. Enough time to get settled before the next full. Should be back by Christmas at the latest."

The Slytherin sighed, letting his chin tilt down until his nose was buried in Remus' hair. Selfishly, he wanted to tell the werewolf not to go, that it wasn't worth it. But he couldn't bring Dumbledore's suspicion onto him like that. Besides, Severus was stuck at the school, under even tighter watch than usual with Umbridge sticking her nose in all over the place. He hardly saw Remus as it was.

One day, he promised himself, neither of them would be beholden to anyone but each other.

"I'm going to talk to the pack elders about Harry's offer," Remus piped up, one hand playing absently with a loose thread on the hem of Severus' shirt.

"So soon?"

"Better than letting them get swayed by Albus' pretty words," Remus pointed out. "Harry and his friends actually have a plan to back up their offer, rather than just a vague promise."

Severus knew that was the problem for the allied werewolf packs; it was all well and good Albus Dumbledore promising them equal rights, but when the man hadn't actually *done*

anything to achieve that in decades — other than employ one singular werewolf, and allow him to be harassed from his post when the truth came out — his promises fell flat.

“Good luck, then, I suppose. Stay safe.” *Come back to me.*

Every time Remus went to the werewolves, Severus didn’t know which fear grew stronger — the fear of him getting into a dominance match he couldn’t win, or the fear of him deciding he belonged there after all.

Remus leaned up, kissing his cheek, gaze as knowing as ever. Severus never could hide from him for long. “I’ll be back in time for Christmas,” he vowed. “Harry can actually come home for this one. Well, Grimmauld.” Against Severus’ cheek, the werewolf’s nose wrinkled. “But close enough. I wouldn’t miss it.”

Severus hoped that would be the case.

Chapter 56

Now that the enormous basilisk corpse had been reduced to an expanded chest full of potion ingredients, a huge pile of snakeskin, and a mound of ash, Harry was keen to get down to Salazar Slytherin's office once more. He made his escape from the common room and hurried down the secret staircase, hissing at the office's snake guardian.

"*Oh, good, you're back,*" Salazar hissed in greeting. Harry waved.

"*I've been quite busy, sorry. School is hectic.*"

The painted founder chuckled. "*That's what all students say. Come, sit; we have much to discuss, I think.*"

Harry did as asked, making himself comfortable on the sofa opposite the portrait. "*Where do I even start?*" He ran a hand through his already messy hair. He'd tried to think, over the last couple of weeks, what he might ask Slytherin now he had the chance. But there were so many questions, he couldn't prioritise any of them.

"*Tell me about this Riddle fellow,*" Salazar requested, face hinting at a scowl. "*It seems he has done quite a bit to mar the reputation of my line.*"

Harry wasn't sure Voldemort was the one entirely behind that, and he said as much, explaining what the current common view of Slytherin house was. That made Salazar's eyes darken, his hands clenched around the arms of the chair he was painted in.

"*It seems you will have much work ahead of you, young heir — once you have destroyed this Dark Lord of yours, it is your family duty to bring the truth of the Slytherin name to light. I will tell you everything, in time, and together we shall repair my house's reputation.*"

That was a deal Harry was perfectly willing to make. Slytherin house deserved better. "*Do the other founders have portraits hidden somewhere?*" he hissed. "*Or their own secret chambers?*"

Salazar shook his head. "*I was the paranoid one; I was put in charge of the subtle defences. The other three focused on their wards and traps. As for portraits... I was always telling them to sit for a painting. Godric kept insisting they would all have time later in life, and the girls didn't care enough to argue. They all died before they could be painted.*" He gave a sad, rueful smile. "*I am the only one left.*"

His tone made Harry's heart clench. "*I'm sorry.*" To be stuck in portrait form, entirely alone in a locked, hidden office... that was no way to exist.

"*It is no matter,*" Salazar waved him off. "*You have questions, lad. Ask away.*"

A million and one things jostled for space in Harry's mind, but there was one that rose to the forefront, far more important than any of the rest.

“Do you know anything about horcruxes?”

Immediately, Salazar’s expression grew thunderous. *“The Slytherin family magics will not allow you to pervert yourself in such a way,”* he said, a hissing snarl. Harry went wide-eyed.

“No, no, not for me! Voldemort — Tom Riddle — he has horcruxes. I need to know how to find and destroy them.” Salazar relaxed a little, though his upper lip was still curled.

“There’s... there’s a horcrux of his, inside me. I was hoping you might know how to get it out.”

Harry explained, raising his fringe to show his scar, telling Salazar of the goblins’ scans and their current search for a solution. *“If I need to die to be rid of him, I’ll do it,”* he said bluntly. *“Obviously, I’d quite like a different option.”*

“Indeed,” Salazar agreed, brow furrowed in thought. *“It was not common, for horcruxes to be housed in a living vessel. Then again, it was not common for horcruxes to exist at all. But I encountered them a few times, in my travels.”* He raised a hand, gesturing to the bookshelf on the opposite wall. *“I believe there are a few books on the subject in my collection. Memory escapes me on the specifics, but you’re welcome to take a look.”*

Harry looked at the expansive number of books that made up Salazar Slytherin’s private library.

It was going to be a long night.

. . .

He retreated from the Chamber a little after midnight, his eyes crossing behind his glasses from the strain of reading the ancient books. They were in surprisingly decent shape, but half of them weren’t even in English — at least, not any form of English Harry recognised. Even with Translation charms, it was slow work looking for any mention of horcruxes and soul magic.

Especially because he kept getting distracted reading about magic and theories that had fallen out of use in the last thousand years. It was *fascinating*.

One day, he promised, he would take Remus in there. Or at the very least, copy the books for him to read himself. Draco and Snape, too; all three of them were absolute nerds, and would probably commit murder for the chance to read such rare texts.

Harry snuck back into Gryffindor Tower, and was surprised to see Neville sat in the common room by the dying fire, hunched over the table with a couple of textbooks open, quill scribbling furiously. He looked up, wheat-blond hair falling into his eyes. “There you are!” he greeted quietly.

“Were you waiting up for me?” Harry asked guiltily. Neville shook his head.

“Nah, just forgot about Binns’ essay til about an hour ago,” he confessed sheepishly. “Where have you been?”

Harry sank down into the armchair, shaking his head. “Mate, you wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

Some secrets were best kept to himself, for now.

.-.-.-.

The defence club — which, to avoid using the term ‘club’ around Umbridge’s keen ears, had begun to be referred to as ‘the Hogwarts Alliance’, HA for short, ‘Harry’s Army’ if people were feeling particularly cheeky — was rapidly becoming Harry’s favourite part of the week, just below spending time with Draco. His students were coming on in leaps and bounds, once they started to get their confidence in spellcasting. Harry had them working on Stunning charms now; a standard part of the OWL curriculum, but also a very handy spell to have in a fight.

He wasn’t training them to become killers. Not like Snape was training him. He just wanted them to be able to incapacitate their opponent, and escape the fight safely. Once they had those skills, he’d look at teaching them some more combative spells.

Everyone was taking it in turns to stun each other, cushions piled up on the floor to stop any major injuries. Some of them seemed to be enjoying the opportunity to hex each other far too much — especially Justin Finch-Fletchley, who was paired with Zacharias Smith.

“You’re all doing brilliantly,” Harry enthused, walking between the pairs with a spring in his step.

“Thanks, Professor Potter,” the twins chirped, winking. Harry’s cheeks reddened — they had started calling him that as a joke in the last meeting, but it was starting to catch on amongst the rest of them. Harry couldn’t deny the little spark of pleasure in his chest that burst each time someone said it.

Maybe he’d go into teaching, once he was done with his professional quidditch career. It was oddly satisfying, seeing people improve from lesson to lesson, watching their delight as they started to master spells they’d previously struggled with.

Neville was possibly Harry’s most improved student. The blond Gryffindor had started out incredibly nervous, stuttering his incantations and giving up before he’d even properly tried. With some coaching from Harry, he was really starting to find his stride. Privately, Harry wondered if the boy’s wand — his father’s wand — was the problem; Neville had magic, that much was clear, but the conduit was distorting things along the way. Neville wouldn’t hear a word about the possibility of replacing it, though. “Gran would kill me,” he kept insisting, so Harry let it be. For now, at least.

As Harry observed his classmates, he noticed that more than a few of them had reddened skin on the backs of their hands. He scowled to himself — how many detentions was Umbridge giving these days? Surely someone on staff had noticed? Other than Snape, of course, who couldn’t risk his reputation to say anything. Was everyone else hiding it, just like Harry had?

He looked around the room, a faint frown coming to his lips. The pairings were much the same as they always had been; the same people tended to drift together, much like they would in class.

A firework burst from his wand, and immediately the room fell silent. “This is going great,” Harry began, “but there’s something I’ve noticed. Look around a minute. What do you see?”

Everyone peered around the room, confused.

“We’re all fighting our friends,” Susan said eventually, eyes going wide. Harry nodded.

“I don’t blame you. It’s natural to want to practice these spells with someone who feels safe to you. But always working with the same people can make you too comfortable — you start to learn their tells, and their weaknesses, and you target them. Then, if you fight someone new, it’s harder to get a grip on *their* weaknesses. It’s not as big a deal now, since we aren’t really fighting each other,” he added, before anyone could protest, “but as things go on, it’ll become more obvious. Especially when we start working on fighting in groups. You get too used to the same person protecting you, you start to leave openings with the assumption they’ll cover it.”

He’d listened to a dozen lectures on the matter from Sirius, who apparently had taken personal offence to the Auror department always pairing the same people together for training, back when he’d been one of them.

“Everyone in here is on the same side,” Harry declared firmly. “You could end up fighting alongside any one of them. If you know their strengths, their fighting style — that’s a huge advantage. I want us to start changing up our pairings. Find someone you’ve never spoken to before; someone from a different year, a different house. Someone you don’t really know anything about. If we keep switching it up, it’ll keep things interesting.”

“You just want us all to be *friends*, Potter,” Daphne called, stood beside Blaise and the rest of the Slytherins in the room. Harry winked at her.

“I will neither confirm nor deny that,” he joked. “Seriously, guys. We’ve all been going to school together for years now, and yet I’m learning new things about all of you just from watching you work. And Daphne isn’t wrong — you might find your new best friend in this room, you just overlooked them because they wear a different coloured tie.”

He watched them, expectantly. At first, nobody moved. Then, slowly, the divides were crossed. Harry felt a swell of fondness in his chest as George Weasley strode across the room, offering his hand to Blaise Zabini. Susan walked up to Luna with a tentative smile; Cho bravely approached Angelina Johnson. One by one, people extended the hand of friendship to each other, and the room filled with noise once more as they resumed their spell practice. The atmosphere was different, this time; Harry could feel it. Everyone was a little more on their toes, keen-eyed — they were learning to spot the differences in each other’s movements, to look for their advantages. There was regular conversation, too; Patrick kept up a lively chat with Lavender Brown as the pair exchanged Stunning and Shield charms, trying to catch one another off guard. Harry smirked, seeing the way Lavender’s eyes trailed over the handsome

older Hufflepuff, the way Patrick started to flourish his wand a little more, showing off for the pretty girl.

All kinds of bonds would be made, in this room, he could feel it.

His chest was bursting with pride as he continued the lesson, observing all the progress being made. Not for the first time, he wished the rest of the Slytherins could be there to share in it all, but it wasn't time for that yet. He had to make do with training Draco privately, and letting Blaise and Daphne pass the lessons on to their secret little group of Slytherins rebelling against the Dark and their parents.

It had taken a tricky little addendum to the contract, to allow the pair to talk about what they learned from Harry enough to be able to pass the knowledge on to others, but it was worth it.

Curfew approached, so Harry wound down the session, ready to carefully send people on their way. They left in small groups; some from the main door, others through the doors closer to the common rooms, trying to leave in intervals enough to not look suspicious. They had been lucky, so far; Umbridge seemed satisfied that her Educational Decree had stamped out any rebellion, and was focused more on inspecting the teachers again.

"Hey, Susan," Harry called, gesturing for the girl to stay back. She bid Hannah and Ernie goodbye, wandering over to Harry's side.

"What's up?"

Harry shook his head, waiting until the pair of them and Neville were the only ones left in the room. "I've been thinking," he finally said. "I think it's time I start properly gathering my case against Dumbledore."

Susan's eyes widened. "Why now?"

"He's ignoring me," Harry said. "I don't know why. Maybe with Umbridge about he's worried he'll be seen playing favourites. But he's leaving me alone, which means it's the perfect time for me to start the proceedings. I'm going to write to the goblins over Christmas, once I'm out of the castle." They still had the sample of magic from Harry's blocks and compulsions, not to mention the records of Dumbledore's unlawful access of Harry's vault.

"Okay. What do you need from me?" Harry could have kissed Susan for not asking any more questions.

"Nothing much, yet. Just thought I'd give you the heads up. Even if I have a case, I still can't do anything while Voldemort's at large." He wasn't stupid enough to rock the wizarding world by denouncing the leader of the light while the dark faction could stand to benefit from it. "I know your aunt has been gathering her own evidence, for things he's done at the Ministry — if you're going home for Yule, maybe you can let her know, so when I've got everything I can find I can coordinate with her on the rest."

A vindictive smile formed on Susan's face. "Sounds perfect. I'll pass a message along when I can. Y'know, add it to the list," she joked, winking.

“Brilliant.”

When she disappeared through the door to the Hufflepuff corridor, Neville turned to Harry.
“Are you sure about that? If he catches on before you’re ready...”

“I don’t know when I’ll be ready,” Harry admitted, “but knowing the way my life goes, it’ll be sooner than any of us anticipate. I want to make sure I don’t leave *any* chance for that meddling bastard to worm his way out of the consequences.”

If he didn’t have the measures in place to slap Dumbledore with an arrest and a trial that would absolutely destroy his reputation, ready to go as soon as Voldemort was defeated, Harry knew the old man would be right there to turn the crowd in his own favour — and paint Harry as the next Dark Lord, if necessary.

He was playing chess with the chessmaster himself, and he had to be several moves ahead.

.-.-.-.

Sirius shuffled down the corridor of Grimmauld Place, hands in the pockets of his cardigan. He was feeling cold, today — really, had been a little cold ever since Moony left for the werewolf packs. Merlin, he missed being able to feel sun on his face whenever he wanted.

He turned a corner, then paused. Tonks was stood at the top of the stairs, looking... quite different. Square shoulders, with an entirely flat chest and more masculine waistline. A more masculine jaw, too — similar to Sirius’ own, just without the stubble. And cobalt blue hair, shaved close at the sides and longer on top.

A suspicion began to appear in Sirius’ gut. He cleared his throat. “Is that my t-shirt?”

Tonks whipped around, looking down at the Guns N Roses insignia, offering up a guilty smile. “It was. But then I nicked it.” Voice a touch deeper. Nervous, too.

“I’ve been looking for that,” Sirius mock-grumbled. He raised an eyebrow at his younger cousin. “You feeling alright?”

Tonks’ cheeks went pink. “Yeah. Just. Y’know.” An awkward glance to the side. “Feeling a bit more masculine today.” This was followed by a strained laugh.

Sirius’ suspicion grew. “Fair enough. Changing pronouns?”

Tonks froze. Electric blue eyes widened. “You— Um. He is good. When I’m like this. Which isn’t often, but— sometimes.”

Sirius nodded, his suspicion confirmed. “Will do. Now, are you *actually* feeling alright? That was a nasty curse you caught last night.”

The whole reason Tonks was even at Grimmauld was because of a concussion sustained in a raid the night before. Kingsley had been worried enough to insist upon keeping his partner somewhere that was easy to supervise. Since Sirius — supposedly — never left Grimmauld, it had been the logical place.

Tonks grinned, the anxious tension flooding from his shoulders. “Oh, that, yeah. Doing just fine, promise. No more double vision or anything.”

Sirius eyed him over, looking for any trace of a lie. “Okay. I’d still prefer someone check you over, though.” Tonks couldn’t go to the Ministry medics; the raid had been Order business, not Auror.

“Charlie will be here in a little bit,” Tonks assured. Sirius ignored the tiny flop his belly gave at the news. Suddenly, Tonks frowned. “Are you sure you’re alright with — y’know. This.” He gestured to his very male body. Sirius rolled his eyes, slinging an arm around Tonks’ shoulders.

“Look, little cuz; I used to hang out with all sorts of people, back in the day. Gender fluidity is not a stranger to me.” Some of the social circles he’d run in between Hogwarts and Azkaban, the clubs he used to go to — Tonks would’ve fit right in. “Of course, you get to *cheat* and use your metamorph abilities when all my old mates had to settle for glamour and padding,” he teased, ruffling Tonks’ hair. He patted his cousin’s cheek playfully. “Still keeping the Black cheekbones, I see. Good choice.”

Tonks grinned back, and the next thing Sirius knew he was being bundled in a tight hug. Tonks was still shorter than him, his head tucked just under Sirius’ chin. “You’re the best,” he murmured vehemently. Worry grew in Sirius’ chest.

“Is your mum not alright with it?” He hadn’t thought Andi was the type to judge.

Tonks pulled back, shrugging. “She doesn’t mind, but she doesn’t really understand it. She just lets me do whatever.” He shoved his hands in his pockets. “I don’t tend to let myself have masculine days unless I know I’m in safe company. I sort of forgot you lived here, today; I woke up with my brain all scrambled and I needed to be a boy and that’s as far as I got.”

“Scrambled, huh?” Sirius narrowed his gaze. “Thought you said it was fine?”

“It is now,” Tonks hurried to assure. “Just wasn’t when I got up. But y’know; took a piss, splashed some water on my face, I’m all set.”

Yes, Sirius was *definitely* getting Charlie to check him out later. He’d recruit Kingsley, if he had to.

“Right. Well, consider this a safe place for any sort of gender expression, at least when I’m around. Moony, too.” He grimaced briefly. “Maybe not when Molly’s here.”

Tonks made a face. “Yeah, I learned that one years ago. Far too many invasive questions from her.” He shrugged, brightening up. “Charlie’s good, though, and Bill. They’ve known since we were kids.”

“Knew those two were solid blokes.” The two eldest Weasleys were quickly becoming great friends to Sirius, and he was glad to hear they had the right attitude about things. He shot Tonks a playful look. “And Kingsley?”

The metamorphmagus blushed brightly, but the grin that stole across his face spoke volumes. “He’s great,” he admitted. “Hardly even blinked, the first time. And— well,” he cut himself off abruptly, hair turning red with the force of his blush. “Never mind. But you don’t need to get all protective big cousin, not on that front.”

“Good.” Sirius liked Kingsley, he truly did, but he would absolutely hex the man into a puddle of goo if he messed around Sirius’ little cousin.

Which, admittedly, might be the reason Tonks hadn’t said anything about the relationship until Sirius had caught them kissing in the library a week ago.

He felt the wards twitch, and heard the sound of the front door open. “That’ll be the Weasley boys,” he said unnecessarily. He shot his cousin a sideways glance. “If you get paint on that t-shirt, I’ll never let you borrow any of my clothes ever again.”

The relieved smile on Tonks’ face made Sirius’ heart ache. “I’ll try my best. I do have my own boy clothes. Just not with me. And I was never any good at transfiguring clothing.”

“Ah, my dear cousin, that is my specialty,” Sirius boasted, winking. “Old Minnie will tell you herself. Once, I transfigured her an absolutely *stunning* dress, really brought out the murder in her eyes.”

Tonks burst out laughing, following Sirius down the stairs. He wondered how long his little cousin had kept his feelings bottled up — how much longer he would’ve continued to hide the truth if he hadn’t been addled by the concussion.

Sirius looked down at the drab robe he wore, his wardrobe limited by the things he had at Grimmauld to make it seem like he’d been on the run before moving in there. No wonder Tonks had not recognised him for the beacon of queer solidarity that he was! His eighteen year-old self would be *appalled* at his sartorial choices.

Making a mental note to do some owl-order shopping, Sirius looked down with a grin at the pair of redheads in the main hall. They smiled back, then their eyes slid past him, and two sets of eyebrows went up.

“Now *there’s* a face we haven’t seen in a while,” Charlie greeted, cheeks dimpling with the force of his smile. “I was getting worried about you, y’know.”

His blue eyes moved to Sirius, question clear, and Sirius put his hands on his hips. “You thought I would have a problem with it? Me?” he said, offended. “Clearly I’m losing my touch.” He shook his head, turning back to Tonks. “You and Kingsley were the ones who raided my old flat when I broke out of Azkaban; did you not find my skirts?” They had been in the wardrobe with the rest of his clothes, a good third of which had come from the ‘women’s’ section of the shops.

“Skirts?” The strangled yelp came from Charlie, and Sirius looked back just in time to see the dragon tamer’s eyes lift up from where they had very clearly been checking out Sirius’ legs. The animagus ignored the thrill down his spine, merely grinning.

“Gendered clothing is bullshit and I look *fantastic* in a mini-skirt,” Sirius informed the trio. “So no, I don’t give a fuck about Tonks’ gender identity, except to make sure he’s happy and feels welcome to present however the hell he wants in this house.” He shook his head, bewildered. “Merlin, how old and stuffy do you two think I am?” He knew Azkaban had aged him prematurely, but *really*?

“Our apologies,” Bill replied. He was smirking pointedly at his brother. “We won’t doubt you again. Now, I’ve got some good news for you. I’m pretty sure I’ve figured out how to get your charming mother off the wall for good.”

Sirius lit up excitedly. “Really?” Ever since the kids had left for school, he’d been slowly gutting and re-decorating the whole house — with Molly no longer trying to steamroll his every opinion, it was going much easier. He’d mainly stuck to the upstairs rooms so the rest of the Order wouldn’t notice, but now he was working on the more widely used parts of the house, and his mother’s portrait had been proving a very difficult sticking point.

“My supervisor promised me that if this spell doesn’t work, nothing will,” Bill assured. “So I brought a sledgehammer too, just in case. But first, neither of us have eaten lunch yet.”

“Oh, I see how it is,” Sirius drawled, keeping his voice low as they passed the portrait and headed to the kitchen. “Using me for my free food.”

“Absolutely,” Charlie confirmed, with a wink that sent Sirius’ nerves aflutter. Merlin, he was off his game, after twelve years in Azkaban. One handsome young redhead smiling at him and he was turning into a fifth-year Hufflepuff!

Bill made himself perfectly at home in the kitchen, pulling out salad and cold cuts for sandwiches. “Tonks, Sirius, you eating?”

“Please,” Tonks requested, sprawling gracelessly into a chair.

“Go on, then. Charlie, would you check his concussion, please?” Sirius requested, resolutely trying not to blush as he looked at the redhead. “He says he’s fine, but he also said he was too scrambled to pretend to be female this morning, so I don’t trust him.”

Charlie was immediately turning concerned eyes on his friend, who glared accusingly at Sirius. “Don’t give me that look; you promised you’d let Charlie look you over,” Sirius reminded.

With a sigh, Tonks relented, and Charlie soon had his wand out. From his work as a dragon tamer, he’d learned to deal with all sorts of medical maladies — you couldn’t always access a healer, if there was an angry dragon blocking your way.

“How long can the three of you stay?” Sirius asked, perching on the kitchen table with his feet on one of the chairs. “Getting the portrait down would be great, but I wanted to strip the wallpaper in all the hallways today, and a couple extra hands would be fab.” It looked much better now he’d taken down all the house elf heads, but there was definite room for improvement.

“Depends,” Charlie drawled. “What’s in it for us?”

Sirius hated the way that voice sent prickles of electricity across his skin. “You mean other than a free meal and the pleasure of my company?” he returned, trying to gather his best flirtatious voice, rusty as he was.

He had no idea *why* Charlie Weasley seemed so keen to flirt with him, but he was happy to rise to the challenge.

“I’ll let you join me in the delight of setting fire to Mum’s portrait, once it’s off the wall.”

“I’m in,” Tonks said immediately, beaming.

“Sounds fun,” Bill agreed, levitating a plate of sandwiches over. Charlie, evidently happy with Tonks’ health, leaned back in his chair, sparkling blue eyes meeting Sirius’.

“I never turn down a chance to play with fire,” he murmured, voice edged with challenge.

Sirius swallowed thickly.

That man was going to be the death of him.

.-.-.-.

If Harry had thought that the first couple of weeks of term were the teachers trying to scare them with an enormous workload into taking their OWLs seriously, he was sorely disappointed — it was edging closer to December, and the homework load had only gotten *worse*. Between quidditch practice, the HA, heirs meetings, and visiting Salazar, Harry was beginning to feel like an overstretched elastic band.

Draco, being the absolutely incredible boyfriend and paragon of all things wonderful that he was, had rectified this by outright kidnapping him from a corridor on his way back from dinner, yanking him into an empty classroom and warding the door. “It feels like it has been *weeks* since I last had a civil conversation with you that didn’t revolve around Defence practice or the Wizengamot,” he declared in irritation, casting Cushioning charms on the floor and manhandling Harry down. “I’m sick and tired of having to talk shit about you in public, and for once I don’t have prefect duties, and you’ve got a free evening, so we are going to stay in here until bloody curfew and pretend the rest of the world doesn’t exist.” The more he spoke, the more his anger drained into exhaustion, until he was on his knees and staring at Harry with plaintive grey eyes. “Please?”

Harry pulled him forward, cuddling him against his side, running a hand through the blond’s soft hair. “That sounds amazing.” It was wearing on him, too, only being able to speak to Draco if they were insulting each other. “Fuck, fifth year is hard.”

“It is,” Draco agreed, voice muffled by Harry’s jumper. “But it’d probably be easier if you weren’t moonlighting as a Defence teacher and attempting to bring down the Ministry.”

“Probably.” Harry kept playing with Draco’s hair. “Are prefect duties really getting to you?”

“Not by themselves,” Draco sighed. “But with everything else — the politics in Slytherin right now...” He trailed off, and Harry squeezed him tight for a minute. “I got another letter from Father today. Checking up on me, making sure I’m applying myself and *forging the right connections.*”

“Arsehole,” Harry muttered, kissing Draco’s hair. The blond hummed.

“Good news is, he’s agreed to let me stay for Yule.”

That was good news, though Harry knew it would just leave Draco in the castle worrying about his mother all of break.

“I think I’m just gonna sleep the whole three weeks,” Harry declared mutinously. “Here or at the Burrow or where Sirius is, I don’t care. As soon as classes are over, just point me to a bed, and wake me up when spring term starts.”

Draco craned his neck up, looking amused. “You’re not a bear, Potter. And foxes don’t hibernate.”

“This one could,” Harry insisted.

It was a moot point, of course. Whether he was at Hogwarts or Grimmauld, he had far too much to do to sleep the whole break away. Still, he could dream.

The pair lay together for a while, the only sound in the classroom their steady breathing. Harry began to wonder if Draco had fallen asleep, until he felt the Slytherin’s hand reach for his own, tangling their fingers together. Harry frowned when Draco’s thumb started to run over the ridged flesh of the scar from Umbridge’s detentions. Even with Snape’s help, it had left a permanent mark.

“Don’t,” he murmured, pulling his hand away.

“Does it still hurt?” Draco’s voice was worried. Harry shook his head.

“No, I just—“ He huffed, looking down at the pale marks on his skin. “You shouldn’t have to look at my scars.”

Draco propped himself up, one hand on Harry’s chest. His blond brows knitted together. “Your scars don’t bother me,” he insisted. “I mean, they *do*, because I want to pull that hag’s intestines out through her own mouth for inflicting that kind of pain on you,” his eyes flashed dangerously, “but I don’t think any less of you for it. Or any of the rest.” He looked at Harry earnestly. “Does that still bother you? Even now?”

Harry squirmed, unable to meet his boyfriend’s eyes. “I know they’re not pretty to look at,” he mumbled. It was easy for Draco to ignore them, when they met in dimly lit classrooms. It was easy for Harry to pretend they weren’t there.

“How many times to I have to tell you you’re gorgeous before you’ll believe me, Potter,” Draco sighed. He grabbed Harry’s hand again, bringing it up to press a kiss to the scarred words. “Scars and all. If they upset you that much, you should ask Uncle Sev for some Scar

Remover; he has some that works well even on years-old scars. But don't you dare think for a second that they bother me."

"Only because I try not to let you see them," Harry muttered. Draco poked him hard in the chest.

"I've seen enough to think about you naked, and when I do, the scars are still there," he said bluntly. Harry's cheeks flamed.

"I—" Draco cut him off with a firm kiss.

"Trust me," he said, "the scars don't make you any less attractive. But even if you were hideous I'd still probably fancy you."

"Only probably?" Harry teased, ignoring the rest of the declaration before he dissolved from the embarrassment. Draco gave him a look that said he knew exactly what Harry was doing, and let it slide.

"Honestly, Potter, you should worry more about that *hair* of yours than the scars, I mean *really*, it's like you've never even seen a brush," he muttered, though he happily buried his hands in the tangled black mess. Harry snorted, pushing up and back until he was the one lying half on Draco, pillowled on the blond's narrow chest.

"Don't deserve you," he murmured, feeling those deft fingers scratching gently at his scalp.

"I'm a gift," Draco agreed breezily. A quiet laugh huffed out of Harry; truer words had never been spoken.

.-.-.-

When over half the members of the Hogwarts Alliance showed up with bleeding hands, Harry mentally revised his lesson plan. He waved his wand, rearranging the cushions on the floor until they were in a rough circle.

"Everyone take a seat," he requested. "If you'd be more comfortable in a proper chair, let me know, I'll conjure one."

They all seemed fine with the cushions, settling down and watching Harry curiously. He sat on a cushion of his own, glad to see that people hadn't automatically sat by their housemates and friends. His insistence on constantly mixing up partnerships was working.

"How many of you have had detention with Umbridge so far?" he asked, dread heavy in his voice.

Silence, in which many people shared uneasy glances. Then, slowly, hands began to rise. Harry cursed. Even little Dennis Creevey, the youngest person in the room, had his hand up. "That bitch," he muttered, then shook his head. "Okay. Today I'm going to teach you all a few spells. Some of you might know them — either because I've taught you, or someone else did," he looked at Cho, whose jaw was clenched, and she nodded shortly. She had shared the spells with the Ravenclaws. Good.

"First is a charm to drain the magical residue from the wound. Blood Quills are a magical object; even though the injury might look like it's healed over, magic still leaves its mark. If enough of that magic builds up, it can cause problems." He didn't want to scare anyone with the full explanation. "This charm should be cast after every detention. If you know anyone else who gets a detention, you can teach it to them, too."

He demonstrated the charm, and around the circle people began to copy him, wands pointed at their own hands, or their neighbour's.

"How do we know if it works?" Lavender asked, her wand pointed at Ginny's reddened hand.

"You can feel it," Ginny assured her. "It feels like there was something sticky on my hand, and it's gone now." Other people nodded, agreeing with her assessment. Harry was glad they could feel it — maybe it would help them feel any other magic cast on them. Just in case.

Next, he taught them a Healing charm, followed by a Numbing charm to apply before detentions so the Blood Quill wouldn't hurt as much. Harry had never needed that one himself; the pain wasn't even a blip on his radar.

They were all learning quickly, and Harry was wondering if he had time to go back to his original lesson plan, when Katie Bell cleared her throat. "Hey, Harry; would you teach us that privacy ward thing you're always putting up in the common room? The sound-muffling bubble one?"

Harry blinked at her; he hadn't realised people had noticed that.

"You can do privacy wards?"

"And proper Silencing charms?"

Immediately, a flurry of questions came Harry's way; everyone keen to know what other kinds of magic he could do. He raised his hands to get them to settle down. "I can teach you, yeah," he said, smiling a little bemusedly. "I'm sure some of you know similar versions, but we can all teach each other. I'm not the only one in this room who knows spells the other don't," he added ruefully.

It was an interesting meeting, sat in their circle like that; once Harry had taught his privacy spells, Fred had offered to teach them a Proximity charm he and George used to warn them if someone was coming close, when they were setting pranks. Soon, several people had their own contributions — Blaise even demonstrated a spell that Harry didn't know, to make something invisible to everyone except the person who had cast the spell.

Loads of them had little snippets of magic to share; things learned from parents, or older siblings, or out of random books. Not all of them were defence-based — Anthony Goldstein proudly shared a spell he used to soothe and stretch his hypermobile joints when they were painful, and all the quidditch players in the room were delighted by the results.

Curfew snuck up on them, the clock on the wall letting out a loud ringing noise, and Harry jumped. “Bloody hell. Guess we got a little carried away.” He stood, looking sheepish. “This was really brilliant, I’m so glad we did this. Before you all go, I’ve got something for you.”

He hurried over to his satchel, pulling out a black cloth bag. Up-ending it onto the table, a bunch of inkwells spilled out. “Everyone, take one of these,” he urged. “It’s an easier way to spread the word on when we’ll next meet.” Between three house teams worth of quidditch, and prefect duties for various members, it was hard for Harry to set a date too far in advance. “They’ve all got a Protean charm on them — look.” He picked one up and showed the bottom, which was a flat plate of silver metal. “I’ll mark on mine the date and time of the next meeting, and it’ll show up on yours. The ink will change colour, too, when I’ve updated it — to remind you to check it.”

“That’s a fancy bit of spellwork,” Cho teased, reaching for an inkwell.

Bashful, Harry shrugged. “A friend suggested it.” It had been Remus’ idea, and Sirius had taught him the Protean and Colour-Change charms through the mirror.

“Just don’t throw it away when the ink runs out,” George joked, picking up two and tossing one to his twin. “Cheers, Harry.”

Soon, the table was empty and the students were headed off to their common rooms, hurrying to make it within the generally accepted ten minute grace period post-curfew.

It was nice, Harry thought as he tidied the room up a bit, not to be the only one teaching *all* the time. Maybe he would encourage the others to share their knowledge more often.

Chapter 57

Winter had well and truly arrived, and with it, so had the Hogwarts quidditch season. To start things off with a bang, the first match of the year was Gryffindor versus Slytherin. A rivalry that seemed more tense than ever.

The whole Slytherin team were taking great pleasure in hexing the Gryffindor players in the hallways — or trying to, at least. After several weeks of HA meetings, the Gryffindors were light on their feet and quick on the draw; even Vicky Frobisher, their youngest member, had a speedy Shield charm these days.

Naturally, there were no repercussions to these attacks, even the ones that succeeded. Snape was practically encouraging them, and with Umbridge on the prowl no one else dared make much of a fuss. But the spells didn't bother Harry, nor did the whispered threats — he'd heard it all by this point.

Vicky seemed a little more wobbly at the constant taunts, but with the rest of the team at her back she soon learned to brush it off. "They're only doing this because they know we're better than them," Alicia told her one evening in the common room, when the team was gathered for a strategy meeting while a gale-force wind blew outside. "They can't beat us on skill, so they're trying to fake us out in the hopes we get sloppy."

"It's a bit sad, really," Angelina sighed, shaking her head. "Seventh years having to resort to threatening a third year girl just to try and win."

Vicky giggled, a little of the confidence returning to her eyes. Harry grinned at her.

Draco and Cassius, despite being the two actually decent human beings on the Slytherin team, had of course joined their teammates in the harassment like the good little future Death Eaters they were supposed to be. Harry probably wasn't supposed to find their attempts quite as funny as he did, though.

Especially as Draco seemed to have forgotten one tiny little detail.

The morning of the match was utterly freezing, but otherwise the weather was practically perfect quidditch conditions; still winds, no rain, and not too much glaring sunlight. Harry and the rest of the team headed down to the pitch after breakfast, in high spirits — it was going to be a good game, Harry could feel it.

Inside the changing rooms, they donned their robes and checked their broomsticks over, listening to the sounds of the steadily growing crowd in the stands outside. Harry glanced over at Vicky, who was getting a quiet pep talk from Angelina.

"How d'you think she'll do?" he asked Katie under his breath.

"I reckon she'll handle it," she replied, grinning. "It's hard, having our toughest match first, but she's done really well in training. She'll be fine." Then her grin faltered for the briefest

second. "I hope she is, anyway; we're screwed if we have to replace her. The next best flier was Ron, and he was only good when no one was looking at him too closely."

Harry wrinkled his nose. Yes, he would rather not have Ron on the team; the redhead's attitude about quidditch since he hadn't made keeper had been appalling. He'd be absolutely *insufferable* if Angelina let him join now.

Vicky would be fine. He had faith in her.

If the points started looking rough, Harry would just make sure he caught the snitch quickly.

At last, it was time. Angelina gave a firm nod, and then they were striding out onto the pitch in single file. The Slytherins were already out there — which meant Harry got a perfect view of Draco's face when he saw Harry in his quidditch robes. And when he remembered the *last* time he'd seen him in his quidditch robes.

The blond's jaw tensed, his pale cheeks colouring as he tried valiantly not to react. Harry smirked at him, giving a fleeting wink. Draco's only response was a glare.

"What did you do to him?" George whispered in Harry's ear, amusement colouring his tone. The team captains shook hands, and Harry snickered.

"Tell you later."

As soon as the whistle blew, Draco was on his broom and speeding away from Harry. Harry took to the air, heart swooping in joy the way it always did when he flew. He did a quick lap, making sure to fly in front of Draco, bent low over the handle of his broom.

His boyfriend was going to kill him when the match was over.

Angelina might have belittled Slytherin's skill, but they had certainly brought their A game — both in ability, and in aggression. Crabbe and Goyle seemed to be focusing all their efforts on disrupting Harry with bludgers, while the chasers were *barely* following the acceptable contact rules in their determination to keep the quaffle.

Alicia scored early, but it was followed all too soon by a goal from Montague. Harry let his eyes move to Vicky, concerned, but if anything the third-year was just more determined not to repeat her mistake.

Harry left her to it, returning to his hunt for the snitch.

The quaffle flew from one end of the pitch to the other dozens of times, goals being scored and saved from both teams. The occasional glance at Draco showed the blond had not yet seen the snitch, and also was resolutely not looking at Harry. Harry smirked to himself.

And then he saw it.

As promised, he was ahead of Draco in the dive, though not by far enough that the Slytherin was looking at his backside. His hand was only inches behind Harry's, but Harry was faster, his hand wrapping securely around the little gold ball. Pulling out of the dive and lifting his

hand triumphantly, Harry turned to offer Draco a quip about following him — and his vision went white as a bludger hit him hard in the side.

He fell off his broom, luckily only about five feet off the ground anyway, and managed to keep one hand wrapped around the Firebolt on his way down. He landed sort-of on his feet, knees buckling immediately as pain throbbed through his side. “Harry!”

“Are you alright?”

He raised a placating hand to the girls as they surrounded him, looking past them to see Crabbe in the air with his beater’s bat, looking smug and unrepentant — and the twins looking like they might kill him for it.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” he insisted, and he wasn’t even lying. It would bruise, but it didn’t feel like there was any major damage. His body armour had caught the worst of it.

“He hit the bludger after the whistle went,” Angelina accused, glaring at Crabbe, who was already receiving a stern talking to by Madam Hooch.

Harry looked back at Draco, who was white-faced with fury — not, Harry suspected, about losing the game, but about Crabbe’s unsportsmanlike conduct. “I’m fine,” Harry said again, directing his words at his teammates while his eyes were still on his boyfriend.

The Slytherins in the crowd were heckling and booing, but it didn’t matter — Gryffindor had won. The rest of the team landed, Fred and George immediately crowding Vicky with praise, tweaking her ponytail and thumping her on the back proudly.

“That’s the hardest match done,” Katie declared happily. “We’ve got the cup in the *bag* this year!” They all whooped, and Harry did to, heading towards the changing room. He glanced over his shoulder, unsurprised to see Draco’s eyes still on him — no longer angry, but hot and intent.

A shiver ran down Harry’s spine, and he kept walking.

Angelina wasn’t satisfied until Harry pulled off his shirt and armour to prove there was nothing more than a light bruise. “It’ll be fine in a couple of days,” he insisted. “I don’t need to see Pomfrey.” He had bruise balm in his room, courtesy of Snape, and that would clear it right up.

“Leave the man alone, love,” Fred called jovially, “or I’ll start worrying about how desperate you are to keep his top off.”

Angelina rolled her eyes, throwing her wrist-guard at her boyfriend.

The twins, bless their devious hearts, seemed to notice that Harry was dragging his feet. They were in fine form, chattering away about the victory party, herding the girls out of the changing room and telling Harry not to take too long. George threw a salacious wink at him on his way out, and Harry felt himself go red.

Once he was sure he was the only one left in the changing rooms, he started to put his quidditch robes back on. He had a hunch.

And he was right — a few minutes later, he heard the door creak open. “That you, George?” Harry called loudly, a grin already on his face. The door shut, and a familiar voice muttered a Locking charm.

Draco rounded the corner, no longer wearing his own robe but still in the rest of his uniform, and he stalked across the room towards Harry. “You’ve got some nerve, Potter,” he muttered, grabbing him by the front of the robes. He paused. “Crabbe didn’t hurt you, did he?”

“Just a bruise,” Harry assured; a bruise he couldn’t even *feel* right now, considering the way all his blood was rushing to a very different part of his body. “Did you have a nice time watching my arse?” he asked cheekily.

Draco growled, pushing him back until Harry was up against the lockers, and the next thing he knew his mouth was being devoured.

Harry’s fingers tangled in the soft wool of Draco’s team jumper, pulling him close with a low moan. One of the blond’s legs was firm between Harry’s thighs, pressing up against his cock. He still smelled of sweat and leather, the intoxicating combination making Harry dizzy with lust.

“You look even fitter in these robes than you did last Christmas,” Draco groaned. “God, you little shit, you knew exactly what you were doing when you walked out on that pitch. Exactly what I was remembering.”

“This is better than outside the greenhouses,” Harry shot back. “Less likely to get caught.”

Draco’s eyes darkened when he pulled away, fingers running down the laces of Harry’s robe. “You’ll be late to your own victory party,” he said mock-sadly. Harry scoffed.

“This is a better victory party.”

“Still,” Draco said, undoing the laces slowly. “I should at least try and get you presentable. You’re all sweaty, it’s disgusting.”

Harry blinked — as if Draco wasn’t equally sweaty!

Then he saw where his boyfriend’s gaze was directed; not at Harry, but at the shower cubicles just past his shoulder. “Oh.” He swallowed, fire flooding his veins. “Yeah?”

They had never been naked together before. Trousers round their knees and shirts off, yes, but not actually, fully naked.

Draco pulled back, tugging his jumper over his head, leaving him in just his thin undershirt. “It’ll save time,” he drawled. “May as well get messy where it’s easier to clean up.”

Harry didn’t need more encouragement than that; he fumbled with his robes, pulling them off and hurrying to shed the rest of his layers.

Despite Harry's fantasies, there was hardly anything sexy about scrambling to get quidditch boots undone and awkwardly peeling off the skin-tight trousers with a prominent erection, but it didn't matter that both of them looked ridiculous; not when they were both finally, gloriously, naked. Draco grabbed him by the hand and led him into the closest shower cubicle, turning on the shower head. Without his glasses, Harry's vision was blurred, but he hardly cared when he could get his hands on Draco's arse, water running down both of them, making their skin slick and their hair flatten into their eyes.

Next thing Harry knew he was pinned to the wall in a bruising kiss, Draco's body flush against him, and *holy hell* that was the best feeling in the world, all that bare skin on bare skin. Harry didn't even care that the lights in the showers were so bright Draco could probably see every one of his scars, not when the blond was kissing his way down Harry's neck, one hand between them gripping both their lengths.

Draco was rarely so... dominant, and Harry was a little amazed at how much of a turn-on it was, having his boyfriend so desperate for him. Neither of them lasted long, Harry barely having the sense to drag Draco's mouth back up to his, tongues twining together as pleasure shot through his every nerve. He felt Draco gasp and shudder against him, then relax into Harry's frame, both of them propped up by the wall and on shaky legs.

Harry breathed harshly, water running into his eyes as he tried to gain his equilibrium. "We should make that a regular thing," he gasped, running a hand down Draco's bare back, over his backside. "Every Gryffindor/Slytherin match."

"Deal," Draco agreed, chest heaving. "Next time we use the Slytherin changing rooms."

"Only if you win," Harry teased in response. Even without his glasses, he could see Draco pout.

"See, you're going to have to go professional after school," Draco decided. "International, even. It's the only way my ego will cope with being beaten by you every bloody time."

Harry laughed, pushing off the wall when he thought his knees could keep him standing, pushing his wet hair off his forehead. "Yes, dear."

He looked down at Draco's belly, at his cock now limp between his legs. The mess had already washed off them, and Harry cursed his poor vision. "Not fair," he groused. "I'm half-blind even before there's water in my eyes. You can see me properly."

"I can, and I'm very much enjoying it," Draco confirmed, patting Harry's bum playfully. "Now budge over, you're blocking the soap."

For some reason, Harry's mind had not processed the part of *showering with Draco* where they would actually get clean. All his fantasies had fizzled out after the orgasms happened. Before he would have thought it to be awkward, scrubbing himself down beside the blond after what they'd just done, but it felt surprisingly nice. Easy. Harry washed Draco's hair, amusing himself by making it stick out at ridiculous angles when it was all lathered up, and Draco tenderly scrubbed the rapidly growing bruise on Harry's side, muttering under his breath about all the awful things he was going to do to Crabbe.

Harry hadn't expect to feel so comfortable being naked in front of another person.

They were quick in the showers, and when they stepped out Harry hurried to grab his glasses, wanting to properly admire Draco's nude form before the boy put on clothes. The Slytherin gave a ridiculous pose, flexing his muscles, and really it was *obscene* how much Harry's heart swelled with affection for the preening blond.

"I feel like such a cliché right now," Draco remarked, buttoning his trousers.

"What, snake in the lion's den?" Harry teased, sitting down to put his socks on.

"That, and being two opposing seekers fucking in the changing rooms. It's like something out of a trashy romance novel."

His casual use of the word *fucking* made Harry's cheeks heat. "Lots of experience with those types of books, have you?" he drawled to hide his embarrassment. Draco snorted.

"Mother likes them. She leaves them lying around sometimes — I got curious." His tone was defensive, making Harry wonder if there wasn't a little more than *curiosity* involved.

Suddenly he knew what he was getting Draco for Christmas.

"At least no one will question you having gone off for a sulk by yourself," Harry pointed out, shoving his feet into his boots. "I'm gonna get *mobbed* when I finally get up to Gryffindor." It was at least half an hour since the rest of the team had left the changing rooms. They were going to think he'd slipped and died in the shower or something.

"Tell them you were having a celebration of your own."

Harry snickered, reaching out to reel Draco in by the front of his cloak, kissing him firmly. "Not great for keeping this secret, that," he pointed out.

"You don't have to say it was *me*. Let the rumour mill do some work; they've all forgotten about your love life since the Quibbler article last year."

"I thought that was a good thing, seeing how *unbearably jealous* you get at even the suggestion that I might be with someone else," Harry argued lightly, running a hand through his boyfriend's still-damp hair. A faint blush rose on Draco's cheeks.

"I can't help that I'm possessive," he muttered abashedly.

"Don't worry, it's hot," Harry assured, smirking. For the boy in the cupboard that nobody wanted, having Draco get possessive made him feel all warm and fuzzy inside. The blond gave a cocky smirk.

"They'll think what they want to think. But if you don't get up there soon, they'll think the Slytherin team have kidnapped you for revenge."

"Not far off the mark," Harry teased, going in for one last kiss. "Best revenge ever."

Still, Draco was right, and the two boys had to part ways; Harry up to the castle, and Draco doubling back to the Slytherin changing rooms to gather his things.

Harry should have expected to be accosted by two red-headed devils as soon as he walked through the portrait hole.

“There he is!” Fred shouted, thrusting a bottle of butterbeer into Harry’s hand.

“Man of the hour!” George cried, offering a second bottle.

“Finishing his walk of shame—”

“Stride of pride!”

“Shut up, both of you,” Harry groaned, obediently necking back the first bottle.

“About time you showed up!” Ginny exclaimed. “Everyone, Harry’s back!”

A roar of celebration went up around the common room, and Harry was shoved into the centre of the fray. He couldn’t even be mad about the looks the twins were sending him, or even the way Neville — shy little Neville! — kept making quiet innuendos about snakes, not when everyone around him was so happy. And occasionally transforming into canaries, thanks to snacks provided by the twins. Harry let himself be jostled over to where the rest of the team were celebrating, one of his butterbeers having been claimed by Lavender on his way through. He felt like he was walking on air; they had won the quidditch match, he had seen his boyfriend naked, and the whole house was happy for the first time since Umbridge had arrived.

As he turned to watch Fred and Lee juggling empty bottles, he caught sight of something out the window.

There was smoke drifting from the chimney of Hagrid’s hut.

A face-splitting grin tugged at Harry’s cheeks; Hagrid was back!

It was truly an excellent day.

.-.-.-

With the party going on in Gryffindor for most of Saturday evening, Harry decided to go down and see Hagrid in the morning. Wrapped up in several layers with his charmed cloak from Sirius and Remus shielding him from the snow, he trudged down to the hut, knocking on the door.

Hagrid opened the door, smiling widely at the sight of Harry. Harry, on the other hand, stared at his friend in horror. “What the hell happened to you?”

“Nice to see you, too, ‘Arry,” Hagrid said reproachfully. Harry scoffed, stepping into the hut and hanging up his cloak, edging closer to the blazing fire. Hagrid’s face looked like he’d had a run-in with a meat grinder, one of his eyes puffy and swollen. The way he moved, ambling

to fetch a mug while Fang bounded over to Harry, suggested he might have a broken rib or two.

Harry obligingly scratched the slobbery boarhound behind the ears. “You had an eventful trip, then?”

“Aye, it was certainly that,” Hagrid agreed, pouring two cups of tea and reaching up in the cupboard for the biscuit tin, only wincing a little. “Surprised you’re out here on your own. You still on the outs with Ron and Hermione?” He was frowning, which made the cuts on his face look even more gruesome.

“Yeah, that’s a pretty permanent thing by this point. Rough summer.”

If possible, Hagrid’s face got more upset. “I ‘eard what ‘appened to Dudley.” Harry’s shoulders tensed. It had been months since anyone had brought that up. “Kid might’ve bin a brat, but with parents like his ‘e didn’t have much of a choice. There was still plenty o’ growin’ up to do. No one deserves what ‘appened to him, least of all a boy his age.” His huge hand came down gently on Harry’s shoulder. “Still, lucky it weren’t worse, I s’pose. Could’a bin the whole town, with how long Dumbledore said it took fer the Aurors to show up.”

“Yeah.” Harry shrugged, desperately wanting to move the conversation along. Somehow it was harder coming from Hagrid, who had actually *met* Dudley. “You’ve seen Dumbledore since you got back, then?”

“Aye, soon as I got in last night.” Hagrid sipped his tea, frowning. “Had a visit from some Ministry lass, too. New Defence teacher, she called ‘erself. Umbridge. Said summat about inspectin’ teachers.” He shook his head, shaggy hair getting even more haphazard. “Got awful nosy about where I’d been all term.”

Harry’s stomach turned. “I bet she did,” he muttered. “You’ve got a lot to catch up on, Hagrid.”

“I’ll put some sausages on,” Hagrid declared. At Harry’s knee, Fang perked up at the word. “You can tell me all about it over breakfast.”

He looked to be in some serious pain as he moved, and just looking at him made Harry wince. “Is there nothing Pomfrey can do for you?” He knew giants, and therefore half-giants, were resistant to a lot of forms of magic. He wasn’t sure if that included healing spells, too.

“I’ll swing by and pick up some Bruise Balm at lunch,” Hagrid assured dismissively. “The rest’ll heal in its own time. Now, tell me more about this Umbridge woman.”

Harry explained what had happened since the beginning of the year; Umbridge’s speech at the welcoming feast, her appointment as High Inquisitor, the inspections and Trelawney’s probation. He carefully edged around the endless detentions, merely mentioning that she had it out for him and Dumbledore both. “She’s a blood purist,” Harry told him, “she made all these laws that made it impossible for Remus to get a job. And she’s been needling Professor Flitwick about his *heritage* since she got here.”

Hagrid's face twisted in dislike. "So she decided to come and welcome back the 'alf-giant professor, then?" he said knowingly. He fished the sausages out of the grill pan, pulling a loaf of bread out from a different cupboard. In short order, there was a pile of sausage sandwiches slathered in ketchup; Harry's mouth watered.

"She's got an agenda," Harry agreed. "Hate to say, getting rid of you is probably on it."

"Dumbledore won't let that 'appen,'" Hagrid insisted faithfully.

"She might not give him a choice." Harry hated the idea of Hagrid becoming collateral damage in the battle for dominance between Dumbledore and the Ministry. "Just promise me you'll be careful. No dragon eggs; no dangerous creatures in lessons. Nothing that'll let her use all those awful stereotypes about giants against you."

"Don't worry about me, 'Arry," Hagrid said. He didn't seem remotely concerned by the whole affair. "It'll be alrigh'." He gave a savage grin. "In't the first time I've played the Ministry's game."

That was exactly what Harry was worried about.

"Anyways, I'm surprised; you 'aven't even asked me where I been all this time!"

Harry blinked — of course, he wasn't supposed to know that Hagrid had been seeking giants. "Well, now we've got all the boring stuff out of the way, you can tell me," he declared, reaching for another sandwich.

From the injuries Hagrid was sporting, it was bound to be an interesting story.

.-. .

Between quidditch celebrations and his visit with Hagrid — which had ended, somewhat awkwardly, when Ron and Hermione appeared on Hagrid's doorstep, and Hagrid tried to get the three of them to sit and talk together — Harry was worryingly behind on his homework. Sunday night found him up in the common room long after the rest of the Tower had gone to bed, fast asleep with his face pressed against the pages of a book on goblin wars. Inside his head, he was travelling down a long, dark corridor.

He tried his best not to let the dream draw him in, but the corridor just kept stretching ahead of him, a tiny voice in his head whispering that he was so *curious*, that he *needed* to find out what was at the end. He reached for the door, and it sprung open, revealing a bright light and

—

Harry gasped awake, wand jumping into his hand as something touched his shoulder. He blinked into the darkness of the common room, heart stopping for a moment when huge green eyes blinked back.

"...Dobby?"

The elf was wearing a truly ludicrous amount of misshapen knitwear, a stack of lumpy hats piled atop his head. He looked wary; not his usual delight at seeing Harry.

“Harry Potter sir is shaking in his sleep,” he said. “Having bad dreams.” Then he paused, wringing his hands. “Dobby is still looking out for Harry Potter sir, even though he is having another elf doing that for him now.”

Harry’s sleep-fogged mind took a minute to catch up. “Another... oh. You mean Ceri?” A quick nod. “She isn’t really my elf. She’s my godfather’s. She just... helps.” He blinked again, watching the way Dobby seemed to shrink into himself. “Dobby, it doesn’t mean I’m not happy to see you. You’re still my friend.” He realised guiltily that he hadn’t seen the elf all term. “I’m sorry I haven’t been down to visit; I’ve been really busy lately.”

“Dobby knows,” the elf said with another nod, looking a bit brighter. “Dobby is seeing Harry Potter spending lots of time in the Come and Go Room.”

Confusion drifted through Harry’s brain. “You mean the Room of Requirement?” Surely Dobby couldn’t be referring to the Chamber, which was the only other place Harry had been frequenting.

“Another name for it, yes.” Dobby’s tennis-ball eyes stared up at him. “Harry Potter sir is truly not upset with Dobby?”

“What? No! Why would I be upset?”

Dobby wrung his hands anxiously. “Harry Potter sir is spending more time with Master Draco. Master Draco will tell Harry Potter sir that Dobby is a bad elf.”

Harry choked, red in the face at the insinuation that Dobby had been *watching* him and Draco meet up.

“No, no, Dobby; Draco isn’t like that at all! He—he isn’t like his father, I promise. And he doesn’t think you’re a bad elf.” Draco likely didn’t think of Dobby at all. “You can’t tell anyone that I talk to him, though. It’s a secret. His father would get very angry with Draco if he found out.”

Dobby’s eyes became fearful; he knew what happened when Lucius Malfoy got angry. “Dobby is keeping Harry Potter’s secrets. Dobby is a good elf.”

“A good friend,” Harry corrected, smiling when the small creature blushed. “And, look—I know Ceri is around. And she’s great. But she doesn’t look after me like you do. She hasn’t saved my life like you have.” Or endangered it like Dobby had, but the danger came from a place of caring. Suddenly, he was struck with a thought. “Listen, Dobby. You can say no if you want—I know you like working at Hogwarts, but... I’m too young for an elf of my own right now. I’m in school all the time, I don’t really need anything. But maybe, after I graduate... if you wanted to come with me, I would like that.”

The elf’s jaw dropped. “Harry Potter sir is asking Dobby to be his personal elf?” he breathed, awed.

“Only if you want to. I can’t promise you’d have much work to do. But I’ll pay you whatever wages you want. You can still be a free elf.” The idea of leaving Dobby at Hogwarts after

everything he'd done for Harry, letting the elf think that Harry had just forgotten about him... it didn't sit right with him.

"Dobby... Dobby would like that, very much." He bit his lip. "But Dobby needs to think about Winky, too. She is still not happy being a Hogwarts elf."

"Of course." Well, there was only one real answer for that. "I don't think I'll have enough work for one elf, let alone two, but Winky can come if she wants, too."

Immediately, Harry had a pair of skinny arms wrapped around his legs. "Harry Potter sir is too kind!"

Harry Potter sir was very tired, and only vaguely aware of what he was doing, and would really like to finish his essay and go to bed. He patted the top of the tower of hats, gently disentangling the elf from his person. "It's two years away. Plenty of time to make a decision. But the offer is there."

Plenty of time for Harry to figure out what the hell he'd do with two house elves, too.

Draco would know what to do. He'd sort it out.

....

Despite — or perhaps because of — Hagrid's reassurance that he could handle Umbridge, Harry felt nothing but trepidation when that obnoxiously dainty little '*hem, hem*' sounded while Hagrid was showing the class some thestrals.

The half-giant greeted her cheerfully; if Harry didn't know better, he'd say the man was entirely oblivious to what she clearly thought about him.

Then again, Harry supposed, Hagrid was probably used to people thinking certain things about him, and having to interact with them anyway.

His fists clenched at his sides as Umbridge spoke to Hagrid with slow, exaggerated words and near-comical hand gestures. Hagrid took it all on the chin, smile not even faltering.

"Are you aware," Umbridge continued, "that the Ministry of Magic classifies thestrals as dangerous?"

"Aye," Hagrid said, nodding genially. "They can be. But Hogwarts has had a permit for the thestrals to pull the carriages since about nineteen-fifty-summat. Only domesticated herd in Britain!" he declared proudly. Umbridge did not look nearly as impressed.

Things quickly went downhill as she began to walk amongst the students — it was clear that even if Hagrid had been an exemplary teacher, she had made her mind up about him. It didn't help that the Slytherins — Draco looking apologetically at Harry when no one else was watching — were on fine form, regaling Umbridge with all the *dangerous* things Hagrid had made them study, and how difficult it was to understand him.

Harry knew they didn't mean it, knew they were only spouting the same crap their parents said, the crap they were *expected* to say, but it still hurt to see Hagrid's smile get more and more tense with every remark.

He let out a tiny sigh of relief when Umbridge finally made her way back towards the castle, but the damage had been done. Hagrid was anxious, fumbling his words for the remainder of the lesson, and none of the students were properly paying attention. Which was a shame, because Harry was actually quite keen to learn more about thestrals.

"That was the worst inspection yet," Neville muttered when they were on the path back to the castle at the end of the lesson. Harry had tried to hang back for Hagrid, but Hermione had swooped right in and started lecturing him about all the things he needed to do to make sure Umbridge didn't fire him, so Harry left them to it.

"He's doomed," Harry agreed morosely. The only saving grace would be Dumbledore stepping in before Umbridge could do anything permanent.

For once, Harry was desperately praying that the headmaster would ignore the rules for his own benefit. Hogwarts wasn't Hogwarts without Hagrid.

.-.-.-.-

Remus' whole body ached as he apparated onto the lawn at Seren Du, the welcoming magic of the wards washing over him as he stepped through. "Ceri," he called, and the elf appeared at his side. "Would you please find Severus when he's next alone and tell him I'm back?"

All he wanted to do was take a nice long bath, and see his partner.

Thankfully, it wasn't long until he had both; Severus arrived at the manor while Remus was soaking in their obnoxiously large bathtub. He strode into the bathroom, still in his teaching robes, and something in Remus eased at the sight of him. "Hello, love. I've missed you."

With a wave of Severus' hand, all his buttons from collars to cuffs undid at the same time. "Are you injured?" the Slytherin asked, low voice flooded with concern. Remus shook his head, watching happily as the man stripped down to his skin.

"No, no; not unless being too damn old to spend a whole moon running through the woods counts as an injury," he joked. Severus rolled his eyes, stepping into the hot water. Remus made room for him, angling for a kiss.

"You're not old, you're thirty-five," Severus muttered. Remus laughed, resting his head on the man's bony shoulder, inhaling the lingering scent of potions' ingredients.

"I'm fine, honestly," he assured, letting his body curve against his partner's, muscles relaxing. "How are you? How are things at the school?" *How's Harry*, he wanted to ask, but from the look on Severus' face the question was implied regardless.

"Umbridge continues to terrorise the students and staff. Hagrid has returned, which has given her a new target." Remus winced, imagining how awful that woman was being to the poor

man. “Potter led Gryffindor to victory at quidditch, and has only had four detentions with Umbridge since you left. And two detentions with me,” Severus added, smirking faintly.

“Two detentions I’m sure he absolutely deserved,” said Remus with a roll of his eyes.

“Naturally,” Severus agreed without hesitation. He reached back for the bottle of shampoo, tipping Remus’ head back and gently lathering his hair. Remus sighed, slowly going boneless at the ministrations. Merlin, Severus had such wonderful hands.

“Order done anything interesting?” he asked, though he cared less and less every passing second.

“Not even slightly. Were you successful?”

It took Remus a second to remember what Severus was talking about, lost in the sensation of the fingers massaging his scalp. “Hmm? Oh. Wolves. Well, they’re much more receptive to Harry than Dumbledore. Especially when I told them the only thing Harry wants them to do is not join Voldemort.” Albus, the idiot, was expecting the wolves to somehow fight for the light, put their lives on the line for wizards that would happily see them dead. “They like the idea of someone pack-adjacent being in power, promising them rights. I’ll write to Harry in the morning, let him know how it all went.” Remus tried valiantly not to drift into a complete puddle of goo, but it was hard now Severus’ hands had moved to his neck and shoulders.

“How’s Harry’s little club going?”

“I’ve not heard hide nor hair of it, so they’re succeeding at secrecy,” Severus replied. “I would imagine it’s going well, however; Potter looks far too smug for it to be failing.”

Remus chuckled softly, cracking one eye open to glance amusedly at his lover. “Don’t front, you’re proud of him.” It was written in the lines of his face, for someone like Remus, who was an expert at reading that particular map.

“I am pleased that finally someone is taking the protection and defence of the students seriously, and treating them with at least the hope that they may become capable adults. Even if that someone is Potter.”

That was Severus-talk for pride. He needn’t try so hard with Remus. “It does sound ridiculous at times,” he confessed. “I could hardly believe it myself when I began telling the werewolf elders that I would happily follow a fifteen year-old boy into both an all-out war and a political minefield.”

“It’s absurd,” Severus said. “Trusting a single teenager to succeed in thwarting the two most powerful wizards in magical Europe.”

“And yet,” Remus murmured, looking knowingly at Severus.

“And yet,” the man echoed, hand lingering at Remus’ jaw.

Watching Harry now was the most hopeful either of them had been about winning the war in their entire lives.

For once, they could believe that there was someone out there who could truly create a world worth fighting for.

Worth living for.

Chapter 58

Chapter Notes

CW for non-graphic mentions of child abuse

Harry and Neville were in the library one cold December evening, working on their Transfiguration homework and quietly discussing the upcoming Christmas holidays.

“I’ve no idea if I’m staying or not, to be honest,” Harry murmured. “I mean, obviously I want to spend it with Sirius. But I’ve not heard anything from anyone about it.” Ginny had mentioned that Ron had been told to invite Harry to the Burrow, but even the thought of having her and the more tolerable Weasley brothers around wasn’t quite enough for Harry to want to spend Christmas with Ron.

“Just get on the train when we all go to leave,” Neville told him, shrugging. “You know where it is. What can they do, send you back?”

Harry didn’t point out that it was entirely likely someone would force him to return to Hogwarts if it had been deemed *safer* for him to remain at the castle, but he didn’t voice that to Neville.

He reached to turn the page of the textbook he was referencing, and a shadow caught the corner of his gaze — he looked up, immediately tensing.

Theodore Nott was stood at the end of the aisle, watching them both.

Harry elbowed Neville, nodding in the Slytherin’s direction. Then he dropped their privacy ward, looking back at the boy as if daring him to make a move.

He hadn’t really spoken much to Nott, despite being in several classes with him. He was one of the students Draco had immediately written off as Death Eater spawn, in far too deep thanks to his father. The hair on the back of Harry’s neck prickled on end, his wand in his hand beneath the table. Pince would murder him if he started a duel in the library, but he wasn’t going to risk being defenceless.

“Can we help you?” he asked calmly. Nott’s response was a quiet, almost disbelieving laugh.

“Fuck, I hope so.”

That wasn’t the response Harry had expected. He blinked, but allowed the boy to walk closer. Nott set his wand on the table, a clear sign of truce. “I need your help, Potter,” he said, dark gaze as wary as a stray cat. “I— my father wants me Marked. This summer.”

“...And that’s not something you want?”

Nott’s face turned incredulous. “Of course not. I’ve seen the way that lunatic treats his followers.” Then he grew hesitant. “And—he’s wrong. The Dark Lord. He’s going to get us all killed.”

That was a surprise. Neville looked equally shocked, his quill slowly dripping ink onto his half-written essay.

“So you don’t want the Mark because you don’t like to bow?” Harry asked sharply. “Or because you don’t believe in torturing and killing muggleborns?”

“Both,” Nott said with a twist of a grimace. “Magical blood shouldn’t be spilt.”

“What about muggles?”

Nott flinched under Harry’s intense stare, looking like he might bolt. “Look, Potter, I’m trying here. I heard—I overheard Blaise talking to some other Slytherins, in the common room. He said there’s a way to avoid *him* without having to debase ourselves to Dumbledore.” His gaze turned cautious, hopeful. “He said you could offer sanctuary.”

Harry would have to have a word with Blaise Zabini about what exactly he was promising people on Harry’s behalf.

“I could,” Harry agreed slowly.

“Name your price and I’ll pay it,” came Nott’s immediate reply. “Money, connections, knowledge; whatever you want. If it’s in my power, it’s yours. Just *please* get me out of my father’s house by this summer. He—“

Nott met Harry’s gaze, and Harry’s heart sank. He recognised that wild-eyed, frantic sort of look.

It was the same look he saw in the mirror when he lived at the Dursleys.

“He hits you?” Harry asked urgently, and Nott’s lips turned down bitterly.

“Like a muggle? He’d never be so crass.” He laughed, and the sound was haunted. “My father likes a good old-fashioned Cruciatus curse. Really makes the punishment *memorable*.” He shook his head, dark hair falling carelessly into his eyes. “If I’m lucky, he’ll hex me into such a gibbering mess that I’m no use to the Dark Lord.” Then he froze, flinching, and looked at Neville. “I’m sorry, Longbottom. That was uncalled for.”

Beside Harry, Neville had gone chalk-white. He swallowed hard. “If Harry can’t offer you sanctuary, I will,” he said, surprising them both. “No—no-one should suffer that fate. Not even you.”

“I’ll sort something out,” Harry promised. Slowly, telegraphing his move quite obviously, he reached out to place a hand on Nott’s shoulder. “You’ll have a safe place to go by the

summer. A place where your father and Voldemort can't get to you." Harry would have to write to the goblins and change around some of his plans, but it was doable.

The relief that flooded the Slytherin boy was visible, as he slumped in his chair like a ragdoll. "Thank you," he rasped. "What do you ask in return?"

"Nothing," Harry replied, shaking his head. "I don't help people because I want something. I help people because they need it."

That seemed an utterly foreign concept to Nott. Harry didn't hold it against him; even Draco still struggled with the idea. Slytherins just did not think that way. "I will, however, ask for your silence, and your loyalty. Not like him," he hastened to add, seeing the way the Slytherin tensed. "But if you're going to be on my side — or, at the very least, not on Voldemort's side — you're going to learn some things that would be absolutely dire for anyone else to discover. How's your Occlumency?"

"Impeccable," Nott responded immediately. "My father likes to rip my mind apart for any signs of *wavering loyalty*. I wouldn't have survived this long without solid shields."

His matter-of-fact tone made Harry's stomach turn. "Good. And — you're the heir to two Wizengamot seats, correct? Nott and Avery?"

"Harry, are you sure?" Neville hissed in alarm. "That's an awful lot of trust to put in him."

Harry nodded; he knew that. But he had a gut feeling that Nott was worth that trust.

If only he could ask Snape to test the boy without revealing the Potions Master's loyalty.

"I'll be eligible for both when I turn seventeen, yes. But my father holds them right now." Nott's eyes were calculating, looking between the two. "If it's political clout you're after, I can help." He smiled viciously. "If it requires my father to have an unfortunate and lethal accident, even better."

Harry wasn't quite sure what to do with all that bloodthirsty energy, but that was good to know. "Talk to Daphne Greengrass," he said eventually, thinking that the female Slytherin would be devious enough to spot if Nott was trying to play him. "Tell her I said she should think about bringing you to study group."

Nott blinked, looking perplexed. "If I do that, you'll give me sanctuary?"

"I'll give you sanctuary regardless," Harry promised. "This will just... help with some other things."

If he could be trusted, it would be worth having him on board. Two more seats would be an enormous help.

"Thank you." Nott reached over, clasping Harry's hand in both of his own. "I am in your debt, Heir Potter. Should I betray this trust, let Magic punish me as it must."

His words were heavy with magic, and Neville gasped softly. Harry set down his wand, laying his free hand on top of Nott's. "I appreciate your vow, and will honour your debt." His own magic sealed the deal.

If Nott planned to betray him, he was going to have a bloody hard time of it.

"Talk to Daphne," he repeated, then offered a small smile. "I'll see you in class."

Recognising the dismissal for what it was, Nott nodded, pulling back and reaching for his wand. "Potter, Longbottom. Sorry for disturbing you," he said, as if he'd just asked about borrowing a book or something equally mundane. Then he was gone.

Harry looked at Neville, who was wide-eyed in shock. "I think I just made a new friend," he said, and grinned.

.-. .

Through the whisper network, Harry heard enough to be prepared by the next heirs study group meeting. He wasn't as shocked as the others when Theodore Nott walked in beside Daphne and Blaise. The tall boy still looked like a cornered animal, but there was a glimmer of hope in his eyes that Harry recognised painfully well.

He'd spoken to Snape, the same day Nott had come to him for help. The man had confirmed that Theodore Nott Sr was exactly the violent, odious piece of shit that Theodore Jr made him out to be. Snape had not been at all surprised to hear that his student was being threatened with the Cruciatius into joining Voldemort, only resigned. He had been earnest in his request for Harry to hold firm to his promise of sanctuary, even if Nott didn't get along so well with his other friends.

With that in mind, for this first meeting Harry had suggested that Cassius, Draco and the girls skip this one. If Nott got cold feet, they didn't want him to have the knowledge that four more children of Death Eaters were not loyal.

At least the other heirs seemed to have been similarly forewarned; they eyed Nott warily, but none looked shocked to see him there.

"Welcome," Harry greeted, beckoning him further into the room. "Can I call you Theodore? Or do you prefer something else?"

"Uh— Theo. Theo's fine," the boy stuttered, caught off-guard by Harry's lack of hesitation.

"Great. Call me Harry, Theo," he urged. "I don't know how much Blaise and Daphne have told you, but this is our study group."

"They said you're all planning on overthrowing both Fudge and Dumbledore, once Potter — Harry, sorry — once Harry kills the Dark Lord." Theo sounded deeply impressed, and also quite skeptical. "That you're going to completely rebuild the Ministry from the ground up, starting with the Wizengamot." Then he grinned, a predatory, gleaming-eyed thing. "I want in."

Across the table, Susan smirked. "Then well met, Heir Nott," she greeted, offering an open-palmed bow. "Sit down. We'll catch you up."

.-. .

Harry spent more nights than he probably should down in the Chamber of Secrets. He knew it was inadvisable — when added to the nights he spent with Draco, he was coming back past curfew often enough to be incredibly suspect should any of his dorm-mates notice. He was lucky that Ron was such a sound sleeper, or Dumbledore would surely know by now that Harry was up to something.

He couldn't help himself; he was learning so much from Salazar. The founder was more than happy to teach him about the history of his life and the school, regaling Harry with stories of his travels from Persia to England in his early teens, and meeting the other three founders. While Harry browsed the office library looking for books on horcruxes, Salazar explained to him the truth behind the story of the 'tragic fight' between himself and the other three founders. Apparently, Salazar had left the school not because of his disgust at them allowing muggleborns, but because his cousin had become a Dark Lord back in Persia and he felt it his duty to go and bring him to heel. The other founders, and his own wife and children, had not wanted him to leave, and that was what they had fought over. Salazar had gone back to Persia, and died there in the fight against his cousin.

It was an awful tale, made all the worse by how Harry knew time had twisted it.

When Salazar wasn't telling him about the founding of Hogwarts, he was guiding Harry through his library, recommending books he thought the boy might be interested in. Harry didn't have the free time to get stuck in to any of them really, with his busy schedule, but one day when things were calmer he was going to *devour* those bookshelves.

And some nights, like this one, Salazar sat and watched Harry work on his magic, occasionally offering advice. Mostly he was silent on those nights, especially when Harry was working on his animagus form.

He was getting closer and closer to achieving the final transformation. The book Sirius had given him said that after the partial transformations there would be a sort of wall, where the body's magic was trying to figure out how to get the whole form to shift at once. Harry had hit that wall, and just *knew* he was close to pushing past it.

He sat on the sofa, deep in his magic, chasing down the sneaky little fox within him. It was getting more and more wily, like it was aware how close Harry was and wanted to make him *really* work for it. He raced through his own mindscape, focus entirely on the dark red creature, the white tail-tip bobbing along in front of him. Putting on an extra burst of energy, he lurched forward, and pounced.

And opened his eyes.

The world was different. He was much lower down, for one, but even without that everything was... sharper. The colours were muted, but somehow it all felt so much *more*.

He cocked his head, looking down at his paws. His tail twitched.

“Oho! You’ve done it, lad!” He looked up — he could understand the hissing language, but had no hope of speaking it back.

He stood on four wobbly legs, jumping down from the sofa and landing in a sprawled heap. Above him, he heard Salazar chuckle.

There was no mirror in the room, and Harry wished he’d known how successful he would be so he could have conjured one. All he could do was turn a tight circle trying to get a good look at himself; his tail waved in the corner of his vision, and he chased it for a few moments, before tripping over his own feet and rolling into the side of the desk.

He sat back on his haunches, pushing away all the curious smells and sounds around him. He had to change back. He couldn’t be a fox forever.

It was almost as hard as the initial transformation. This time in his mind he was chasing down his own memories, trying to remember the feel of hands and feet and human skin, of a bipedal body, of wearing clothes. It seemed foolish that he should forget such a thing when he’d inhabited a human body for fifteen and a half years, but right now all he could think were fox thoughts, and all he could feel were fox feelings.

It took time. But eventually, Harry was himself again, sat on the floor of the office with his glasses askew.

“Well done, lad!” Salazar enthused, applauding politely from his portrait. Harry beamed at him.

It would take practice before he could switch between forms as effortlessly as Sirius did, but he’d done it.

He was an animagus, now.

He couldn’t *wait* to show his godfathers.

.-.-.-.

Arriving to set up the Room for the last HA meeting before Christmas, Harry did not expect the place to be decorated. At first, he wondered if it was the castle getting cheeky with him — then he took a closer look at the baubles hanging from the ceiling, realised they all had his face on them, and knew it must have been a gesture from Dobby instead. A quick wave of his wand transfigured them into regular golden baubles, just in time for the first group of people to arrive.

“Putting up mistletoe, hmm?” Susan remarked, looking up at the white berries hung in the centre of the room. “Something you’re trying to tell us?”

Harry blushed, and Susan cackled at him.

She wasn't the only one who spotted the mistletoe. The twins thought it was a grand idea to charm it to float around the room, and each time two people stood beneath it they couldn't move until they kissed.

"It's to practice being aware of your surroundings," Fred declared brightly, looking far too devious when his brother ended up stuck under the mistletoe with Blaise Zabini. George got him back for that one, still blushing from the soft peck Blaise had given him — Fred was abruptly rooted to the spot right beside Zacharias Smith, when he'd been creeping past the boy trying to slip some kind of rubber worm down the back of his robes.

No one seemed truly bothered by the antics, so Harry let it slide; it was only a review lesson, as he didn't want to start anything new right before a three week break.

It was amazing, seeing how far they had all come since the first session, just a couple of months ago. Everyone in the room was capable of stunning, disarming and blocking even while dodging spells, and they were racing through the OWL curriculum. Harry wouldn't be surprised if he had even the fourth years up to NEWT level by the time exams rolled around.

He hoped Umbridge had been exposed as a shit teacher by then, or people might think her methods had actually *worked*.

"I've got a bit of homework for you all," Harry declared as the session came to a close. A chorus of groans rang through the room. "Don't worry, it's nothing difficult." Merlin knew they all had enough actual homework to do over the break. "I want each of you over Christmas to think of one spell you don't know that you think would be handy to have in a fight. Doesn't have to be an offensive spell," he added, as they had learned over the weeks that with some creative usage, practically *anything* could be an offensive spell, "any spell, as long as you can give me a reason you think it'll be useful. Whether it's something you read in a book, or heard about from someone you know — first meeting after Christmas, you'll share the spells you found, and we'll all learn it." Unless they found some *very* obscure sources, the chances were either Harry would know the spell already, or either Snape or Remus would and could teach it to him.

That seemed to be the kind of homework everyone could get on board with, so it was a cheerful group that dispersed when Harry called it a night, wishing Harry a Merry Christmas on their way out. As the group began to thin out, Harry noticed Cho stood alone off to one side. He frowned, and when Neville gestured for them to leave, Harry waved him on ahead.

"You alright, Cho?" he asked, approaching her once it was just the two of them left.

She was by the section of the mirror that had turned into the group's informal message board. It had started with a request for tutoring help in other subjects, stuck to the mirror by a stressed-out Parvati who was convinced she was going to fail all her exams. Since then it had evolved into other requests, as well as little notes of encouragement and support, even a few anonymous love notes among the mix. There were photos, too, thanks to Colin Creevey; pictures of members of the group casting spells, or laughing together, or suffering the hilarious results of a Weasley Twins prank.

And at the top, like a reminder of what it was all for, was a picture of Cedric Diggory. He was in his Triwizard uniform, but it wasn't the picture from the paper. It was of him before the third task, his friends crowding around him like he'd already won. The last picture taken before he'd died. And Harry knew Cho had taken it.

"He would've loved all this," Cho said, finally breaking the silence. She turned, gesturing to the room at large. "Everyone coming together like this. Last year, it made him so happy when people started studying outside of their house groups. And when you and Viktor and Fleur and him all worked together for the tasks." Her smile quivered, heartbreakingly sad.

"He was a Hufflepuff," Harry said, and a sharp laugh burst from her lips.

"*Such a fucking Hufflepuff. Wanted everyone to be friends and stand together, stand up for each other.*" She shook her head, tears now trailing down her cheeks. "Like I said. He would've loved this."

Harry reached out an arm, tucking her into his side, and together they stood and watched the picture of Cedric laugh and smile and blow kisses at the camera. "I got a letter from Fleur the other day. She asked if I was going home over the holidays, wondered if I wanted to meet up. She... she said Cedric told her, last year, that Christmas was his favourite time of the year. That he loved the Yule Ball, because it felt like Hogwarts was finally having the celebration that Christmas deserved." She sniffled, and Harry squeezed her tighter. "Fleur thought I might want something to look forward to instead of just sitting at home and thinking about how much Cedric turned into a giant puppy at Christmas and how quiet it is without him,"

"Did you reply?" Harry asked, his heart constricting. He couldn't imagine being in Cho's position, being surrounded by people who had moved on when your heart still felt like it was torn apart.

"Yeah. We're going to get coffee on Boxing Day. Some muggle place in France; she's sending a portkey for me that may or may not be legal." Cho managed a weak grin, and Harry snorted. That sounded like Fleur. "She said there will be coffee and croissants and possibly snow, and an ice skating rink where we can both make fools of ourselves because neither of us knows how to skate. So then I can look back on this Christmas and know that I wasn't sad all the time. Because Cedric wouldn't want me to be sad."

"I'm sure you'll both have a wonderful time," Harry said sincerely. "She's right. He'd want you to be happy."

"I know." Cho sniffled again. "He'd be so proud of you, y'know." She turned to look at him, smiling through her tears. "Protecting everyone like this. Finding ways to keep everyone positive even when there's Umbridge and You-Know-Who and everything." Her smile widened. "He'd say you're being quite Hufflepuff yourself."

"From him, I'd take that as the highest compliment." He looked back at the picture, feeling a stab of pain in his chest, that gaping hole from the summer starting to feel raw around the edges again.

"Hey, Harry?"

“Yeah?”

“Do you... are you still seeing whoever it is you were snogging at the Yule Ball last year?”
The question was quiet, and made Harry tense. “You don’t have to tell me who.”

“Yeah, I am,” he admitted, unable to stop his smile when he thought about Draco. Cho wiped at her eyes, nodding decisively.

“Good. I’m glad.” She looked back to Cedric’s picture, and took a deep breath. “You hold onto him, yeah? Because... because you never know how long you’ve got with the people you love.”

Harry felt something wet slide down the side of his nose, and he realised that he was crying, too. “I will,” he promised, pulling Cho into a tight hug, lips pressed to her forehead. “Cho, I’m so sorry.”

Her whole body shook with a sob. “It’s okay,” she said. “It’ll be okay. These spells you’re teaching us all will keep us safe, and hopefully — hopefully no one else will end up like Cedric.”

That wasn’t a guarantee Harry could make, and they both knew it, but he nodded all the same, his tears dripping onto her hair.

He couldn’t say how long they stood there, hugging and crying silently, both lost in their memories of a Hufflepuff boy with so much love in his heart and so much life left to live. Eventually, Cho pulled back with an awkward, wet chuckle. “I didn’t mean to cry all over you,” she admitted.

“We’ll call it even,” Harry replied, wiping at his own face.

“Alright. I’m gonna go back to Ravenclaw, I think. Have a good Christmas, Harry.”

“Have a good Christmas, Cho. Give Fleur a hug from me.”

Cho smiled, then stepped up to the mirror. She kissed her fingertips, reaching up to press them tenderly to Cedric’s photographic cheek. Then, with one last attempt at a smile in Harry’s direction, she disappeared through the Ravenclaw door.

Harry let out a long, shaky breath in the silence of the room. He looked at the photograph, the boy still beaming. “I’m trying, Cedric,” he murmured. “I’m trying.”

And then he too left the room. But not to go back to his common room.

There was still forty minutes or so until curfew — Harry had ended the session early, in the spirit of the season — and he ducked into an alcove to pull the Marauders’ Map from his bag, his heart hammering in his chest. “I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.”

Spidery lines spilled across the map’s surface. Harry scanned them desperately, looking for one dot in particular. *There.* Draco Malfoy, in the library, with Theo and Pansy.

Harry set off at a brisk pace.

He donned his invisibility cloak before he reached the library, carefully sneaking through the doors when a Gryffindor second year sped through them. He dodged the students hard at work, not making even a whisper of sound, until he found the trio of Slytherins. They were all reading silently, and Harry crept up, placing an invisible hand on Draco's arm. He felt the blond tense.

"*Come with me,*" he breathed, hardly louder than a whisper, his lips right next to Draco's ear. The Slytherin immediately relaxed, then leaned forward and shut his book.

"I'm going to head back. I'll see you two later."

Neither of his companions offered to go with him, which Harry was grateful for. He walked close behind the blond on the way out of the library, then reached out to grab the sleeve of his robe.

They didn't go far; there was a hidden room behind a tapestry that they had used for heirs meetings in the past, and Harry ducked into it, pulling Draco along and warding the entrance. Then he dropped the cloak. "Hey."

Draco, who had been wearing a sultry smile, immediately frowned in concern. "Harry? What's the matter?" He stepped forward, cupping Harry's face with both hands. "Have you been crying?"

"I love you," Harry blurted, watching the blond's face go slack. "I—I was just talking with Cho, about Cedric, and something she said—I love you," he repeated, slower this time, words full of emotion. His heart pounded hard against his ribs, blood rushing in his ears. "I need you to know that. In case—I just need you to know."

The words that had been filling his heart for so long still felt *small* when said aloud, like such a simple thing as *love* could not describe the depth of his feelings for this beautiful boy, but it would have to do for now.

"You daft Gryffindor," Draco said eventually, his face lighting up with the most incredibly *fond* look, his arms moving to wrap loosely around Harry. "Nothing's going to happen to me. I'll be right here in the castle all Christmas," he promised. "But I love you too, of *course* I do, surely you've guessed by now. I'm not exactly subtle."

Harry's rabbiting heart suddenly felt lighter than air and huge inside his chest, his thoughts all vanishing in favour of hearing those words in Draco's voice directed at him, echoing in every corner of his mind.

"I'd hoped," he admitted sheepishly, and Draco chuckled, kissing him, achingly tender.

"I love you, Harry Potter," he declared, grey eyes bright. "Merlin help me, but I love you."

Had every dementor in Azkaban appeared right then, Harry was sure he could have powered a patronus strong enough to send them all right back where they belonged.

Draco loved him.

.-.-.-.

His body was small; sleek, powerful. Was he a fox again?

No. That wasn't right. He was... lower. His belly sliding along stone, his eyes peering through darkness. He was in a corridor, alone.

Not alone.

A man sat ahead of him. Asleep, or at least most of the way there. Entirely unaware of Harry's approach. Harry continued forward, tongue flicking out to taste the scent of the man. His Master had warned him there might be someone there, had said only to bite if necessary.

*What was necessary, when Harry felt the urge to **hunt** ?*

*He tried to resist it, hoping to move unnoticed past the man. But something startled him, and he jerked awake. Suddenly, his wand was out, and fear flooded Harry's system. He reared back, baring his fangs, and **struck** .*

*Hot, coppery blood spilled between his lips, his fangs sinking deeper into the man's flesh, aiming to crush, to **destroy** . The man cried out, then didn't cry at all, slumping to the cold floor. Harry looked at his face.*

He knew that face.

*Something was wrong. Something was **very** wrong.*

“HARRY!”

He woke with a gasp like a drowning man, lurching into an upright position, pain searing through his body. Neville was at his side, chalk-white with fear. Behind him, Harry's other three dorm-mates stood wary-eyed. Even Ron looked concerned, behind his scowl.

Suddenly, the dream — *not a dream*, his mind insisted — flashed behind his eyes, and he tensed. “Someone get McGonagall,” he rasped, chest still heaving. Then he rolled to the side, and vomited over the edge of the bed.

He vaguely heard the thud of rapid footsteps, his eyes squeezed shut as he tried not to vomit again; he felt like his scar was trying to melt itself off his face, the pain radiating down his neck and spine, making every breath agony.

“Harry, you’re shaking,” Neville said worriedly. “What do I do? What happened?”

“Dream,” Harry muttered, sweat cooling on his body. His legs were tangled in the sheets and it felt far too constricting, so he kicked them away the best he could. “Voldemort. Attack.”

Vaguely, he heard a lilted murmuring that had to be Seamus — if the Irish boy hadn’t thought Harry was insane before, he probably did now.

Harry's heart was pounding, and he reached out to grip Neville's forearm. "McGonagall," he insisted. He had to tell someone, he had to get help, *fast*, before it was too late.

"She's coming. Dean's gone to get her," Neville assured. "Harry, what do you mean, *attack*?"

He was saved having to answer by the sound of two sets of footsteps, and suddenly a tall figure in a tartan dressing gown was striding across the dorm. Neville pressed Harry's glasses onto his face, and when Harry looked up the Gryffindor housemistress' face was pinched, her eyes full of concern. "What's going on up here?" she asked, studying Harry's wrecked form. "What's the matter, Potter?"

"Mr Weasley was attacked," Harry blurted, seeing Ron freeze out of the corner of his eye. "Voldemort's snake. She got him. I—I need to see the headmaster. He has to help him." He never thought he'd be *volunteering* to go see Dumbledore, but needs must when the devil drives, and the devil had *definitely* been driving Harry right into that snake's body.

McGonagall's lips pursed. For a moment Harry worried she wouldn't believe him, would insist he was only dreaming. He hated himself for being so *foolish*, for not telling anyone but his guardians about the dreams — surely no one would take him seriously now!

But perhaps she knew something he didn't, because after a moment she gave one single, sharp nod.

"Yes, I believe you do. Come on, Potter, up you get."

A wave of her wand had the vomit on the floor vanishing, and Harry scrambled to shove his feet into his slippers.

"I'm coming too," Ron declared stubbornly, stepping forward. "It's my dad he's talking about."

There wasn't time to argue, and McGonagall seemed to know it, so she merely huffed and started walking. Harry squeezed Neville's hand in assurance, then followed the stern woman out of the dorm, hurrying down the stairs with Ron hot on his heels.

For an older woman, McGonagall could move quickly when she wanted to; they were at Dumbledore's office within minutes, the gargoyle moving aside. Harry's heart raced as he stood on the moving staircase, trying frantically to pull together enough brain cells to figure out what to say to the headmaster. He had to make him see how important this was, how much Mr Weasley was in danger, but he couldn't give away what he knew about his connection to Voldemort.

For the first time since the Triwizard Tournament, Harry stepped into Dumbledore's office.

It was past midnight, but Dumbledore had clearly been up for a while; wearing a truly lurid dressing gown, he sat at his desk while the portraits of previous heads of school chattered at him. They all fell silent at the intrusion.

“Oh my,” Dumbledore greeted, frowning, leaning forward in his chair. “Whatever is the matter?”

“Potter’s had a nightmare,” McGonagall said, and had Harry been paying attention he would’ve seen the brief flash of triumph pass through Dumbledore’s gaze. As it was he was trying his best *not* to look the man in the eye, sure his Occlumency shields would be scrambled to all hell.

“Not a nightmare,” he insisted. “It was real. Sir, Mr Weasley’s been attacked by a snake, he needs help.” *He’s dying*, he thought desperately, heart clenched.

“How did you see this?” Dumbledore asked, and for a second Harry thought the man was just *outright asking* Harry about his connection with Voldemort.

“In a dream, but it wasn’t a dream, more like a- a vision?” He stuttered, only half faking his confusion.

“You misunderstand me,” Dumbledore pressed. “Where were you, in the dream? Watching from above, perhaps?”

Oh, Harry thought, followed by, he knows.

He knew exactly what had caused Harry to travel outside his own mind that night.

“I was the snake,” he admitted, and suddenly a horrifying thought occurred to him.

He had been within the snake’s mind, just like he was sometimes inside Voldemort’s. And it had felt comfortable. More comfortable than he anticipated an animal being possessed would feel.

The snake was a horcrux.

His lips pressed tightly together as he tried not to react to this realisation — thankfully, Dumbledore at least seemed to care about Mr Weasley’s life more than his own academic curiosity; he was talking to a couple of the paintings, telling them to raise the alarm. The two disappeared from their framed immediately.

“But he could be anywhere!” Ron burst out in a panic, and Harry’s jaw clenched.

Dumbledore knew exactly where Mr Weasley was, because he’d sent him there.

The Department of Mysteries. Guarding that *fucking* prophecy.

Did Voldemort really think his *snake* would be able to get to it? Or was he just using her to scope the place out?

“You’re still shaking, Potter. Sit down,” McGonagall urged softly, nudging Harry towards one of the chintz armchairs opposite the desk.

Dumbledore, meanwhile, was doing something daft and flashy with one of his silver instruments, clearly trying to make Harry curious as he muttered to himself and waved his wand through a puff of smoke shaped like a rearing snake's head. But Harry didn't care; he knew more than Dumbledore thought he did, more than perhaps Dumbledore himself, and he just wanted to make sure Mr Weasley was okay before he went and passed out again. He was *exhausted*, utterly drained of energy, head pounding.

After what felt like an age, the two painted ex-heads returned to their portraits. The man assured that Mr Weasley had been found, and soon after the woman relayed his arrival at St Mungo's — in quite an awful state, from the sounds of it. Ron shuddered violently, and Dumbledore pursed his lips.

"Right, then. Minerva, if you would please wake the rest of the Weasley children and bring them here..."

"Of course." With one last worried look at Harry, McGonagall hurried to the door. She paused in the threshold. "Headmaster, what about Molly?"

Ron let out a quiet moan, and Dumbledore's face drew tighter. "I will send Fawkes, once he has returned from keeping watch. Though she may already know, with that excellent clock of hers..."

McGonagall left, and Dumbledore began to rummage through a cupboard until he found an old tea kettle. That kettle became a portkey in short order, and Harry was vaguely aware of the headmaster shouting for Phineas Nigellus Black, his resident painted spy in Grimmauld Place. A weak smile twitched at his lips; was the man's portrait even still in the house, after Sirius' decorating spree?

His hands clenched over the arms of the chair like it was the only thing keeping him upright. Harry had done his bit, he'd raised the alarm, now he just wanted to *sleep*. But he didn't think Dumbledore was going to let him go back to Gryffindor Tower.

At least it sounded like he would be seeing Sirius, soon.

McGonagall returned with Ginny and the twins, all dressed in pyjamas and pale with fear. Dumbledore explained what had happened in a very vague and unhelpful sort of way. Harry knew he'd be giving a proper explanation when they were alone, but they didn't seem to be able to focus on anything past the fact that their dad was hurt, regardless.

There would be time for explanations once Mr Weasley was okay.

Fawkes flashed in with a warning that was apparently about Umbridge, and McGonagall was off again. Dumbledore bid them all gather around the portkey, and Harry did so, his body aching with every movement.

Then the headmaster called his name, and instinctively Harry looked up. Green eyes met blue, dead on, and he only had a brief moment to panic — but instead of the prod of Legilimency, Harry merely felt a wave of *hatred*, and suddenly he had fangs once more and would very much like to sink them into Dumbledore's neck, and his scar was on fire—

And then the portkey pulsed with magic, and he was gone.

Chapter 59

Chapter Notes

I hope this makes up for last week's cliffhanger, pals ;)

They appeared in the dimly-lit kitchen at Twelve Grimmauld Place, Harry's knees buckling the second he touched down. The only reason he didn't fall right to the floor was through a quick save by Fred, whose strong arm wrapped around his middle. "Easy does it, kid," the tall redhead murmured, keeping Harry upright.

"Harry."

The next thing Harry knew he was bundled against a familiar-smelling chest, large hands pressing at his shoulders. *Sirius*. He choked back a sob, leaning into his godfather's embrace.

"What happened? Phineas Nigellus said Arthur's been injured." Sirius' question was directed at the Weasley children.

"*He* had some sort of mad vision, woke up screaming, saying Dad had been attacked by a snake," Ron declared viciously.

When Harry looked up, all eyes were on him.

"Harry, what happened?" Ginny asked gently. Harry sighed.

"I'll make some tea," Sirius announced, depositing Harry on one of the kitchen chairs and hurrying towards the kettle. "You can explain everything then."

Harry didn't wait for the tea to be ready; with his gaze firmly on the wooden tabletop, he relayed the events of his dream.

At some point while he was talking, Bill and Charlie arrived. Harry wasn't sure who sent word to them, but he was glad when they appeared, Bill immediately gathering Ginny in a hug, turning his anxious blue gaze on Harry.

Harry thought about altering his story, about telling them he watched from outside the snake rather than from within; not letting on that he had felt the way the fangs had sunk into warm flesh. But he'd already said it to Dumbledore, and he trusted all of them — except Ron, but at this point Harry couldn't give a fuck about Ron Weasley's opinions.

"Does Mum know?" Charlie asked urgently. Sirius approached the table with a tray covered in cups of tea, and he squeezed Charlie's shoulder gently.

“I expect Dumbledore is warning her now.”

Ginny had to be talked down from haring off to St Mungo’s, reminded that if even Mrs Weasley hadn’t been informed by the hospital yet, it would look mighty suspicious if all her kids showed up with Harry Potter in tow.

“Let’s all just settle down,” Bill said, his low voice calm, and his siblings reluctantly took seats at the table. “Even if we went to St Mungo’s, there’s nothing we can do to help. Dad’s being seen by the healers, they’ll be doing everything they can. Better for us to wait here than over there. Hospital tea is shit,” he added with a weak laugh, raising his cup towards Sirius. Only Charlie snorted at the joke.

The younger Weasleys didn’t seem convinced, but none dared argue with their eldest brother.

Harry sipped at his tea, hands trembling around his cup. Sirius took the seat beside him, leaning close until their shoulders were pressed together. “You alright, pup?”

A jerky nod. Then, smaller, a shake of his head. How could he be alright after seeing something like that?

It was a thousand times worse than the endless corridor running of his usual Department of Mysteries dreams. It was even worse than the occasional time he got a direct line into one of the Death Eater meetings, watching — *feeling* — Voldemort torture his loyal subjects.

This was a visceral attack on a man Harry had known since he was twelve, a man who had always treated him with kindness. If Mr Weasley died...

Harry clenched his jaw tight. He wouldn’t think like that. He couldn’t.

Fawkes flashed in with a note from Mrs Weasley, telling them her husband was still alive and she was on her way to the hospital. Far from reassuring them, it just made the Weasley children realise how dire their father’s situation was. Harry’s stomach roiled, and he jumped to his feet. “I need the loo,” he declared, practically sprinting from the kitchen.

He vaguely noticed that Mrs Black’s portrait was no longer on the wall, tearing past it and heading for the small toilet just beneath the stairs. He retched into the sink, bringing up the tea he’d just drank, hot tears leaking from his eyes.

“Easy, kid.” It was Bill, and for a moment Harry was struck by how similar he and Fred had sounded that he almost laughed. The curse-breaker’s hand rubbed soothingly at his back. “Any more coming up?”

Harry shook his head. “Don’t think so.” He turned, meeting Bill’s gaze intently. “Bill. The vision— being inside the snake felt like being inside Voldemort’s head. *Exactly* like it.”

The redhead’s tanned face was pale and waxy. “I had a feeling you might say that,” he sighed. “She’s another, then?”

“She’s got to be.” A fourth horcrux. How many had the man even made??

“Right. *Fuck.*” Bill ran a hand over his face. “At least we know. Bugger all we can do about that one, with how close he keeps her.”

That was definitely a problem for a future night. “Do you think he wanted me to see it?” If Voldemort knew he could see into the snake as well as his own head, would he start suspecting the truth?

Bill shrugged. “No way to tell. But if it helps, I don’t think so. He might not even know you’ve seen it. In fact, you’d probably know if he did. Didn’t you say you can feel it when he’s pissed off?” A ghost of a smile crossed Bill’s face. “I’d say raising the alarm in time to get Dad to St Mungo’s would probably piss him off, if he knew it was you.”

That made sense, and Harry finally felt like he could breathe.

“Come on,” Bill urged. “Let’s go back to the kitchen. Unless — you didn’t actually need the loo, did you?”

Harry snorted, shaking his head, and let Bill gently corral him back to the gathering in the kitchen. Now he was looking properly, he realised Sirius had redecorated in here, too — not massively, but where there had once been dark wallpaper there was now cheery duck-egg blue paint, and he’d replaced the grimy old tiles with fresh white ones. The floor, too, had been cleaned until the dark grey stone gleamed.

Sirius offered him another cup of tea. They all sat in silence for a long, long time.

Harry didn’t know what to do. There was nothing he could say to make it better, especially not when anything he might say would likely be of the vein that when he felt his fangs going in, he didn’t feel any bones break, so that was probably good.

That wouldn’t be reassuring to anyone.

Sirius kept a hand on the back of his neck for a while, a soothing weight, and absently Harry wondered if Remus was around. He didn’t ask, though. It didn’t seem appropriate.

At around three, Bill got a message from his mother; a request to come to the hospital. Apparently, someone had been sent to his flat, but he obviously wasn’t there.

The note didn’t say anything about Mr Weasley’s status. Bill was grey-faced when he floored out of the kitchen.

It was ten past five by the time anything else happened; all of them were beginning to doze off around the table, but stubbornly refused to go to bed. Harry didn’t feel he could go up, even though he felt like he’d been hit by the Hogwarts Express, not when his friends were worrying. Not when they didn’t know if Mr Weasley would make it.

When Mrs Weasley finally strode through the door, Harry was jostled abruptly as his pillow — George’s shoulder — moved, the redhead turning to look at his mum.

“He’s going to be alright,” she announced, exhaustion threading her voice. “Bill’s sitting with him now. We can all go see him later.”

It was like a plug had been pulled in the room, the tension draining visibly. "Thank Merlin," Charlie said hoarsely. Then he pushed his chair back, eyes a little too wide. "Breakfast, then? I'll get the eggs on." He reached for the frying pan on the stove, fumbling and nearly dropping it. In an instant, Sirius was up beside him, hands on the redhead's shoulders.

"Let me take care of it," the animagus said, voice soft. "Go hug your mum."

Charlie looked back at his mum and siblings, nodding jerkily. "If you're sure."

Harry eagerly approached the stove to help, desperate to have something to do that wasn't sitting in the miasma of grief and relief that surrounded the Weasley family. They might call him their brother, but he was not one of them. And with his feelings still very mixed regarding Mrs Weasley, he didn't want to intrude.

Between the pair of them, he and Sirius managed to cook enough breakfast for everyone. But when Harry went to get plates to dish it all up, he found himself wrapped in a rib-crushing embrace. "Thank you, Harry," Mrs Weasley breathed emphatically. "If not for you, they might not have found Arthur for hours. By then... well, I don't like to think what would've happened."

His stomach squirmed guiltily — even now, he wanted to yell at the woman, to ask if this too was a lie, to demand why she had stolen from his vaults and helped Dumbledore manipulate him and whatever else she might know. But at the same time he wanted to sink into her hug, overjoyed that Mr Weasley was going to be okay, that he'd managed to help.

"I'm just glad he's alright," he said wearily, stepping awkwardly out of her embrace. "I— I need to get the plates."

He wasn't even that hungry, nor was he particularly in the mood to celebrate, but everyone else was so high on relief and lack of sleep that Harry couldn't get away. So he sat there, picking at his eggs, trying to rid himself of the taste of blood in his mouth.

. . .

Harry had never been to St Mungo's before.

He had expected the wizarding hospital to be somewhere by Diagon Alley, but instead it was just past Bond Street station. Seeing the bustling crowd of muggles out Christmas shopping was jarring, and Harry stopped for a moment just to stare — until Moody grabbed him firmly by the shoulder and shoved him forward.

He'd managed to sleep, some; with visiting hours not until the afternoon, Sirius had suggested everyone get some rest. Harry hadn't expected to be able to do so after the vision he'd had, but as soon as he was in his bed in his room surrounded by familiar things, he dropped off quite quickly. Luckily, Voldemort had not disturbed him further.

So now he was with the cluster of redheads, as well as Tonks and Moody, headed for St Mungo's. They turned a corner, stopping outside a run-down department store that all the muggles were walking straight past. Harry was only a little surprised when the mannequin

beckoned them forward, and he was nudged to step straight through the sheet glass shop front.

Being inside a magical hospital reception was about as chaotic as Harry might have imagined. He hardly knew where to look, seeing people with all sorts of bizarre ailments and injuries. He tried not to stare too hard at any one of them, following Mrs Weasley as she asked the Welcome Witch for directions.

The number of people in lime-green robes was almost blinding, and privately Harry much preferred the muggles with their white coats. Though at least you could find the healers easily, if you needed one. Those robes looked like they would glow in the dark!

An image popped into his head; Draco, older than he was now, wearing one of the vibrant robes and looking down at it as if it was a personal offence to be on his body. His lips twitched with a smile — even the bright green would probably look good on Draco. Attractive bastard.

Harry tried to linger back with Moody and Tonks, but the Weasleys were having none of that, and so he let himself be strong-armed into the ward. Mr Weasley looked to be in good spirits, propped up on several pillows and reading the *Daily Prophet*. He positively beamed at them all, setting the newspaper aside. “Oh, hello! Bill just left, had to pop into work. Shouldn’t you be at work, too, Charlie?”

“Don’t be daft, Dad,” Charlie said, voice thick with emotion. “Called in sick, didn’t I?”

Mr Weasley’s gaze was an attempt at being scolding, but he was clearly just happy to see his son. He held his good arm out for a hug. “Go on, I won’t break. Just be gentle with me; I’m not one of your dragons, you know!”

Charlie didn’t waste any time, hugging his father as tight as he dared. “Merlin, Dad,” he sighed, pulling back with a strained smile on his face. “Of everyone in the family, I thought it’d be me ending up in the Creature Injuries ward, one of these days.”

“Well, don’t take this as a challenge,” Mrs Weasley muttered roughly, leaning in to kiss her husband’s cheek. “You look peaky, dear.”

Harry hung at the back of the group, letting the Weasleys greet their injured family member, listening to Mr Weasley babble on about the ward and his fellow patients and how his wound was healing. He kept insisting he felt fine, but Harry could see the strain around his eyes, the wrinkles that were a little deeper than usual. He had the look of a man hiding how much pain he was in.

Fred and George began to ask questions; what their dad had been doing in the Ministry, how the snake got in, who had sent it. Really, they needn’t have bothered — Harry had all those answers, thereabouts, and would be happy to tell them most of it later. But it made Mrs Weasley cross, them asking about Order business, so the kids were soon shoved out and told to send Mad-Eye and Tonks in.

That was not going to stop the twins, who pulled a pair of Extendable Ears from their pockets, and set up to listen.

“Dumbledore seems to have been waiting for Harry to see something like this...”

“...Always been something funny about that Potter lad...”

“—Well, if You-Know-Who’s possessing him—“

Harry pulled out his own Extendable Ear, but the damage had been done; the rest of them were looking at him with wary, alarmed gazes.

Harry looked at the twins and Ginny, trying to silently assure them that he knew what was going on. Ron, on the other hand, was staring at Harry like he was Voldemort himself.

They didn’t get a chance to talk further — Mr Weasley needed his bandages checked, and Mrs Weasley decided that was enough for one day. Charlie stayed with his dad, but the rest of them were shuffled off back to Grimmauld. Harry was silent for the whole journey, to the point where even Mrs Weasley noticed.

“Why don’t you all go up to the small drawing room?” she suggested once they were inside the house. In the light of day, Sirius’ renovation efforts were entirely visible; the entrance hall was now a bright, welcoming place, with no screaming portraits or creepy taxidermied house elves in sight. “Or perhaps get a few more hours sleep — especially you, Harry dear, you look like you could use it.”

He nodded, but when he went upstairs he didn’t go to his room. He went with the others to the small drawing room; now a cosy little living room, with squashy sofas and a landscape painting of a forest on the wall above the mantle.

“So are you going to tell us what the hell that was all about, then?” Ron spat, and Harry should’ve known he wouldn’t be able to hold it in much longer.

“I’ve already told you what happened,” Harry sighed, running a hand through his hair. “If Dumbledore knows something about it, that’s news to me.” But wasn’t it telling that the headmaster had apparently been *expecting* such a thing, even with Harry keeping his previous visions a secret.

“You heard what Moody said,” Ron retorted. “What if You-Know-Who really is possessing you? Are we supposed to just get on with things, let him see all our secrets through your eyes?”

“Don’t think Old Voldie cares much about your secrets, Ronnikins,” Fred remarked wryly.

“Besides, Harry’s not possessed.” Ginny’s voice was sharp. “As the only person in this room who has *been* possessed by You-Know-Who, I can assure you of that.” She turned to Harry, one red eyebrow raised. “You’re not missing chunks of time, are you? Finding yourself somewhere with no idea how you got there?”

“No.”

“Exactly,” Ginny huffed, glaring at Ron. “Whatever it is, it’s not that.”

“But it is something!” Ron argued. “He wakes up screaming bloody murder about a snake, and a hundred miles away our dad is *dying!* You heard what he said; he was inside the snake. He bit Dad!”

“That’s enough!”

Harry whipped around — Remus was in the doorway, his eyes flashing gold. “Harry is not a danger,” he declared. “I understand it’s been an emotional twenty-four hours, but yelling about it isn’t going to solve everything.” He paused, giving the barest of frowns. “The headmaster is aware of things, Ron. If he was worried about Harry or anyone else’s safety, he would’ve said something.”

As much as Harry hated it, that was probably the best thing to say to reassure Ron Weasley — Dumbledore was taking care of it. Indeed, it seemed to take the wind out of the redhead’s sails. Harry scowled.

“I’m going to bed,” he muttered, squeezing past Remus and heading for the stairs. He wasn’t surprised to hear the werewolf following him; neither of them spoke until they were in Harry’s room, the door warded. Then, Remus opened his arms, and Harry sank into them gratefully.

“It’s good to see you, cub,” he said, running a hand through Harry’s hair. He leaned down, kissing Harry’s scar tenderly. “Are you alright?”

Harry scoffed. “Really?”

“Fine, stupid question,” Remus agreed, brows drawing together in amusement. He nudged Harry towards the bed, both of them sitting on the edge of the mattress. “What happened? I only got bits and pieces. Arthur is in St Mungo’s?”

Harry relayed the events of the night before, going into more detail with the vision than he had with the Weasley children. “I spoke to Bill — I think the snake is another horcrux.”

Remus’ frown deepened. “That does seem to be the case. I’ll need to speak with Severus to confirm it, but...” He didn’t need to say the rest; if anyone knew what Voldemort’s horcruxes felt like, it was Harry.

“I— there’s something else,” Harry admitted. Slowly, he confessed what had happened when he’d taken the portkey; when he’d looked Dumbledore in the eye by accident.

“You think he knows what you are?” Remus asked, worried. Harry nodded.

“If he didn’t before, he likely does now.” Having Voldemort lunge at him through Harry’s mind was a bit of a giveaway. “But... I’ve been thinking. I bet he’s known since summer, if not beforehand. He’s been avoiding me all term.” He’d thought at first that the lack of eye contact was his own doing, keeping himself safe from the man’s wandering Legilimency, but the more he thought back on it the more he realised that Dumbledore had been the one not

even looking anywhere near Harry. “I think he’s worried about what Voldemort can see through me. I think... I think he’s worried Voldemort can do Legilimency from within my mind.”

Remus ran a hand through his hair, letting out a slow breath. “That would explain some of the things Albus has said through Order meetings. Nothing blatant,” he added at Harry’s alarmed look. “Just cryptic comments about making sure you don’t know too much. Sirius and I thought he was just trying to keep you oblivious because he was worried you might piece things together about him, now you’ve broken free of the compulsions.”

“But he’s worried Voldemort can get into my mind, properly.” A bolt of fear shot through Harry. “He can’t, can he?”

“Absolutely not,” Remus said firmly. “Severus has checked for himself; your Occlumency shields are good, and the connection doesn’t work that way. He can access your dreams, draw you into his own mind, but he can’t get at your thoughts or memories.” He gave a wry, bitter smile. “If Voldemort knew what you knew, a lot more people would be dead; Severus likely at the top of the list.”

That was true. The tension eased from Harry’s shoulders. “But the longer he has to research the connection, the higher the chance of him figuring out I’m a horcrux.” Suddenly, he wished he’d been able to stay at Hogwarts for Christmas — the three weeks of break would have been a perfect time to scour Salazar’s library. “I want it out of me, Moony.”

Wiry arms wrapped around him. “I know, cub. Bill’s working on it, I promise you. But as awful as it is, it did allow you to save Arthur’s life last night.” He kissed the crown of Harry’s head. “And look on the bright side; at least Albus will keep out of your head, if he thinks you’ve got company in there.”

A weak smile tugged at Harry’s cheeks. That was a small victory, all things considered; but he’d take it.

He just worried what Dumbledore might do to try and get Voldemort *out*.

.-.-.-.

To the delight of mostly just Ron and Mrs Weasley, Hermione showed up at Grimmauld Place the next evening; Hogwarts had finished for Christmas, and apparently she had changed her mind about skiing with her parents.

Harry didn’t really care either way; he was keeping to himself for the most part, regardless. The twins and Ginny had mostly accepted his explanation that he knew why he’d seen through the snake’s eyes but he couldn’t tell them, but no one was really in the mood to do anything.

Sirius tried to keep them all busy with hanging Christmas decorations, saying that now he was done with his refurbishment of the house, it deserved to get dressed up for the occasion. Mostly it seemed a way to keep Ron and Hermione away from Harry, as they were all separated into the same pairs they’d been in for the summer’s cleaning efforts.

The animagus had stripped the wallpaper from Harry's room while he was away, but the rest he had waited for Harry to help with. At first, Harry had considered using the same decorating scheme as his room back at Seren Du, but that just made him miss his real home even more. So instead he changed it to a muted red and gold decor, liking the way it made Sirius light up with glee, to see such a Gryffindor room in his family's house.

That evening after dinner, Harry went up to his room to write a letter for Draco, apologising for not being able to say goodbye. He didn't write too much about his vision, just in case, but he wished the blond a good Christmas and promised to write again soon when he could. Signing the letter '*love, Harry*' made his stomach flutter. Next time he saw Remus, he would give him the letter to give to Snape; with luck, it would make it to Hogwarts before Christmas Day. Along with it, he passed on the green-wrapped stack of trashy wizarding romance novels he'd had George owl-order for him, wishing he could watch Draco's face when he opened that particular Christmas present.

It took an entire day of hanging around Grimmauld Place, stringing tinsel from every possible surface, before Harry remembered the *enormous* surprise he had for his godfathers. A devious grin crossed his face. That would cheer them up, for sure!

He managed to get them both to come up to his room without alerting Mrs Weasley, who never liked Harry spending too much time with Sirius. When the door was shut, Sirius eyed him worriedly. "What's the matter, pup? Did you have another vision?"

Harry shook his head, beaming. "No, nothing like that. I need to show you something." Then, without hesitation, he closed his eyes and became a fox.

He'd practiced a lot since the first transformation, and it was much easier now; he still couldn't change mid-stride like Sirius, but it didn't take ten minutes of meditation anymore.

Both men gasped, and Harry cocked his head, sitting on his haunches and watching their faces fill with pride. "Little Red!" Sirius cooed, and Harry hissed at the nickname. They were *not* calling him that!

Suddenly, Sirius was a huge shaggy dog. Harry's initial fox instinct was to run, but he pushed past it, bounding over to his canine godfather. They bumped noses, sniffing each other, and then Harry was treated to the delight of a big doggy tongue licking right across his muzzle, all the way up to his ear. He glared, feeling the slobber stick to his fur, and swiped out halfheartedly with a paw. Above them, Remus chuckled.

"That's amazing, Harry." Knees cracking with the effort, Remus sank down to sit cross-legged on the floor, holding his arms out expectantly. Harry bounded over, getting right in the man's lap so Remus could study his form. The werewolf smelled different to his keen fox senses, the predator in him obvious — but then he started scratching behind Harry's ear, and Harry *melted*.

"Gets them every time." Sirius had become human again, and was watching in amusement. "Pretty little thing, aren't you, pup? Let's get a proper look at you."

Remus stopped scratching his head, so Harry shook himself off and hopped between the men, showing off his fluffy tail and needle-sharp teeth. “You’ve done so well, Harry. I didn’t expect you to get it so quickly!”

“It took Jamie and I almost a whole year, and Peter nearly eighteen months.” Sirius was awed, stroking gently down Harry’s back. “Oh, he’s so *soft*, Moony!” A grin of childlike glee filled his face. “I always wanted a pet fox when I was little, y’know.” He swooped down to grab Harry in a cuddle, careful not to squish him. Harry yowled in mock-annoyance.

“Can you change back?” Remus asked. Harry screwed up his nose in concentration, and the next moment he was human-shaped once more, still in Sirius’ lap. If anything, Sirius just hugged him harder.

“So *proud*,” he declared, smacking a loud kiss to Harry’s cheek. “Our little prodigy, Moons!”

Harry blushed, unused to such blatant praise.

“Very impressive,” Remus agreed. “We’re incredibly proud.”

“Could I— this summer, if we’re back home...” Harry bit his lip, hesitant. “Could I run with you on the full moon? I’ll be really careful, I promise. I just... I want to be part of it.” It was something his father had done, something that felt like the greatest expression of family he could offer. Remus sucked in a quiet breath.

“We’ll take precautions,” he said eventually, and Harry’s heart soared. “If there’s even a *hint* of something going wrong, Sirius will get you out of there. But if, by summer, you still want to... we’ll try.” Then, he smiled, tears in his eyes. “I’d love to have you out there with us, Harry.”

Harry beamed at him.

“We’ll have to get you something really special for Christmas,” Sirius enthused. “Something to celebrate. Merlin, if Prongs could see you now!” There was a beat of heavy silence, and Harry swallowed thickly.

“I wish he was here. I wish they both were.” It still felt entirely selfish of Harry, to be pulling together his family when his parents could no longer be part of it. Especially in moments like now, something that was so wrought with echoes of the past. His father should have been the one teaching him his animagus transformation, the one bursting with pride at his success. He never got that chance.

“They are, pup,” Sirius insisted, squeezing him tight, one hand over Harry’s heart. “They’re right here. Always.”

A lump rose in Harry’s throat, and he swallowed past it thickly.

It wasn’t the same, but it would have to be enough.

.-. .

He should have known he couldn't successfully avoid Ron and Hermione forever. They ambushed him while he was in the library, doing his Christmas homework, having just sent a letter off to Susan with Hedwig. She was his best bet for finding out if he'd missed anything important in the last couple days of school, and he wanted to know how her aunt was doing with the Dumbledore case.

The pair walked right up to him, and Harry set his quill down, dread building. What did they want now? Was Ron still mad about the snake thing?

"So are you done being mad at us, yet?" Ron asked. Harry blinked.

"Sorry, what?"

"You've been awful to us since the summer," Hermione burst out. "I *know* it upset you that we didn't write to you, but Dumbledore told us not to say anything about the Order or where we were."

"Even if we had written to you it would've just pissed off your relatives," Ron added mulishly. "You can't be angry at us for that, mate."

"I know you had a bad summer, and we're really sorry, but honestly, Harry, you've been ignoring us all term and it's just not fair! We might have made mistakes, but we don't deserve the cold shoulder from you." Hermione spoke very quickly, like she'd rehearsed what she was going to say and wanted to get it all out before she was interrupted.

Harry stared at them both incredulously. *What??*

"I'm not ignoring you because you didn't write to me over the summer," he said flatly. They both looked taken-aback. "I'm ignoring you because I don't want to be friends with you anymore."

Ron's face went red with anger. "You just *decided* that, did you?" he snarled. "What, you're too good for us now?"

"*You* made it pretty clear how little our friendship meant when you decided to believe I'd put my own name in the Goblet of Fire, and spend half the year talking shit about me behind my back because of it!" Harry retorted sharply.

"Harry, he apologised for that," Hermione huffed, but Harry just rolled his eyes.

"Because you made him. And it didn't stop him saying things when he thought I wouldn't hear them." With Lavender and Parvati as his friends, Harry had heard every awful thing Ron had said about him. There was no way the redhead could come back from that, even if he wasn't spying for Dumbledore.

"But what about all the things we've gone through?" Hermione was tearful now. "The troll, and the stone, and everything with the Heir of Slytherin! Third year when you thought Sirius was trying to kill you. The Triwizard Tournament!"

“Shared trauma doesn’t mean I’m *obliged* to be friends with you, Hermione. Besides; you didn’t *go through* half of those! I was alone when I faced Quirrell, I was alone when I killed the basilisk, and seeing as I hardly spoke to *either* of you last year, you can’t say you were *with me* for the tournament either?”

“So you’re just going to throw it all away?” Hermione sobbed. “Four years of friendship?” She wiped at her eyes, then grew serious. “Harry, if this is about your vision — if you’re trying to push us away because you think Voldemort is in your head, that’s ridiculous.” She reached out to grab his hand, but he pulled back. “We’re *here for you*, Harry.”

“Now, when it suits you. When there’s things happening to me that you want to know about,” Harry shot back. “You always want to know *everything*, Hermione; where I’m going, what I’m doing — for the longest time I thought that was how friendship was supposed to go! But I know better, now. I’ve got *real friends*, now. Honest friends, who let me have my space and my secrets, and don’t treat me like I’m incapable of doing my own bloody homework without help.”

“Don’t talk to her like that,” Ron growled.

“I’ll talk to her how I want; she does the same to me!” Harry shouted. He got to his feet, grabbing his schoolwork in a haphazard bundle. “I’m sick of you two treating me like a child, and I understand that with things the way they are we’ll end up being around each other more often than not, but we’re *not friends*, alright? Friends don’t treat each other the way you’ve treated me. So just leave me alone.”

Before they could argue further, Harry stormed from the room — he *hated* the knot in his chest, hated that there was still a small part of him that wanted to rush back in there and apologise and smooth everything over, until they could all go back to the way things were. But he had seen too much of their true colours by now, and he knew there was no place for them in the life he was building for himself.

That didn’t mean it didn’t hurt to say it.

.-. .

Utterly oblivious to his godson’s emotional turmoil happening downstairs, Sirius was in one of the little-used upstairs parlours, a Bowie record spinning on the player, enjoying a bit of peace — and avoiding Molly Weasley.

He’d grown used to being mostly alone in the house outside Order meetings. Since the kids had gone to school, pretty much the only visitors he had were Remus, the two Weasley boys, Tonks and Kingsley. He had liked it that way.

Now the house was full again, and while he was delighted to have Harry back... it was a lot. *Molly* was a lot. While she was grateful he was allowing them to stay for the holidays, given the house’s proximity to St Mungo’s, she had gone right back into the mindset she’d had in the summer; namely, forgetting it was Sirius’ house and not her own. She had more opinions than he cared for about his decorating choices, and had entirely re-arranged his kitchen cupboards to her liking without so much as a by-your-leave. Sirius didn’t have it in him to

argue, not when he knew it would just end in another disappointed lecture from Albus about *doing his part for the cause*.

Because obviously letting Molly Weasley run roughshod over his silverware was absolutely vital to the war effort.

At least she couldn't throw out his family heirlooms in the name of *cleaning* anymore. Indeed, she didn't seem to know what to do with herself, now the house was in decent shape. It gave her less to needle him over in Order meetings, too; he was no longer the ragged escaped convict living in a disgusting, Dark hovel — a terrible role model for poor young Harry.

Sirius chuckled to himself. She didn't have much of a leg to stand on, anymore.

So lost in his thoughts, Sirius didn't notice the door creeping open.

"Is this a private party, or can anyone join in?" The smooth, lightly amused voice made the hair on the back of his neck stand on end, and Sirius looked up as Charlie Weasley snuck inside, shutting the door in his wake.

"Not just anyone, but I suppose you're alright," Sirius teased, winking. Charlie laughed, the sound tripping over Sirius' quickening pulse. "Thought you were with your dad."

"Just got back. They had to change his bandages again, and he hates us watching that." Charlie grimaced, and Sirius frowned; Arthur was having an awful lot of bandage changes, from the sounds of it. Was the venom still so potent?

Charlie sat down on the sofa beside Sirius, rather than in the armchair opposite. Sirius tried not to tense. "Harry's on the warpath again, by the way," the redhead remarked ruefully. "Heard him yelling at Ron and Hermione in the library on my way up. Sounds like they tried to tell him to get over himself and be friends with them again."

Sirius rolled his eyes. "Bet Harry loved that." He was surprised he hadn't heard the yelling from all the way up here. Harry had Lily's lungs on him when he truly got going.

"Gonna make for an interesting Christmas, that mix," Charlie mused. "Can't say I'm sad we're spending it here, though."

His blue eyes met Sirius' with a pointed kind of heat, and Sirius felt his breath catch, his tongue sticking to the roof of his mouth.

He hadn't thought Charlie's flirting would go on this long. He'd fully expected the redhead to laugh him off after a while; get bored, switch targets. Instead, he only seemed to get bolder. More serious.

Sirius was beginning to wonder if the flirting had ever been a joke to begin with.

"You won't miss your dragons over Christmas, then?" he asked lightly. A syrup-smooth chuckle spilled from Charlie's lips.

"I'll still see them plenty. But they're not much for the winter; half of them are snuggled up in their nests 'til spring." He gave the full force of that dimpled smile in Sirius' direction, and the animagus felt the urge to press his thumbs into the divots of those cheeks — preferably as he got up close and personal with the inside of Charlie's mouth.

He swallowed hard. "That's good, then. The more the merrier, round here."

"All we need is Dad healed up and back home, and it'll be a proper party," Charlie agreed. His eyes sparkled, the sapphire blue catching the light beautifully. "Maybe if I'm a good boy I'll get my Christmas wish early."

"Oh?" Sirius shouldn't, he should get up, walk away— this was wrong, he couldn't, he *shouldn't*.

And yet as the dragon tamer leaned in, his intentions clear, Sirius could do nothing but tilt his chin up and accept the kiss.

It was short, and relatively chaste, but it rattled Sirius right down to his very *bones*. He hadn't kissed someone in years — since before Azkaban — and he wasn't sure if the dementors had tarnished his memories or if Charlie was just *that good*, but it felt incredible.

Charlie didn't push his luck, and pulled back after a few moments. But there was a pleased light in his eyes and a flush across his lightly tanned cheeks. His hand rested on Sirius' knee, palm like a brand through the denim of Sirius' jeans. "That wasn't a good idea," Sirius whispered weakly. Charlie's lips twitched, amused.

"Wasn't it? Felt pretty good to me."

Sirius felt his own cheeks redden. "Charlie, I— I'm flattered. But we can't. We shouldn't. I'm too old for you, for Merlin's sake; I'm an escaped convict. Your mother would kill me."

"None of those reasons are that you don't fancy me back," Charlie said knowingly. Sirius stayed silent; he couldn't argue that. Charlie would know it was a lie.

"We shouldn't," he repeated instead. Charlie darted forward to press a kiss to the corner of his mouth, his nose pressing briefly against Sirius' cheek.

"I'm old enough to know what I want, Sirius," he breathed. "And I want you, *very much*. I think we'd go well together." Then he grinned roguishly, and Sirius' stomach flared with heat. "But if you need a bit of convincing, I'm happy to oblige."

Getting up from the chair with catlike grace, he passed in front of Sirius — giving the animagus an eyeful of those powerful thighs and shapely arse in very tight jeans — and trailed his fingers across the line of Sirius' shoulder. "I'll see you at dinner." A flutter of a smirk. "Great album choice, by the way. I'm more of a Diamond Dogs fan myself. Maybe we can compare collections sometime."

He strode confidently from the room, leaving Sirius alone once more; feeling very much like he might be in over his head.

Chapter 60

Even with the minor upset of Percy Weasley's returned Christmas present, and the still-stewing anger of Ron and Hermione, Harry still managed to have an excellent Christmas morning. The pile of presents at the end of his bed was even larger than it had been the year before — and somehow, someone had snuck in his present from Draco, which was a gorgeous blown-glass fox figurine that made his heart ache fondly. He wondered how the blond was doing, back at Hogwarts.

At least he wasn't at home, with Voldemort.

Harry hoped Narcissa Malfoy was doing okay.

"Merry Christmas, Harry!" Ginny called as he headed down the stairs. "Thanks for the book!" He had given her a book all about the best female quidditch players in history, most of whom were Harpies players. Harry grinned at her, returning the sentiment.

"Merry Christmas, kiddo!" Sirius beamed, wrapping him in a tight hug. He'd been acting odd the last couple of days, but he seemed to be fine now, and Harry hugged him back.

"Thanks for everything. Merry Christmas." Harry had been truly spoiled by his godfather — both of them, in fact.

With Mrs Weasley commandeering the kitchen for an enormous Christmas lunch, they were all kicked out of the basement room; except Bill, who was trusted enough to help with the preparations.

Instead, they gathered in the bigger living room; Fred and George had a new board game from Bill, one that spewed brightly coloured smoke every time a player made a bad move, and they were delighting in playing that with Ginny, Charlie and Ron — the redhead couldn't be properly furious on Christmas, so he was just avoiding Harry. Hermione was sat nearby, reading one of her new books.

Harry made himself comfortable on the sofa between Sirius and Remus, relishing in the joy of being with his family at Christmas.

If only he could have all of them there. Next year, perhaps.

He wriggled round on the sofa, leaning his head on Remus' shoulder and peering at the pages of the book the man was reading. "I wish Snape could be here," he murmured quietly. Remus looked down at him, shocked.

"I— really?"

"Of course. He's family." He might be a grouchy bastard, but the worst of that was for show. Remus deserved to spend Christmas with the man he loved.

The werewolf's face softened, and he dropped a quick kiss to Harry's forehead. "I'm glad you think so, cub. I wish he could be here too, but he's got Slytherins to take care of. He's with Draco." Harry was glad for that; glad his boyfriend had his godfather with him.

"Are you going to see him later?" Remus had been living at Grimmauld since Harry had returned.

"Tomorrow, I think. We'll both be busy today. I want to give that poor fellow in the ward with Arthur a bit of company."

Harry knew the one; the recently turned werewolf, who never said a word but always watched the family gather around Mr Weasley with sad, yearning eyes. Harry had never seen him have a visitor. "That'll be nice." Perhaps Remus could put him in touch with one of the packs.

Christmas lunch was exactly the chaos he expected, with the twins trying to sneak pranks into the food, aided by Sirius — and Charlie, though Mrs Weasley didn't seem to notice that child of hers getting involved. Harry ate until he was fit to burst, and regretted that slightly when he found himself clambering into the back of a magically-expanded car between Remus and Ginny. He was grateful when Remus discreetly slipped a vial of Stomach-Settling potion his way, labelled with Snape's spidery handwriting.

St Mungo's was appropriately festive when they arrived, heading straight for the Llewellyn ward. Mr Weasley accepted his pile of gifts with a bright smile — that quickly faltered under the keen eye of his wife, when she began to question his off-schedule bandage change.

The rest of them sensed the brewing argument, and Harry began to wonder if he could slip off and join Remus by the werewolf man's bedside, when Ginny gripped him by the wrist. "Let's go for a walk, yeah?" she hissed, dragging him backwards out of the ward.

"Where are we going?" Harry asked, once they were safely out of Mrs Weasley's explosion radius. Ginny shrugged.

"Bill said something about a drink. Should we go find the tearoom?"

It was as good a suggestion as any, so they set off for the stairs. "Neville's around here, somewhere," Ginny commented offhandedly. Harry's stride faltered.

"Yeah?" Harry knew only one reason why his blond friend would be in the hospital on Christmas.

"His gran doesn't let him visit too often. But they come every year on Christmas Day." Ginny sounded sad. Harry, very much out of his depth with this sort of thing, cleared his throat awkwardly.

"He's, uh, told you a bit about his parents, then?" He knew Ginny and Neville hung out when he wasn't around — sometimes with Luna, sometimes not — but he had absolutely no clue what they talked about, considering Ginny was dating Michael Corner and Neville was pretending to be fine with that. It sounded unbearably awkward to him, but whenever he was

brave enough to ask Neville about it, the other Gryffindor just said that his feelings weren't going to stop him being friends with Ginny.

Harry was very glad his own love life wasn't that complicated, threat of Lucius Malfoy aside.

"Yeah, he's told me. It's so sad."

Harry hummed in agreement. There wasn't much else to say on the matter. "And, ah, what's Michael up to, this Christmas?"

Ginny's face hardened. "I wouldn't know," she muttered angrily. "We broke up."

That was brand new information to Harry, and his eyes went wide. "What? Why didn't you tell me?" Why hadn't *Neville* told him? Did Neville even know?

"Never had the chance." Ginny glanced at the floor evasively, and Harry narrowed his eyes. There was a story, there; perhaps he could get her to spill it over a cup of terrible hospital tea.

But all thoughts of pestering Ginny for details flew from his head when they reached the fourth floor landing, and came face to face with the subject of their conversation. One of them, at least.

"Ginny!" Neville blinked, startled. "Harry! What are you doing here?"

"Visiting Dad," Ginny explained. Her cheeks gained the faintest red flush. "It's, uh, good to see you."

Neville blushed too, and then a throat cleared pointedly behind him. Harry looked past his friend, seeing a woman in a rather impressive vulture-topped hat that could only be Mrs Longbottom herself. "Neville. Introduce me."

Harry took a half-step forward, palms open. "Well met, Dowager Longbottom," he greeted, bowing in respect, hoping desperately he had the correct form of address.

A keen-eyed smile crossed the woman's age-weathered face. "Ah, of course. Well met indeed, Heir Potter." She held out a hand, and Harry kissed the back of it. "A pleasure to finally meet you."

"The pleasure is all mine," Harry assured her earnestly. "I know it's quite late, but I'd like to thank you in person for all the help you gave me in my third year."

Her smile widened, something like approval in her eyes. "The Potter-Longbottom alliance has stood strong for generations," she said. "I am glad to help it flourish for another."

Neville looked a mix of pleased and petrified, shuffling awkwardly from foot to foot. "Um, Gran," he stuttered. "This is Ginny Weasley. My friend."

Ginny's face coloured further, but she managed a slightly clumsy half-curtsey. "Nice to meet you, Mrs Longbottom."

“Indeed,” Mrs Longbottom said. “I’ve heard quite a bit about you.”

Neville blushed brightly, making Harry wonder exactly what his friend had told his grandmother about the Weasley girl. “Come along, Neville. Visiting hours won’t last forever.”

Neville nodded, then paused, turning back to the pair of them. “Would you—I mean—do you want to come meet my parents?” He looked hopeful, and Harry’s chest squeezed.

“We’d love to,” he said immediately, and Ginny nodded at her side. “If—if it’s alright, of course, Lady Longbottom.” Harry added hesitantly, not wanting to overstep. Neville’s time with his parents was precious; he didn’t want to intrude.

“If Neville is happy with it, then that is alright by me. This way.”

She led them in the direction of the Janus Thickey ward, and Harry stayed respectfully half a step behind her.

“How are you faring, Mr Potter?” she questioned, glancing his way. “I have heard some from Neville, of course — he’s told me all about how *enterprising* young Miss Bones is.” There was the faintest smile flickering at her wrinkled cheeks. “But with things the way they are at school, correspondance has been rather sparse. I have to make do with what I see in the papers, and I can’t say I’m overly impressed.”

By the look on her face, there were several things she’d like to say to Dolores Umbridge, and Harry wished he could sit in on the next Wizengamot session where both women were present.

“I’m preparing for my OWLs as best I can,” he replied, not wanting to say too much in such a public place. “And helping my friends with their studies, too.”

“Glad to hear it. Getting on well with your teachers? The headmaster?” Her gaze was shrewd. Again, Harry nodded.

“They’re all rather busy, though, with the inspections happening. Especially Professor Dumbledore.”

Mrs Longbottom harrumphed, removing her wand to unlock the door of the ward. Harry glanced over his shoulder — behind them, Neville and Ginny were walking close together; so close their hands were brushing. When Neville realised his gran was watching, he cleared his throat and put his hands in his pockets.

“They’re, uh, over here,” he said, leading the way towards two curtained-off beds in the back corner. Harry tried not to stare at the rest of the patients — though he did a double-take at the sight of Gilderoy Lockhart, sat writing his name over and over with a peacock feather quill, smiling happily to himself.

He didn’t have long to think about it, though; Neville stopped in front of the beds and pulled the curtain back carefully, a shaky smile on his face. “Hi, Mum. Hi, Dad. Merry Christmas.”

He reached into his grandmother's large handbag, pulling out a pair of squishy packages in shiny paper. "I brought you these. And, uh, I've got some friends with me, too. They'd like to meet you."

Harry shuffled closer, peering over Neville's shoulder. Mr and Mrs Longbottom were a far cry from the happy, rosy-cheeked couple Harry had seen in Moody's picture of the original Order of the Phoenix. They were worn and gaunt-faced, bodies frail and hair pure white. But when they looked at Neville, even though their eyes were unfocused, they both beamed.

Neville set a present each on their laps, leaning in to kiss them on the cheek one at a time, heartbreakingly soft. Harry stepped forward, clearing his throat. "Hello, Mrs Longbottom," he greeted in a hoarse almost-whisper, stood beside the woman's bed. She looked at him, though her eyes were blank. "I'm Harry Potter. I think you knew my mum." He knew from stories that Alice Hopkins, as she had been before she married, was one of Lily Evans' Gryffindor roommates, and best friends.

Alice Longbottom continued to stare at him, her fingers digging weakly into the paper-wrapped present.

"I just wanted to say," he continued, speaking loud enough for Frank Longbottom to hear, too — he was looking over, curious in a sort of dazed way. "Your son is the best friend I've ever had, and you both should be very proud of him." He heard Neville gasp softly, but didn't look away from Alice's vacant gaze. She reached up, patting him on the cheek.

"James," she muttered, letting out a feeble little giggle, then turned to focus on opening her Christmas present.

Harry stood there, shocked, for several moments. Eventually, an aged hand curled around his shoulder. "That was a very fine thing to say, Mr Potter," Mrs Longbottom said quietly. The pair of them watched as Neville introduced Ginny to his dad, and Harry wondered if Ginny saw the adoration in Neville's eyes as she didn't hesitate to begin chattering to the man like an old friend.

"It's the truth," he said, looking up at the woman with challenge in his eyes. "Neville's brilliant. And you should see how well he's doing in our defence club."

The old woman sighed. "Sometimes I fear in trying to teach him how wonderful his parents were, I put far too much expectation on that boy's shoulders. He's lucky to have a friend like you, Mr Potter."

"I'm the lucky one," he insisted. "And— I know it's not my place, so please excuse my impertinence, but Neville needs a new wand." He had to take his chance, while Neville was distracted. "His father's wand isn't suited to him at all, and it's holding him back. I know you want to honour your son's memory, but... being friends with me is dangerous. I wouldn't want Neville to get into trouble and have a spell fail him because his wand isn't truly his."

It was mean, perhaps, to play on the old woman's fear for her grandson like that — but it was also the truth. In the last few months, Harry had seen Neville's spells go awry for no reason

whatsoever, even when he was doing everything right. It was the wand's fault, and that could get him killed.

Mrs Longbottom's mouth tightened, and Harry wondered if he had gone too far. Then, she nodded tersely. "I shall look into it. Thank you for the recommendation." She looked down at him, grey-blue eyes betraying her amusement. "That impertinence of yours could make life difficult, when you come of age."

Harry grinned back. "Sometimes, difficult is necessary."

"As is impertinence," Mrs Longbottom agreed knowingly.

Harry suspected that had been some sort of test, and he hoped he passed muster. Mrs Longbottom was a very intimidating woman, even without all the stories Neville had told him. But Harry would not be cowed, not when his friend's life was at stake.

"It never gets easier, seeing them like this," Mrs Longbottom sighed.

"Harry, come meet my dad," Neville urged bright-eyed, and so Harry didn't reply, instead smiling at his friend as he went to gently shake Frank Longbottom's hand.

He thought, perhaps, that the reason Mrs Longbottom did not allow her grandson to visit his parents often was not because she wanted to keep them separated, but because it was too painful a reminder for herself.

.-. .

He and Ginny didn't stay too long with the Longbottom family, not wanting to intrude on their entire Christmas visit. Frank seemed far more entertained with the shiny paper of his present than the soft cardigan inside, but Alice immediately wrapped herself in her brand new yellow shawl with a sunny smile.

When they left, Ginny kissed Neville on the cheek, and Harry squeezed his shoulder. "I'll see you back at school," he said, and Neville nodded.

"Thanks for this. It's nice, I think, for them to meet new people."

"Thank you for letting us meet them," Ginny returned. She, likely even more than Harry, knew how important Neville's parents were to him, even though he rarely spoke of them at school.

"I hope your dad gets better soon. I'll write to you, yeah?"

Harry let Neville and Ginny smile and blush at each other for a bit, and then he gently took Ginny by the arm, leading her out of the ward and back to the stairs.

"His parents are so sweet," Ginny murmured sadly once they were alone. Harry nodded. He could only imagine what Frank and Alice Longbottom had been like before the Lestranges had stolen their minds. "What was all that weird formal stuff with you and Mrs Longbottom, though?"

Harry froze — with all the secrets she did know, Harry forgot that Ginny was still mostly unaware of Harry's political standing. She knew that Dumbledore had blocked his family magics, but she didn't know what that meant in the context of the wizarding world. She didn't know anything about what he and Neville were up to with Susan and the other heirs.

"I'll tell you later," he promised; they were getting closer to Mr Weasley's ward. "I think we've got a lot to talk about, anyway." He gave her a pointed look, and she flushed and clenched her jaw.

"Don't know what you're talking about," she lied weakly. Harry let it slide, as they returned to the Llewellyn ward where Mrs Weasley seemed to be done yelling about stitches.

They could talk back at Grimmauld.

.-. .

With most of the occupants of Grimmauld Place out at the hospital visiting Arthur, it was the perfect chance for Sirius to go to Seren Du for a bit of fresh air. The Welsh countryside was blanketed in thick snow, and there was nothing he loved more than running through it as Padfoot before coming indoors and warming up by a nice toasty fire. It would have been better with Harry, but he was happy enough alone.

He was in high spirits when he returned to Grimmauld — though they sank immediately when Tonks hurried into the kitchen. "There you are! I've been looking everywhere for you." Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. "You didn't go out, did you?"

Sirius gave her a considering look. His little cousin was proving herself to be a fine member of the Black family — what the family had once been, before the darkness and madness. What Sirius wanted the family to be again. She had kept all his secrets so far... perhaps it was time to trust her with a little more.

"Has your mum ever told you about the Black family summer home?" he asked casually. Tonks looked bewildered.

"You what?"

"The family summer home. We used to spend a lot of time there as children. It's really quite something." He met her eyes, bright purple today, and drew his eyebrows together. "You should really ask her about it sometime. Remind her of the teas we used to have. Four o'clock, every Sunday afternoon." His smile was perfectly innocent, as if he was just reminiscing on a fond childhood memory. But he could tell from the way Tonks' shoulders shifted that she'd caught on.

"I'll do that," she promised. "Sounds like a fun place to be."

Sirius smirked. "It certainly was," he agreed.

Remus might get angry at him for being too hasty, but Sirius knew what Black family loyalty was like. If he could trust Cissa, he could trust Andi.

And maybe in time he could get them to trust each other once more.

.-.-.-

To her credit, Ginny didn't try too hard to avoid Harry in the days that followed. He let her have Christmas, and Boxing Day, but on the 27th he shot her a loaded glance over lunch, and when he went up to the little-used parlour on the family floor, she came with him.

He warded the room discreetly, not wanting Ginny to realise he was using magic outside of school. Then he gestured to the sofa, a hand-knitted blanket draped over the back. "So," he began, once they were both sat down. "Tell me about Michael."

That didn't seem to be what Ginny was expecting. She blinked, thrown off-guard, then bit her lip. "I... I did like him, at first. Not as much as... I did like him." Harry wasn't sure if she was trying to convince him or herself, and stayed silent. "He was sweet, and he wasn't expecting any promises or anything. But it was nice, y'know? At least at first. Then... When I was with him, I just started feeling this awful guilt. Like I was cheating even though I wasn't. And sometimes I would see Neville look at me..."

She shuddered. Harry knew the looks she was speaking of.

"I talked to Nev a couple of times, and he said I should just do what made me happy. That he could wait for me to figure out what I wanted. But even just sitting and studying with him made me feel ten times better than anything I did with Michael."

"Please don't go into detail," Harry urged, looking a bit nauseous, and Ginny giggled.

"Ask me no questions, I'll tell you no lies," she teased. Then she sobered once more, tugging at her braid. "I think Michael could tell something was off. He started getting... weird. All possessive, wanting to know way too much about who I was with and what I was doing all day. Trying to tell me who I could and couldn't hang out with." Her brown eyes flashed angrily. "Then about a week before we came here, Michael and I had this *horrible* fight. He got really jealous about how much time I spent with you and Neville. Said that he hated when I was in my common room instead of in the library or wherever because he couldn't *keep an eye on me*, that he couldn't trust me when I wasn't with him. I yelled at him about it — we agreed when we got together that it wouldn't be anything serious. We both said terrible things, but he said some *really* gross things about me and I just couldn't take it anymore, so I dumped him."

Her eyes began to water, and suddenly she let out a sob. "The worst part, though, was when he said I'd been leading him on, and I couldn't even deny it because *fuck, I was*."

Ginny started to cry, and Harry shuffled closer to wind an arm around her. She fell into him, tears seeping into his t-shirt. "You said you told him it wasn't serious," Harry pointed out.

"Yeah but I still agreed to be his girlfriend knowing it wasn't going to go anywhere! Knowing I didn't feel about him like I was supposed to."

"Maybe that wasn't the smartest idea," Harry agreed, wincing. "But that doesn't give him the right to be a prick about it. That stuff about keeping an eye on you in the common room is way out of order."

"He was right, though," Ginny sniffed. "I mean, Neville and I never did anything, not while I was with Michael. But I wanted to. Isn't that bad enough?"

"I'm not gonna sit here and tell you you're a bad person, Gin," Harry sighed. "I think you've done some stupid things, but that doesn't mean you deserve to be treated like that by *anyone*. Get George to give you his lecture about consent sometime; it's a doozy." Ginny giggled weakly.

"I never should've dated Michael in the first place."

Well, Harry wasn't going to argue about that. "Why did you?" he blurted. "I mean, I know it's none of my business, but... I thought you and Neville really had something, after the Yule Ball."

"We did," Ginny groaned, shaking her head against Harry's chest. "Merlin, Harry, Neville is... I'm in love with him. I know I am. I think I've known since the Yule Ball, deep down. But I've *definitely* known since I kissed him on the Express at the end of last year."

Harry went wide-eyed. "Nev didn't tell me about that."

"Really?" Ginny looked up at him with red-rimmed eyes. "Oh. Well, yeah. I kissed him, before the train pulled in to the platform. And I spent all summer thinking about him and I just got so scared because I am *way too young* to be in love. Like, I always dreamed when I was a kid about finding Prince Charming, y'know? The one man who would sweep me off my feet and that would be it, forever. All those fairytales mum would tell me — the ones where the prince would have black hair and green eyes."

Harry made a face, and Ginny stuck her tongue out at him.

"But I always thought I'd find him, y'know, when I'm twenty-five and playing for the Harpies or whatever. When I've got my life together. When I've had the chance to fail at dating and make stupid decisions about boys for a few years. Not at the age of bloody thirteen."

"Well, I don't know about having your life together, but I'd say you've managed the whole 'fail at dating and make stupid decisions about boys' part," Harry said dryly, earning a whack to the shoulder. "Look, Gin... if Neville is your Prince Charming, then that's that. Maybe he is, and you'll never date anyone but him. Maybe he isn't and you'll break up when he graduates and then when you're twenty-five and playing for the Harpies you'll find some *other* Prince Charming. But is it really fair on either of you to keep pushing him away and dating boys you don't even care about just because you're too scared of your own feelings? I thought you were a Gryffindor."

The redhead snarled at the insinuation she wasn't meeting house standards, but then her face fell. "It doesn't matter anymore, anyway. I've been such a shit to Neville, dating Michael,

flirting with all those other boys right in front of him. Just telling him to *wait until I was ready*. He's probably sick of waiting by now, after me stringing him along for almost a year."

Privately, Harry doubted Neville would ever be sick of waiting for Ginny Weasley. But he didn't deserve that treatment, and he would never say that himself. So Harry would do it for him. "Yeah, you have been a shit to him," he agreed. "And if he's not interested anymore, that's just something you'll have to live with." Ginny looked heartbroken at the prospect. "But dating more random guys isn't going to help that. It's not going to make you any less in love with him. And it's certainly not going to convince him that you're ready to give things a try."

"I know," Ginny agreed plaintively. "I'm done, with all that. After Michael... I don't want a boyfriend just for the sake of having one. Just to try things out. I want a boyfriend that matters, or none at all." She took a shaky breath. "I want Neville," she admitted in a small voice.

"Then when we get back after Christmas, you go and apologise to him, and grovel if you have to, and tell him how you feel. All of how you feel. Or write it in a letter, if telling him is too scary."

Ginny's hand gripped his, knuckles turning white. "I didn't mean for things to get this complicated," she insisted quietly. "I just — it felt so *big*, so much, and I thought for sure it couldn't be that so I flirted with all those other boys to try and prove that I wasn't some silly little girl who falls arse-over-teakettle for the first boy to actually pay attention to me. I thought I'd start feeling for them like I felt for Neville and it might get a little less scary."

Harry pursed his lips, thinking it over. "Gin," he said slowly. "You remember the Yule Ball, when I disappeared for a bit?"

"And came back looking like you'd been ravished?" she teased. He nodded, and her eyes widened. "Is this about your secret boyfriend that the twins and Neville know about but you won't tell me?"

"You can't tell anyone, I mean it," he said seriously. "He could be killed if anyone finds out."

"I won't tell a soul. Not even Charlie." Considering the dragon tamer was her favourite brother, that was a strong promise.

"I've been dating Draco Malfoy since the first task," he admitted, getting the familiar happy butterflies in his belly when he remembered their first kiss, over a year ago now. Ginny gaped.

"Malfoy? But— oh my God, him coming to talk to you on the train makes so much more sense now." Harry nodded.

"We started being friends in my third year. In secret, obviously. His dad's an absolute piece of shit, and he'd kill Draco if he knew we were even *civil*, let alone how important he is to me."

"And you've kept it secret, all this time?"

He nodded again. “You’re now the fourth person at school to know.” He didn’t count Snape. “Sirius and Remus know, too. Sirius is cousins with his mum, Narcissa. She knows; she’s really nice, she’s just stuck married to a Death Eater.”

“That’s awful,” Ginny murmured sadly.

“The point is,” Harry continued, “I’m in love with Draco. Completely besotted, absolutely *embarrassingly* in love with him. And yeah, it terrifies me,” he said freely. “I’ve never kissed anyone but him, and if I have my way, I never will. But I don’t think I’m missing out. I can’t talk for what it’s like to do anything with anyone else. And I’m not saying you should only date people you’re in love with, or whatever. But knowing how amazing it feels, just being with him... I don’t understand why you’re denying yourself that.” He gave a rueful smile. “We could both be killed if the wrong person finds out about us. Hell, I might get killed by Voldemort before I graduate. So maybe the fear of losing him is greater than the fear of loving him. But, look at it this way — you’re gonna feel the way you do about Neville whether you’re dating him or not. Isn’t it better to just... accept it, and be happy?”

The redhead was silent for a long time, leaning gently against Harry’s shoulder, her fingers twisting in the edge of the blanket on the sofa. “I think I’ve fucked it all up, Harry,” she said in a heartbroken whisper.

“I don’t know about that,” Harry mused. “Nev’s a good bloke. And he cares a lot about you. Hell, the fact that he didn’t even blink when you dated Michael proves that. Maybe the two of you need a bit of time to straighten out some hurt feelings, but I don’t think it’s ruined. It might be, if you keep acting like he’s always going to be there, though. Like he’s your back-up choice, or your afterthought.”

She looked horrified. “I don’t think that!”

“Well it looks like it, sometimes,” Harry said bluntly. She needed to know how much she’d hurt Neville. Even if it hurt her in the process. “It looks like you’re gonna go off and have your fun and when you’re bored of all the other boys you’ll come back and settle for Neville.”

Ginny looked like she was going to be sick at the very idea of it. Harry squeezed her gently, kissing her head. “If you love him, tell him. It’ll eat you up inside if you don’t.” He knew that from experience. “I’m gonna leave you to think for a bit — we’ve been up here long enough, and if your mum figures it out she’ll either castrate me or start planning the wedding,” he said with a grimace. “But I’m always around if you need to talk, yeah? And if not me, you’ve got four other brothers in this house who are probably less useless with relationship advice and have *way* more experience.”

“You’re not useless, Harry,” Ginny insisted. “I—I think I needed to hear all that. Even the hard bits. Go on, I’ll be fine. Might just have a cry for a bit,” she said, wiping at her eyes. Then she managed a grin that was a shadow of its usual cheeky self. “But later you’re gonna tell me all the juicy gossip about Draco Malfoy, yeah? And whatever you didn’t want to tell me at St Mungo’s.”

Harry grinned — it would be nice, having a new person to gush about Draco to. Everyone else was a bit sick of it. “Deal,” he agreed, getting to his feet and leaving her in the parlour by herself.

He just wanted both her and Neville to be happy. Whether it was together, or not.

.-.-.-.

Severus had been expecting the summons from the moment he’d heard about Arthur Weasley’s attack.

“You wanted to see me, Headmaster?”

Albus smiled genially at him across the desk. “Ah, Severus. Come in, come in. Lemon drop?”

Severus resisted the urge to roll his eyes, sending the bowl of sweets a disparaging glance. Albus just chuckled. “I have a request to make of you, my boy. A rather necessary one, I’m afraid.” The man’s twinkling gaze grew serious behind his glasses. “I must ask you to teach Harry Potter Occlumency.”

Severus let his face twist in outrage. “Albus, you cannot believe Potter has the brain capacity for such a thing? The boy is barely more intelligent than a flobberworm.”

“Now, now, Severus; Harry has been doing remarkably well in his classes, lately.” Severus hid his smirk; a little *too* well, for Albus’ liking. “Regardless, it is imperative that he learn to close off his mind. This vision he suffered, from Nagini’s mind... it speaks of dark forces at work. I’m afraid I have recognised Voldemort behind Harry’s eyes, and we must make sure he is not able to get a proper foothold. Harry has seen too much — Headquarters, the faces of the Order members, even beyond that. We cannot allow that information to get into the wrong hands.”

“Albus, you can’t be serious,” Severus continued to protest. “Why don’t you teach the boy? He will trust you far more.”

That made Albus smile, false concern hiding his satisfaction with Harry’s perceived loyalty. “I would if I could, but I’m afraid the Dark Lord’s anger at my person is enough to bring him to the surface. I attempted Legilimency on young Harry after his vision — to try and see for myself, of course, to find a way to help him — but the mind that rose to fight me was not his. I fear my presence within Harry’s mind will merely draw Voldemort through even stronger. It must be you, Severus.”

Severus did not point out that, should Voldemort *actually* be residing in Harry Potter’s mind, having him — a spy, supposedly loyal to the Dark Lord — enter it with the intention of doing anything helpful was as good as signing his own death warrant. Perhaps Albus was finally trying to dispose of him.

“I know it will be difficult to get Harry to trust you, but you must try. He needs to learn to close off his mind. And... you, my boy, need to learn how far Voldemort has his claws into

the boy.”

Severus’ spine tingled. Ah; now they were reaching the heart of the matter. “Pardon?”

“Harry has been... unlike himself, this year. Withdrawing himself from Miss Granger and young Mr Weasley. Spending a lot of time alone. Improving extraordinarily quickly in his classes. Quick to anger, and convinced of his own correctness. He is, perhaps... a little too mature, for his age. I worry about the side-effects of the Dark Lord’s resurrection ritual. If there was any backlash.”

...Albus was trying to make Severus believe that Harry Potter was some sort of shade of Tom Riddle, a puppet walking around the school.

How stupid did he think Severus was?

“That would be concerning,” he agreed, frowning. He played out his anger, though he knew he had no choice. He never did, when it came to this man. “If you insist, Albus, I will attempt to teach the boy. And I will check his mind for outside influence, while I’m there.” He would not crack the child like an egg and take those secrets straight to the headmaster, as Albus so clearly hoped.

“Excellent. Thank you, Severus; your dedication is, as always, greatly appreciated. You will go to Harry with the news the day before he is due to return to school. No need to dampen his festivities with such things, after all.” The twinkle was back. “I would not ask this if it were not of utmost importance — we must stay abreast of Voldemort’s plans, especially if they involve Harry.”

Yes, because then they might interfere with your own, Severus sneered in his own mind, while his face stayed passive.

“If the boy is hiding anything, Albus, rest assured I will find it.”

And there was that smile, that twinkle that Severus so hated. The one that said everyone was playing perfectly into Albus Dumbledore’s hands and they didn’t even realise it.

“Thank you, my boy. I knew I could count on you.”

Severus bowed his head to disguise the hatred twisting his lips. One day, the old fool would get what was coming to him. Severus longed to be there to see it.

Chapter 61

Shortly after Christmas, Harry received a reply from Susan that had him roaring with laughter in the privacy of his bedroom. Apparently, Umbridge had been furious to find Harry and the four Weasleys had fled the school in the middle of the night, but according to the rumour mill — AKA something Parvati heard from one of Ginny's dorm-mates — the High Inquisitor had been told that Harry had ingested some sort of hallucinogenic, and the Weasley children had been called out of bed to check it was not of their doing, accidentally or otherwise. Since the twins were well-known for their prank substances, and Ginny was equally well-known for being happy to accompany them, it was a fairly solid alibi.

That it coincided with Mr Weasley's attack was just a funny happenstance of timing, everyone maintained. And those who suspected otherwise knew better than to ask for details.

But the part of the letter that really had him laughing was Umbridge's newest Educational Decree, implemented on the last day of term. It was now against the rules for any student tutoring to take place without approval of the High Inquisitor. She was clearly looking to catch anyone learning defensive magic unsupervised now that Harry was out of the castle, but according to Susan — whose letter had been sent via the post office in Hogsmeade, to avoid detection — Umbridge had spent the entire Christmas break being constantly hounded by students wanting permission to help their friends with their homework, or teach them a basic household charm, claiming that they weren't sure what the definition of 'student tutoring' entailed and they didn't want to get in trouble.

It seemed to be making Umbridge absolutely regret putting such measures in place, and Harry couldn't *wait* to see how the situation escalated once everyone was back at school.

He'd had a letter from Draco, too, passed through Snape and Remus. He was doing well, if bored, and he missed Harry. Harry spent longer than he would care to admit trailing his fingers over the neat '*Love, Draco*' at the end of the letter.

He hated that he hadn't got to say a proper goodbye to his boyfriend. Or any of his friends, really. Or Salazar; the portrait was probably worried about him, considering what Harry had told him of his life. He would have to apologise for the abrupt departure when he got back.

It was only a week or so away, now. The Christmas holidays had flown by.

It was strange, he thought to himself, reading through the Ancient Runes worksheet Remus had given him — he was simultaneously eager to get back to school, and absolutely dreading having to face Umbridge again. He hadn't realised how suffocating her very presence was until he was free of it.

His door opened, and Sirius snuck in, pressing a finger to his lips. "I need you to come with me," he said. "The twins are covering for us, we've got about three hours."

"Three hours for what?" Harry asked, confused. His godfather grinned at him.

“To go home.”

Harry’s breath caught in his throat, and then Sirius had grabbed him by the hand, and he was being squeezed by the familiar sensation of side-along apparition.

They appeared on the snow-covered lawn of Seren Du, and Harry grinned so wide his cheeks hurt.

“Sirius!” he exclaimed happily. “What if we get found out?”

“I told you, the twins have us covered. They didn’t ask questions.” The animagus smirked. “Marauder privilege.”

Harry laughed; of course Fred and George would bend over backwards to help their idol in mischief-making.

“Brilliant. Why today? Or did you just want someone to throw your toy for you,” he teased. A bark of laughter escaped Sirius’ lips.

“Maybe later, if there’s time. We’re actually waiting on someone.”

Harry paused — he wouldn’t sound so nervous if it was just Remus or Snape. Perhaps... Narcissa, maybe?

A crack of apparition sounded, and Harry turned to look. It was not Narcissa Malfoy, though the resemblance was certainly there. This woman was equally tall and graceful, with long, wavy dark hair and familiar high cheekbones and grey eyes. The bright, open smile on her face was much more like Sirius than Narcissa, though.

Beside her was Tonks — but different. A boy version of Tonks, with spiky bright white hair. Tonks, who took one look at Harry and cursed, going wide eyed and immediately beginning to shift into a more feminine figure. “Didn’t realise Harry would be here!”

“It’s fine,” Harry insisted. “I— Sirius explained. About your boy days. You can— you don’t have to change back because I’m here.” The explanation had been a bit confusing, but as per usual, Remus had been more helpful and informative, explaining that not everyone felt their insides matched their outsides, and for some people what they felt like inside changed from day to day, or didn’t fit with what would usually be considered ‘male’ or ‘female’. He had also given Harry a rather dog-eared book that was definitely of muggle origin, detailing the spectrum of gender and the many ways in which people lived on that spectrum.

If, some days, Tonks felt more like a boy than a girl, Harry certainly wasn’t going to kick up a fuss.

Hesitantly, Tonks transformed back into the form he’d arrived in, and Harry grinned at him, offering a thumbs up. “You look like Sirius,” he commented, and Tonks laughed.

“Don’t know if I’m flattered or insulted.” Then he looked up at the house ahead of them, and let out a low whistle. “Blimey. Bit flash, eh?”

“Wait ‘til you see the inside,” Sirius replied. He stepped forward, beckoning Harry with him. “Pup, I’d like to introduce you to someone. This is my cousin, Andromeda Tonks. Andi, this is Harry Potter, Heir Black.”

Andromeda Tonks smiled widely, her eyes glowing warmly. “It’s very good to meet you, Heir Black. Please, call me Andi.”

“I— it’s nice to meet you, Andi,” he stuttered, not used to adults giving him their first name so freely. “You can call me Harry.” He looked back to Sirius. “What’s this about, Padfoot?”

“I thought it was about time we start repairing family ties,” Sirius declared. “And we needed a place to speak freely. Come on in, everyone; Ceri’s got tea ready.”

“Oh, Ceri’s still here? Wonderful!” Andi enthused. She and Sirius led the way, chattering like long-lost family — which, Harry supposed, they were.

He fell into step beside Tonks, kicking at the snow as they walked. “This place is the best,” he declared happily. “It’s got everything.”

“How well do you know it?” Tonks asked, frowning. “You’ve hardly had time to come here, I mean.”

Harry looked at him, stomach twisting. If Sirius had brought them both here, that meant he intended to let them in on their secrets. And he did trust Tonks; he had written back and forth with the auror quite a bit over the term, and he seemed trustworthy. Bill and Charlie liked him, too.

“I spent most of the summer after my third year here,” he confessed. “And the first half of last summer. Before the dementor attack.”

Tonks gaped at him. “Really? Right under Dumbledore’s nose?”

They stepped inside the entrance hall, and Harry grinned. “We’ve got a whole lot to catch you up on,” he said, hearing Sirius bark with laughter.

“An understatement if I’ve ever heard one,” he agreed. “But it’ll all make sense in a bit.”

To Harry’s surprise, Remus was waiting for them in the kitchen, where the table was already set with tea for five. “Andi, lovely to see you,” he greeted, kissing the woman on the cheek. “It’s been far too long.”

“I should’ve known you’d be involved in whatever trouble this one’s up to, Remus Lupin,” she sighed exasperatedly, making Sirius grin.

“You know Moony, always the brains of the operation,” he joked. “Now, pup. I think you’d best start at the beginning.” His face turned serious. “Don’t worry about leaving anything out. You can trust them. And Tonks’ Occlumency is solid.”

“Okay, then.” Harry was happy to take Sirius’ word for it. “Well, it all started after I blew up my aunt...”

....

The full story took the better part of an hour, and Tonks' hair was red with anger by the end of it. "I'd like to wring that old man's neck," he muttered. "Blocking family magics! Sending you to those *people*, after all he's told us about making sure you have as *normal a childhood as possible*?" He shook his head. Beside him, Andi too was seething.

"I always knew he was slippery as any snake. All that 'Greater Good' rubbish." She shared a knowing look with Sirius and Remus. "I don't know how much Ted or I can help, but you have us, regardless."

"Don't worry; I'm not expecting you take up arms or anything, though I do remember how lethal you can be with a Cutting curse," Sirius said to his cousin, smirking briefly. "I just wanted you to know because one day, as soon as I can, I'm going to reinstate you into the Black family proper. Or Harry will, if I can't."

Andromeda's jaw slackened. "Sirius..."

"It's long overdue, Andi," Sirius insisted. "You're a better example of a Black than half the family we've still got." The woman's face shuttered, and Sirius paused. "And... that's another thing I wanted to talk about. Narcissa's on our side."

Harry, in his storytelling, had focused on the important parts like Dumbledore's manipulations and Molly Weasley's thievery, rather than his love life. He hadn't said anything about Draco.

Andi went chalk-white, and even Tonks looked astonished. "She is? Truly?"

"She'd been here twice in the last two years," Sirius confirmed. "Practically a hostage in her own marriage, but she just wants her son to be safe and happy. And considering the little blighter is *disgustingly in love* with our Harry, here — that means they're both on our side."

Harry blushed bright red as both Tonks' gazes moved to him. "Draco's my boyfriend," he confirmed, grinning despite his embarrassment. "And his mum's nice. Lucius is still a prick, though."

"Language, Harry," Remus scolded mildly. Tonks snickered.

"She'd love to hear from you, Andi," Sirius said earnestly. "She misses you. She's laying low right now because of Lucius' position — and the fact that they're housing the Dark Lord himself at Malfoy Manor — but I've got ways of getting messages to her."

Harry knew he was talking about Snape.

"I... this is all a lot to take in," Andi said, looking lost. She had hardly blinked at Harry's explanation of how deep Dumbledore's plotting went, but the idea that her sister may not be as lost as she had feared had thrown her.

"Harry, cub, why don't you take Tonks and give him the grand tour," Remus suggested gently. "I think Sirius and Andromeda have some catching up to do."

Harry looked to Tonks, who wiggled his eyebrows in response. “Go on, kid. Show me around this *best place ever*.”

On their way out, Tonks squeezed his mother’s shoulder comfortingly. The pair of them stood in the grand entrance hall, and Harry looked around. “What do you want to see first?”

“What’s your favourite bit?” Tonks asked in return. Harry thought about it — he liked the quidditch pitch and the pool, but it was a bit cold outside for those, and he didn’t have his broom. With that in mind... “My room,” he said decisively. “And the library.”

“Lead the way, then,” Tonks declared grandly, flinging an arm out towards the staircase. “And tell me how you fell for my little cousin.”

Considering Harry had recently told the whole story to Ginny, it was remarkably easy to find his words. “He was an absolute stuck-up prat for the first two years of school,” he explained, giving context that Ginny had but Tonks wouldn’t. “Trying to be just like his father. But something changed in our third year... he started to learn to think for himself. And since I wasn’t under the compulsions, I started to see past the Slytherin tie.”

Harry led the way up the stairs, into the expansive library. “We met in secret, after curfew.”

“To snog?” Tonks asked gleefully, and Harry blushed.

“Not at first. We were friends through my third year. We’d just, y’know, talk. Play cards. He taught me a lot about the Wizengamot and pureblood stuff; things that Neville didn’t really know about, since his gran didn’t raise him in the traditional pureblood way. He came here on my birthday that summer and according to Sirius we were really obviously fancying each other, but we hadn’t figured it out yet. That didn’t change until I had to face a dragon in the first task.”

Tonks mock-swooned at the story of Harry and Draco’s first kiss, dramatically falling into an armchair. “Ah, young love,” he cried out, clutching his heart.

“Do I get to know about your secret boyfriend?” Harry asked teasingly. “Now that you know about mine?” Tonks’ letters had alluded to a romantic partner several times, but never given a name.

With how pale Tonks’ skin was today, it was easy to set him blushing. “If we’re dishing secrets, I suppose I’d better,” he sighed. “It’s Kingsley.”

Harry’s jaw dropped. “Kingsley Shacklebolt?”

“Don’t know any other Kingsleys, do you?” Tonks retorted. “Gotta keep it hushed up, though — technically he’s my superior, which makes the relationship not exactly up to auror regs. But with a face like that, I couldn’t help myself.” He was now the one looking lovestruck.

Harry tried to imagine it; the exuberant, clumsy junior auror with the staid, intimidating bald-headed man. It was certainly an interesting pairing.

He shrugged; no weirder than Remus and Snape.

"Isn't he like, loads older than you?" he asked, brows furrowed. Tonks shrugged.

"Eighteen years; it's nothing in wizarding terms. When I'm seventy and he's eighty-eight, no one will give a toss."

Harry, used to thinking in muggle lifespans, supposed that made sense. "Fair enough."

"You don't see it, do you?" Tonks asked knowingly. Harry shrugged.

"Not really," came his apologetic response. Far from being offended, Tonks laughed.

"S'Alright. Lots of people don't. Took Charlie a while, and he's always been into older blokes, so I figured he'd be the easiest to convince. But... Kings is different, when he's off duty. Not much different," he added at Harry's doubtful face. "I know he and I are chalk and cheese, but we like it that way. He keeps me grounded, and I remind him to loosen up a bit. He's got a wicked sense of humour once he stops being all stoic and unmoving and whatnot." He waved a hand. "You only see him for Order business, he's in work-mode then."

"I'll take your word for it." Kingsley had no reason to show anything but his usual stoic auror self to Harry, after all. "If you trust him, you can tell him what we've told you," he offered. "It'll be good to have another auror on board if Dumbledore escalates things. And — he's on the Wizengamot isn't he?"

"Yup," Tonks said, popping the P. "All that politics stuff goes over my head, but he loves it. He'll get a right kick out of Amelia's little niece planning to take over the whole thing; he's been saying for years they need a shake-up. Always ends up coming down to Lucius Malfoy versus Albus Dumbledore."

"I'd like to talk to him about it all sometimes, if he's willing." Harry had heard plenty from his friends, but none of the adults in his life had actual experience of sitting in a Wizengamot seat. Harry wanted to know what he was preparing himself for.

"I'll let him know," Tonks assured. Then he jumped clumsily to his feet, hair turning bright purple. "Let's see this brilliant bedroom of yours, then. Make me feel less bad about that dump at your muggles' place."

Harry grimaced at the reminder. "It's this way." He had missed his room more than he'd expected, though his room at Grimmauld was nice. Maybe he could move some of his posters over, now Sirius had taken that awful wallpaper down...

.-. .

With the twins in charge of distractions, no one noticed Sirius and Harry had been gone for hours — when they got back, it was to see that the twins had turned the entire stairway into one giant slide. Sirius laughed, eyes bright. "I love it," he declared, and without hesitation he sat down, whooping as he went flying down the spiral slide.

The twins got a dressing down from their mother, but since no one had gotten hurt it was considered a minor incident, and life in Grimmauld moved on.

"You do what you need to do?" George asked in an undertone at the dinner table, glancing between Harry and Sirius. Harry nodded.

"Yeah, thanks."

George winked, ruffling his hair and ducking away.

With the stairs actually stairs again, Harry went back up to his room, and was surprised to see an unfamiliar owl waiting patiently on his window-sill. Harry took the letter from the owl, unfolding it in trepidation.

Harry,

Hope you're having a good Christmas. I need to talk to you when you get back to school. It's about that thing you promised Theo—he might have a few fellows there.

Warning you now so you can make any arrangements necessary. Still expecting summer at the earliest.

Best,

Blaise

Straight to the point, much like the Italian boy himself. Harry frowned — there were more Slytherins wanting sanctuary?

Harry sighed to himself, offering the owl a treat for the journey home, and then reached for his parchment and quill.

He hadn't yet written to Farlig about the matter; he had best do it now before he was back at school and it was too late.

There had to be a Potter property *somewhere* that he could access before he was of age, and use to house people hiding from Voldemort — and from Dumbledore. Or a Peverell property. There were too many Blacks on the dark side to risk any properties from that side of the family, as Sirius said that anything other than the two they were already using was too weakly warded to be any good.

Farlig would know. The goblin hadn't failed him yet.

. . .

The last week of the Christmas holidays rolled by in a rather repetitive cycle of visiting Mr Weasley, avoiding Ron and Hermione, doing homework and trying to spend as much time with Sirius and Remus before he had to go back to school.

It was fun, especially on the days when the oldest Weasley boys and Tonks would turn up. One afternoon, Kingsley stayed for a while after an Order meeting, and he winked at Harry when he saw the boy staring. Harry assumed Tonks had told him everything. He watched the pair, trying to see any signs of them dating now that he knew, but they were very good at

keeping it subtle. Other than Tonks teasing the older man — which she also did to just about everyone else in the house — there was no real sign of them being any closer than colleagues, or friends.

But at last, it was the day before they were all due to go back. Harry's trunk was packed, his Christmas homework done and a pile of notes for the HA that Remus had helped him with hidden away beneath his school robes.

Sirius was hiding his sadness well, but Harry could tell his godfather wasn't looking forward to seeing him go. "You'll be alright," Harry assured him, squeezing him around the waist. "You know Bill and Charlie will come visit loads. And Tonks, too."

For some reason, Sirius blushed at that. Harry eyed him weirdly. Then he shook his head to himself; whatever that was about, he wasn't getting involved.

"Harry, dear?" Mrs Weasley stuck her head into the living room, where Harry was playing gobstones with Fred. "Can you come down to the kitchen, please? Professor Snape's here to see you."

The gobstone went flying out of Harry's hand. "Sorry?" Snape? What did he want?

"Professor Snape, dear. In the kitchen."

"What did you *do*?" Fred whispered, equal parts terror and awe. Harry shot him a helpless look, shrugging.

"Nothing! I don't think?"

There was only one way to find out. Harry jogged down to the kitchen, where Professor Snape was indeed waiting for him. The man was in his usual black teaching robes, and looked like he'd rather be anywhere else.

Sirius was sat at the table opposite him, which probably had something to do with it. The pair were glaring at each other hatefully, and Harry pursed his lips. Were they being watched?

"You asked to see me, Professor?"

"Sit down, Potter." Snape's tone was cold. Sirius sneered.

"Don't you give him orders in my house, Snape."

Harry ignored the byplay between the two, taking a seat. Eventually, Snape turned to look at him. "The headmaster has sent me to tell you, Potter, that he wishes for me to begin instructing you in the art of Occlumency."

Harry stared blankly at Snape. The man's black eyes flashed warningly. "What's Occlumency, sir?" he asked dumbly, playing along. Whether Snape was merely worried about Extendable Ears, or something more sinister, Harry wasn't sure.

“It is an obscure branch of magic, used to defend one’s mind against external penetration,” Snape drawled. “You will have private instruction once a week, and should anyone else ask — even your little *friends* — you will tell them I am giving you Remedial Potions classes, to better your chance in scraping a passing OWL result.” He smirked cruelly. “No one who has seen your performance in my class will doubt that.”

That would have hurt, if Harry hadn’t known he was making straight Os in Potions, despite what the grade record said.

“Why do I have to learn this thing?” he asked, projecting a heavy amount of teenage sullenness.

“Because the headmaster believes it is a good idea,” Snape retorted. Harry clenched his jaw.

Dumbledore was worried about people getting into Harry’s head, was he? Well, that was a change of pace.

“Now listen here, Snape,” Sirius snarled. “Why do you have to be the one to teach him? Why can’t Dumbledore do it.”

“Because the headmaster has better things to do, Black, than try and get any form of complex instruction through Potter’s thick skull.”

Harry read between the lines; Dumbledore was too worried about encountering Voldemort, to go messing about in Harry’s brain. That worked in his favour — this way, Harry wouldn’t have to pretend not to know it.

The shouting match that brewed between Sirius and Snape grew loud enough that Harry was surprised they hadn’t drawn an audience. That was explained, however, when the door burst open and the entire Weasley family plus Hermione spilled in — Mr Weasley in the very centre, wearing striped pyjamas and a raincoat. “Cured!” he announced happily. “Completely cured. Oh, I say,” he added, taking in the scene in front of him. “Sorry to interrupt.”

Both Sirius and Snape lowered their wands, though they continued to snarl at each other.

“What’s going on here?” Mrs Weasley asked, frowning at the pair of them.

“*Snivellus* was just leaving,” Sirius growled. Snape’s eyes flashed.

“Something I’m sure you’re *dying* to do, Mutt,” he retorted. “Do us all a favour and give it a try.”

The crowd of redheads watched in alarm, and Harry wondered how he was the only one who seemed to see how much both of them were enjoying goading each other.

Truly, their teenage years must have been *awful*, if this is what they were like when they were supposed to be ‘tolerating each other’. How had Remus survived it?

Thankfully, the introduction of witnesses seemed to be enough for their little show. Snape pocketed his wand, sweeping towards the door. “Six o’clock, Monday evening, Potter,” he

snapped, and then he was gone.

"Blimey. What was that about?" Charlie asked, watching Sirius with concern.

"Nothing important," Sirius dismissed, a false smile still on his face, eyes shining with contempt at the doorway Snape had left through. When he looked to the dragon tamer, he softened a little, and turned his gaze to the Weasley patriarch. "Welcome back, Arthur. Glad to hear you're all healed up!"

.-. .

The Weasley parents tried their best to make that evening's dinner a celebratory one, but considering half the house was dreading facing Umbridge the next day, it was not quite as cheerful as it could have been. Sirius was preparing his finest sulk at the prospect of Harry leaving — and failing to hold it, with Bill and Charlie nudging him into laughter whenever he looked too morose.

Charlie didn't dare flirt with him too blatantly in front of his own mother, not wanting to hear the utter tirade she would go on if she realised how he felt about Sirius. That didn't stop him from watching fondly, and bumping the older man's knee beneath the table whenever he saw him staring wistfully at Harry, who was sat with Fred and George and looked to be planning some mischief or another.

"It'll be quieter without him," he said softly into the man's ear, when Mum was busy at the stove. "But you won't be lonely."

He loved watching the tips of Sirius' ears flush red.

Further up the table, Bill looked to be having a serious conversation with their father. Charlie wondered what it was about, and strained his ears to listen in. All he caught was the word *Wizengamot*, but that was enough.

He and Bill had talked it over, and their dad's injury was a perfect excuse to talk to him about taking up their seats. They wanted to move soon — both of them were of the mind that Harry was being far too optimistic to think he could keep both Dumbledore and Fudge oblivious until he came of age, and the more trustworthy seats they held before shit hit the fan, the better.

From the look on Bill's face, though, the conversation wasn't going well. Their father didn't consider the seats a burden at all, not when he left all his voting to Dumbledore.

"It's our birthright, Dad," Charlie heard Bill say. "I know we're young, but we're ready for it. You've got enough on your plate."

Charlie caught his older brother's eye, silently asking if he needed back-up. Bill shook his head minutely, then gave him a smirk that Charlie translated as *stay over there and keep flirting*.

Well, if Bill insisted...

Leaving the curse-breaker to it, Charlie reached nonchalantly past Sirius for the water jug. He could've summoned it, but that wouldn't let him lean in close to Sirius' shoulder, getting a faint whiff of the man's spicy aftershave. ““Scuse me,” he murmured, only a little smug. Sirius shot him an unimpressed look.

“Like you don’t know what you’re doing,” he muttered, making Charlie laugh quietly.

“Guilty,” he confessed freely. “Go ahead and tell me to stop.”

Sirius was silent, and triumph bubbled in Charlie’s belly.

The older man didn’t think Charlie was serious. Charlie could tell that from day one. But he’d been drawn to the dog animagus since the first time they’d met — once he’d got over the ingrained fear of seeing *actual Sirius Black*, the man he’d been told was a crazed mass-murderer.

He was hot, and had been fun to have a bit of a flirt with, since all of Charlie’s usual flirting targets were back in Romania and he hadn’t warmed up to the Welsh crew enough to know who would be welcome to it.

Charlie hadn’t expected to develop *feelings*.

But he had, and Bill had noticed, and Tonks had noticed, and the pair of them were *insufferable* about it, and Charlie was trying his best but Sirius seemed determined to see him off. Not because he wasn’t interested — Charlie knew what that look in a man’s eye meant, and Sirius was no good at hiding it — but because his own self-worth was so low he didn’t think he was worth Charlie’s time.

“I like those jeans, by the way,” he said quietly, giving as long a look as he dared at the man’s lap with the rest of his family in the room. “They new?”

“Yeah,” Sirius replied, ears still flushed, “Did a bit of owl-ordering. And had Remus pick up a few things for me.”

“Good to hear.” Charlie glanced around to check if anyone was watching, and leaned in a bit closer. “Any miniskirts in the mix? You did say you look fabulous in them. I’d like to see that.”

Sirius choked on his mashed potato. Charlie clapped him on the back, smirking when the last hit was more of a caress. “Steady on.”

“You’re a cruel man, Charlie Weasley,” he coughed, and Charlie gave his best charming grin, dimples at full force.

“Now that’s just not true at all.”

He would change Sirius’ mind. He would get him to see that they could be great together, if given the chance.

The last time he'd been set on something as keenly as he was set on Sirius Black, it had been his desire to work with dragons. And look how that had ended up.

Chapter 62

Whoever's bright idea it had been to get the Knight Bus back to school, Harry wanted to hex them. Why they couldn't just get the train like all the other students he had no idea; just because they'd left under unusual circumstances, didn't mean they had to return in them.

But thankfully, none of them lost their breakfast — which was more than Harry could say for some other passengers of the bus — and with Tonks and Remus chaperoning, they all made it back to school in one piece. Harry hugged Remus tightly at the school gates.

“Stay out of trouble,” Remus said, and Harry laughed.

“Funny joke, Moony,” he teased, making the werewolf roll his eyes.

“Stay out of *excessive* trouble.”

That still seemed like a tall order for Harry, but he didn't argue, allowing Tonks to bundle him in a hug and ruffle his hair. “See you, kid,” she said cheerily. “Have a good term. Give old Umbridge hell for me.”

“I'll do my best,” Harry replied. “See you in summer!” Unless something drastic happened, he wouldn't be leaving the castle for Easter break. He had far too much studying to do for that.

The five of them traipsed up towards the castle, dread falling on them like a curtain as the imposing building came into view. “Let's see what the damage is, then, boys and girls,” Fred sighed, pushing open the doors.

Luckily, they avoided just about everyone up until they reached Gryffindor Tower. And there, the only people who were curious about why they had left were those who were just happy to see them back. Fred dipped Angelina in a showy, overdramatic kiss in the middle of the common room, while George mimed retching behind them both.

“Alright, Harry. Ginny,” Neville greeted, waving cheerily. Harry glanced at Ginny, wondering if she'd written Neville that letter, or was planning on doing it in person. From the wooden smile on her face, Harry was betting the latter.

“Hey, Nev. How was the rest of your holidays?”

“Yeah, great. Hey, look — Gran got me a new wand!” The blond boy showed it off eagerly. “She said with the way things were going at school, I might end up in a fight, and she didn't want me to damage Dad's.” Not quite what Harry had said to her, but the result was the same. At last, Neville had a wand suited to his magic.

As much as Harry wanted to grab his cloak and map and hunt down Draco, he had missed his friends — and he didn't want to be suspicious. So he happily let Neville regale him with the goings on of his greenhouse at home; and then, when she arrived, of Parvati's Christmas in

India with her family. She spoke about places over there with confidence that she would one day be able to show Harry too, and his heart ached with longing.

The Educational Decree that Susan had written to him about seemed to be the only new one that had appeared over the holidays. Harry wondered how long it would take for the next one — surely Umbridge was running out of things to ban?

The day was surprisingly relaxed, right up until dinner, when Harry entered the Great Hall and immediately saw Umbridge glaring at him with that too-sweet smile on her face. He didn't react, heading straight for the Gryffindor table. Her ban of mixing houses at mealtimes was still in place, but all that meant by now was that students ate as quickly as possible and then went elsewhere to socialise.

Across the hall, Harry caught Blaise Zabini's intent stare. He nodded discreetly; he had got the message.

Sure enough, the Slytherin appeared at Harry's side when he was walking away from the Great Hall, and the pair surreptitiously ducked into an alcove, warding it.

"What's the problem?" Harry asked, concern colouring his tone.

"A lot of the neutral Slytherin families were approached over Christmas break. Some Ravenclaws, too," Blaise explained, voice low. "They aren't likely to be allowed to remain neutral for long."

Harry's stomach sank. "How many?"

"At least eight that I know of. Plus Theo — he's not neutral, but he needs an out." Then, Blaise's lips turned down. "I've got a few more in his boat, as well. Though not many are brave enough to come to me. Their parents have them pretty well locked down."

It made Harry's heart ache, to think of how many teenagers would end up with that foul brand on their arm just because they weren't in a position to say no. How many already had?

"Right. But no one needs it more urgently than summer?"

"I don't think so," Blaise assured.

"Good. I'm working on something right now. It should be ready in time." He hadn't heard back from Farlig yet, but he'd told the goblin to send future correspondance through Bill, so it would take a little longer to get a response. "Just... tell them to hold off for as long as they can."

The Slytherin smirked ruefully. "That's been the plan thus far." He reached out, clasping Harry's arm. "We appreciate this, Harry. Truly. No one wants to be in Dumbledore's debt for their own safety."

"They won't be in mine, either," Harry insisted. "Sanctuary is offered freely. As long as they don't intentionally bring Voldemort to the doors, they're welcome."

Blaise shook his head, like he couldn't quite believe it. "The wizarding world isn't ready for you, Potter."

Harry laughed, grinning. "Me? Scrap that — they're not ready for *Susan*."

Blaise nodded emphatically. "Too true. Hey, by the way, Draco wanted to talk to you when you got back. Said to meet in your usual fourth floor spot, once you're done talking to me." The Italian boy smirked. "You two have a usual spot?"

Harry hoped desperately he wasn't blushing. "Not like we can chat in class, is it?" He retorted. "And Draco can't even come to HA." Those defence sessions were becoming the only time people could actually relax and let down their guard a little, safe in the magic of the contract.

"Fair. I'll leave you to it, then."

Harry dropped his ward, and Blaise left first. Harry slipped on his invisibility cloak before he stepped out into the corridor, heading straight for the fourth floor classroom in which they had once broken a chair. A familiar head of blond hair was waiting for him — Harry beamed, dropping his cloak and hurrying over. "Hey. Blaise said you'd be here."

"Good." Draco tugged him down imperiously, until they were both sat on the floor. "You've got some nerve, you know. Telling me you love me and then leaving school in the middle of the night." But he was smiling, and Harry grinned back, leaning in.

"I still love you," he promised, watching Draco's cheeks flush with delight.

"You'd better."

Harry took his hand, threading their fingers together. "How was Christmas in the castle?"

"Much the same as it always is. Mother sends her best, by the way."

"Have you seen her?" Harry went wide-eyed, but Draco shook his head.

"No, but she managed to write without Father over her shoulder. A rare thing, these days." His smile dropped. Harry squeezed his hand sympathetically. "I spent most of Christmas Day in Uncle Sev's rooms. It was nice, though a bit strange not doing Yule rituals with Mother. Blissfully Umbridge-free, at least, unlike the rest of the bloody school." They both scowled, then Draco kissed Harry's temple. "Oh, that reminds me — Uncle Severus gave me the animagus potion for Christmas."

Harry sat bolt upright. "He never said!" He turned eager green eyes on his boyfriend. "Did you find your form? What is it?"

"I'm a snowy owl," Draco replied proudly. Harry beamed at him.

"Brilliant!" A powerful hunter, prideful to the point of being a little bit vain — and an animal Harry happened to have an enormous soft spot for. Perfect for Draco. "You and Hedwig can fly together."

“We can, and I can pick your little fox self up in my claws and drop you at the top of a tree, because *apparently* you made your transformation and didn’t tell me,” Draco said, giving him a hard stare. Harry gulped.

“I wanted Sirius and Remus to be the first to know. And, uh, then I forgot,” he admitted sheepishly. Draco huffed.

“Forgot? Honestly, Potter,” he sighed in mock-annoyance. “Disaster of a wizard.” A pause, and then an expectant look. “Go on. Show me!”

“Oh.” Harry concentrated, and then he was a fox beside Draco.

“*Ohh,*” Draco cooed, grey eyes filling with delight. “Aren’t you beautiful.” Harry preened, and quickly arched up under Draco’s hand, begging the boy to pet him. They spent a fun five minutes or so with Harry flopping around in Draco’s lap, letting the boy scratch the soft white fur on his belly, before Harry decided he wanted to kiss Draco properly, and became human once more so he could.

“You might be a disaster, but you’re a bloody talented one,” Draco told him, smoothing Harry’s mussed hair. Harry shrugged, bashful.

“You’ll get yours before sixth year, I bet.” The Slytherin didn’t look so convinced, and smoothly changed the subject.

“Well, my OWLS have to come first — we can’t all do eight things at once on top of studying for exams. How was your holiday, anyway? Despite the eventful start. Please tell me you actually rested for more than five minutes.”

Harry had written the important parts to Draco already, but it was nice getting to sit and tell him about the more mundane events of his break. Draco’s fingers began carding through his hair while he spoke, and Harry’s eyes went half-lidded with pleasure.

“Well, I’m glad you managed to get some quiet in that madhouse,” Draco remarked. “Slytherin house was more full than ever. Seems I’m not the only one who didn’t fancy heading home for Yule.”

“But you’re the only one with Voldemort in your house,” Harry pointed out. Draco’s pale lips became a thin line.

“Perhaps, but his reach is extending ever further. Rumour has it, he wants to start marking everyone once they turn seventeen. If not sooner.”

Fear gripped Harry’s throat. “Cassius?”

“Went to his secret boyfriend’s for the holidays,” Draco assured. “His family had no idea. He’s got them convinced he can’t be marked because he’s going to infiltrate the Ministry when he graduates, but considering the Dark Lord is talking about taking over the Ministry in due time... I don’t know how long that will last.”

Harry made a mental note to speak to the Slytherin. He needed sanctuary perhaps as much as Theo did — more, if Harry's suspicion about the seventh year's mysterious boyfriend was correct. His father would kill him if he found out.

"I've told Blaise I'll have a safehouse ready by summer," he said. "I'm going to see if there's a Potter property I can use. The goblins can't legally give me the deed 'til I'm of age, but if I can find it, I can take on the blood wards without technically owning the place."

"So your idea of sanctuary is squatting in your own ancestral home?" Draco drawled. Harry snorted.

"Well, when you put it that way... any better ideas?"

Sadly, Draco was all out.

"If needs must, I'll have Sirius kick the Order out of his house and we can use that instead," Harry said with a shrug.

"You're so sure you'll be on the outs with Dumbledore by the end of the year?"

"The only reason he hasn't figured me out is that he thinks I've got Voldemort in my head," Harry retorted. "Once he gets over that fear, it's all over." He was fairly confident that there were no major moves Dumbledore could make against him without drawing the ire of the wizarding world — not yet, anyway — so he didn't mind the man discovering Harry had lost the blocks on his magic. He had a bigger secret, now; Voldemort's horcruxes. Particularly, the one in his scar.

"At least that will mean he can't try and send you back to those muggles in the summer," Draco muttered. "Or to the Weasleys. You can actually go home."

"He couldn't send me to the Dursleys even I wanted him to," Harry revealed, a bitter smile crossing his lips. "They've moved away. Not sure where to." The information had come from Kingsley — who, unbeknownst to Harry, had been monitoring the Dursleys ever since the dementor attack. Apparently they couldn't cope with living in a house surrounded by memories of Dudley; in late October they'd packed up, and never looked back. The blood wards around the house were shattered.

"Good riddance," Draco said. He let out an exaggerated sigh, shifting Harry out of his slump against the blond's shoulder. "Now, enough of these depressing topics. It's been an awfully lonely three weeks without you." His grey eyes darkened.

Harry reached out eagerly, pulse picking up. It had been very lonely indeed.

. . .

Six o'clock on Monday evening found Harry headed down to the dungeons, for once not covered by his invisibility cloak. Only Draco knew the truth of the matter; even Neville, usually privy to Harry's secrets, believed he was headed for Remedial Potions lessons. He and plenty of others knew Harry already knew Occlumency; to have them aware that Snape

was supposed to be teaching it to him would prompt them to consider where the Potions Master's loyalties truly lay.

"Come in," Snape called curtly, when Harry knocked on the door. The office looked as it always did — but for the exception of a softly glowing bowl of silver liquid on the desk.

"Why do you have a pensieve?" Harry asked curiously. Snape warded the door for privacy, and glanced at the stone basin.

"Albus thought it might be necessary, for me to hide *important* memories. In case your Occlumency training should go awry."

Harry wasn't sure how things would go so awry that he would end up in Snape's own mind, but stranger things had happened. "That was generous of him. Don't suppose he left anything useful in it?"

Snape smirked briefly. "Sadly not. Now, I'm sure we can both agree that the last thing you are in need of is more Occlumency tutelage. Anything further would take you into the realm of falsifying your own memories, which, while potentially useful, is not a skill you necessarily need right now. The Dark Lord is very likely aware of the connection between you now, but I have faith in your current abilities to keep him out of your side of the connection." He leant against the edge of the desk, long legs stretched out. "With that in mind, I thought it best to use these lessons to continue our studies from the summer. Far be it from me to deny a perfect opportunity when it arises."

He was right — if Dumbledore expected Harry to be with Snape for the next few hours, it was an excellent time for Harry to get in some duelling practice. Harry looked around the office skeptically, eyes lingering on the shelves covered in jars of strange liquids. "This isn't really the best place for it."

"I was hoping you might be able to help with that. Come here." Snape walked to the back wall of the office, and pointed at the stone. Harry stepped closer, confused — then he noticed the tiny snake engraved in the grey slab. He smirked.

"You just want to go back to the Chamber," he accused lightly, and Snape's eyes narrowed.

"If you would prefer I have you sit here and *read* about the spells I wish to teach you, you are very welcome to," he drawled. Harry snorted.

"No, thank you." He paused, concern brewing. "Will Dumbledore not expect you to give him some kind of report on my progress?"

"And I shall. If he requests visual proof, I am an expert at falsifying my own memories," Snape said matter-of-factly. "But, to be blunt, I believe Albus is expecting these lessons to be a complete and utter disaster, in which I shall discover all the secrets hidden in that thick skull of yours, and you shall be even more convinced that I am evil incarnate." His eyes flashed with amusement. "I will feed him some lies about your mind being full of little else but exam worries and boys, and make my disgust at having to sift through such things very clear."

Harry shot the man an indignant look. “Hey, I could have more going on than that!” He thought about it for a second; Dumbledore was certainly expecting a lot more than that, after his vision of Mr Weasley. Harry doubted the headmaster would believe that Harry had any kind of natural talent in Occlumency… they would have to give the man something good. “Tell him about the corridor dreams.”

“Pardon?”

“The dreams Voldemort keeps sending me, of that corridor in the Department of Mysteries. Tell him you saw those in my head. It’ll make him think he’s right, at least about Voldemort trying to influence me through our connection.” If Dumbledore was busy patting himself on the back, he wouldn’t look much further. “If you don’t give him anything he can use, he’ll start to suspect both of us.”

A sudden realisation hit him, making his blood turn cold. “If he realises I know about the magic blocks and you aren’t the one to tell him, he’ll know you’re not loyal to him.”

On the contrary, Snape didn’t look concerned. “He cannot expect me to seek out every last secret in your mind without making you a vegetable. Considering he currently believes you shed his incredibly powerful compulsion charms from sheer *stubbornness*, I do not think it will surprise him to find that you are equally stubborn enough to force me away from your deepest, darkest secrets.” Then he gave an almost predatory sneer. “I have been serving two masters for long enough to know how to manipulate the truth for my own benefit. Trust me, Potter; I will be fine.” Then he snorted derisively. “Though if you decide to remove Albus as permanently as you will the Dark Lord, that would make my life easier.”

Harry couldn’t say he hadn’t thought about it. “If I kill him, people will declare me the next Dark Lord before his body’s even cold. And if it looks like an accident, he’ll be martyred.” He smirked sharply. “I plan to publicly disgrace him before he can even *think* about toddling off on his ‘*next great adventure*’.”

“Then you had best be prepared to deal with the Dark Lord as soon as possible,” Snape returned. Then he tapped the wall pointedly. “Come; we’re wasting valuable time. We can discuss these plans further while we duel — it’ll be good for you to practice multi-tasking.”

There was a vindictive look on Snape’s face that made Harry’s heart sink in trepidation, even as he obediently hissed at the snake to open a passage.

He was going to be so very sore in the morning.

.-.-.

Harry dragged himself back up to Gryffindor Tower an hour past curfew, his duelling injuries healed but his muscles still sore from use — working with the HA was nowhere near as gruelling as working with Snape, and after a lazy Christmas Harry was woefully out of shape.

Still, it had been a productive session — between dodging curses and flinging back his own, Harry had managed to talk more freely to Snape than he had since the summer; about

Dumbledore's plans, and Voldemort's, and how much they knew about Harry. From the sounds of things, both were quietly trying to gather their armies in preparation for what was to come — to both of them, Harry was practically an afterthought, just a pawn to shift into the right place when the time came.

As long as they both believed that, Harry could do some army-gathering of his own.

He looked appropriately downtrodden as he made his way to his dormitory, cementing the idea for any onlookers that he'd just had a private Potions lesson with Snape and hated every second of it. He had another on Wednesday — as if there weren't enough things filling his evenings, these days.

But they were all necessary, and he wouldn't turn down the opportunity to learn from Snape right under the headmaster's nose. So with that in mind, Harry readied himself for bed, already thinking about when the next HA meeting could be squeezed in.

Just as he was about to pull back his duvet, Harry was hit by a wave of pain in his scar — followed by an overwhelming feeling of pure *happiness*. Triumph filled his chest, a maniacal laugh ringing in his ears. Something truly excellent had happened!

“HARRY!” He heard the call through the fuzz of pain and joy, felt a sharp prod of magic like an electric shock running through him. The laughter cut off abruptly, making him realise it was coming from his own throat. He pushed past the fire in his scar to open his eyes, seeing Neville watching him in concern. Luckily, none of the other boys in the dormitory were present. His friend's eyes were intent, and as Harry sucked in a sharp breath, a cold fear flooded his veins.

“He’s happy,” he rasped, watching the horror dawn on Neville’s features. “He’s *so* happy.”

“What happened?” Neville pressed, but Harry shook his head.

“No idea.” His scar was still prickling, and he ran a hand through his hair, grimacing. Something had happened, something Voldemort was very pleased about. That was an incredibly worrying prospect. “I need to talk to Sirius.”

“Won’t a letter take too long?” Of course, Neville didn’t know about the two-way mirror. Well, that was one secret he was happy to share with his friend.

“Don’t need to write.” Harry scrambled for his bedside drawer, pulling out the hand mirror. When he sat on his bed, he wasn’t surprised when Neville immediately joined him. Worried about the other boys intruding, Harry drew his drapes with a flick of his wand and raised a silencing ward. “Sirius Black.”

The mirror went fuzzy for a second, and then Sirius’ face materialised in the glass. He looked grim. “Pup. Now’s not the best time.”

“Something has happened,” Harry said urgently. “I just got this massive hit of... happiness. Something has happened that Voldemort is really pleased about. You need to be careful—“ He stopped abruptly when Sirius’ frown became more pronounced.

"It's too late for that, pup," the animagus said. Harry's heart leapt to his throat — it had to be bad, to make Sirius look like that. "Tonks just sent a message; the auror department is a madhouse right now. There was a mass breakout at Azkaban."

Harry looked up at Neville, just in time to see the blood drain from his friend's face.

"Yeah," Harry said weakly, hating that the joy was still simmering in the back of his mind. "That'll do it."

Gathering armies, indeed.

.-.-.-.

The news was all over the front page of the *Daily Prophet* the next morning. Ten pictures; ten Death Eaters who were at large once more. The sight of all three Lestranges staring up at Harry made his jaw clench, and he looked sideways at Neville. The boy had been ashen-faced since he'd heard the news, and Harry had noticed the Silencing charm around his bed that night. From the dark circles under his eyes, Harry would bet that Neville's sleep had been more nightmare-plagued than his own.

On the blond's other side was Ginny, her hand wrapped tightly around Neville's. "I'm so sorry," she breathed, voice cracking. "Neville, fuck, I... I'm so sorry."

Neville gave a tiny shrug, mechanically eating his toast. Harry pressed his shoulder to his friend's in quiet sympathy. What else could he do? There was nothing to say to make the situation any better.

Neville wasn't the only one hit hard by the news. At the Hufflepuff table, Susan was squeezed tight between Ernie and Hannah, who were hiding her from view and had been since she'd burst into tears at the sight of the men who had tortured and killed every member of her family barring her Aunt Amelia. The Hufflepuffs around them were quiet, sharing worried looks between them.

Reading the full article just made anger flare in Harry's gut — Fudge was blaming the break-out on Sirius.

Luckily, he wasn't the only one who realised how utterly ridiculous that was.

"If Black was going to break everyone out, surely he'd have done it when he got loose," he heard from the Ravenclaw table behind him.

"You-Know-Who has the dementors, I'm telling you," someone else from further up the Gryffindor table declared. "It's been obvious ever since one of them got Potter's cousin. Fudge just can't admit he fucked up that badly."

Harry hated how flippantly Dudley's death was being bandied about the hall, but if it was helping people realise the truth about the Ministry's incompetence, he couldn't argue against it. It was something Fudge couldn't deny, not after how quickly the news had spread around school — and back to the parents, Harry would bet.

More than one person was murmuring about Fudge needing to be sacked, and up at the head table Umbridge had a white-knuckled grip on her knife and fork. Harry was surprised she wasn't trying to take house points for the blatant defamation of her beloved Minister; perhaps she realised she didn't have a good argument against the truth, this time.

Wishing he could do something to stop the tremors he could feel running through Neville's body, Harry turned to look at the rest of the school, stomach clenching at the sight of so many fearful, horrified faces. Even the Slytherin table wasn't immune to it — while there were some poorly-hidden expressions of triumph, there were just as many who looked like they might be ill. Several of the children Harry knew to have Death Eater parents were among them; did they know, what now awaited them when they left school? Did they expect these Azkaban escapees to be waiting for them, ready to welcome them into the fold?

His gaze landed on Draco, who was making a valiant effort at pretending to be unaffected; pleased, even. But Harry could see the faint shake of his hand, the terror in his eyes.

He knew they were all very likely at his home, now. He knew that Bellatrix Lestrange would be *delighted* to see her little sister again.

Harry forced himself to look away, before he did something stupid. He let his eyes trail over the other Slytherins; Blaise and Daphne had their heads down, huddled together with some fourth years. Pansy was halfheartedly picking at a bowl of fruit, while beside her Tracey Davis was actually *laughing* at something, trying to get the attention of Theodore Nott — who, oddly enough, was looking over at the Hufflepuff table. At Susan.

Susan had mentioned spending time with him over Christmas, catching him up on all the heirs' plans. Maybe they were friends, now.

"Have you seen the rest of it?" Ginny asked suddenly, making Harry's heart sink. There was more??

Ginny flipped the pages of the paper, showing him a smaller article — practically hidden amongst the extended coverage of the escapees and their crimes. '*Tragic Demise of Ministry of Magic Worker*'. Apparently some man named Bode had been sent a Devil's Snare disguised as a pot plant to his bed in St Mungo's, and it had killed him.

"I've heard Dad talk about him before," Ginny murmured quietly. "He works in the Department of Mysteries."

Harry tensed, and felt Neville do the same beside him. A blatant assassination — no one sent Devil's Snare *by accident* — of an Unspeakable, who was already in the hospital in suspect circumstances? That couldn't be anything good.

A bell rang, and half the hall jumped — in light of the news, most of them seemed to have forgotten they had classes to go to.

The absolute last thing Harry wanted to do right then was go and listen to Binns drone on for forty-five minutes. But life went on; there was nothing they could do about the break-out from within the school.

“Come on, Nev,” he murmured, gently urging the boy into a standing position. He grabbed a banana off the table, slipping it into his pocket; Neville hadn’t been able to eat anything, but he would get too hungry to ignore it eventually.

Ginny looked like she was considering ditching her own classes to stick with Neville, but after a pointed look from Harry she gave the blond boy’s hand one last squeeze, then hurried to catch up with Colin.

It was somewhat novel for Harry, to hear the school full of whispers that weren’t necessarily about him. If it weren’t such an awful situation, he might have enjoyed it. As it was, there was nothing to enjoy about this. Voldemort had ten of his most loyal supporters back in his ranks.

Harry’s time was running out.

Chapter 63

The news that Hagrid had been put on probation was just the icing on top of the exceptionally shitty cake. No one seemed particularly surprised — not even Hagrid himself, who was still covered in an absurd amount of bruises, and Harry *did not want to know*. Hagrid didn't seem all that worried, either; not about the probation, at least. He was definitely worried about something else, his mind absent during classes and his gaze often on the Forbidden Forest. He brought much more mundane creatures out to study — likely at the behest of Hermione, who Harry noticed practically coaching Hagrid through his lessons — but every single one of his lessons was now attended by Umbridge, and Harry suspected Hagrid had come to the same conclusion he had.

Not even perfect lessons were likely to save him from Umbridge's blood-purist wrath.

Trelawney, too, now had to deal with the presence of the High Inquisitor in every one of her classes.

"You'd think she'd be focused on teaching her own bloody classes," Parvati hissed venomously once they were out of earshot of the Divination classroom, her expression thunderous. "Maybe that's why all she does is have us read the textbook."

To add insult to injury, Umbridge had introduced another Educational Decree, this one banning teachers from discussing anything but the subject they taught with their students. Harry suspected this was to stop teachers talking to them about the Azkaban breakout, or anything related to what was going on outside the castle walls — as far as Lavender and Parvati were concerned, it stopped them talking freely to their favourite professor, and that was a step too far.

Umbridge was making enemies all over the school, but there was very little they could all do about it. Except what they were already doing, of course.

With that in mind, Harry scheduled a HA meeting as soon as his busy timetable allowed it. As instructed, everyone had spent Christmas researching a spell they wanted to learn — Harry now had quite an impressive list of magic to work through, only a handful of which he would have to have Snape teach him first.

"Brilliant, guys. I'll sort that list out and we can start working on them next week. Today, I thought we'd do something a bit more fun."

"Are we breaking out the duelling dummies again?" Cho asked excitedly, looking over to the corner where a trio of dummies waited. Each of them now had a picture of Umbridge's face stuck to the front of their heads, and it made practicing with them that much more entertaining.

"Not today. Instead... how many of you know what paintball is?"

Immediately, all the muggle-raised members of the group lit up with unholy glee. Harry grinned back at them. “I’m going to split you into two teams,” he announced. “And I hope you’re all familiar with the Colour-Change charm, because we’re going to be using a lot of it.”

Just because learning to dodge spellfire was a very serious and necessary skill, didn’t mean Harry couldn’t make it fun, after all.

.-.-.-.

Sirius looked around the small group, tucked away in the upstairs drawing room of Grimmauld Place. These were the only members of the Order he could trust, these days. Other than Snape, of course — and if his teenage self could hear that, he’d check himself right into St Mungo’s.

“The Minister isn’t interested in searching for the escapees,” Kingsley said in his low, rumbling voice. He had an arm around Tonks, gently rubbing her shoulder — the young auror had been in a state ever since the news of her *dear Aunt Bella*’s escape. Sirius didn’t blame her; the thought of that crazy bitch running free made him feel cold inside, like the dementors were right over his shoulder again.

In his sleep, he could hear her, cackling away to herself from a few cells away, the sound echoing in the narrow stone halls of the prison.

Sirius didn’t sleep much, these days.

“He’s too scared that actually going after them might unearth something he’s not ready to face,” Tonks snorted derisively. “He’s paying lip service, of course — assigning aurors, telling the press he’s got it handled. But the aurors he’s putting on the case can barely tell their arse from their elbow.”

Sirius snorted grimly; he was very familiar with the type.

“The fact that he’s still in the job is a bloody miracle,” Charlie muttered, shaking his head. He was sat beside Sirius, close enough to press their legs together from knee to ankle, and Sirius was glad no one else was bringing up the matter — with the ever-present chill in his bones, he would take all the warmth and comfort he could get. Within reason. He wasn’t going to get the poor man’s hopes up, no matter how desperate he was for some company at night, a warm body to keep the shadows at bay. Charlie deserved better than that.

“It’s not a miracle, it’s a sign that Voldemort’s people are already in power, and Fudge is playing right into their hands,” Remus piped up knowingly. He was propped up in an armchair, wan and tired-eyed from the recent full moon. “If he were competent, he’d be dead by now.”

He was right; the dark side wouldn’t put up with a Minister who might actually do something to stop them, not after all the work they’d done to worm their way into government.

“Charlie, we need to talk to Dad. We need to get our seats,” Bill declared. Sirius felt Charlie tense beside him.

“You think he’ll go for it?”

Sirius knew the boys had been laying the groundwork for a while now, especially since Arthur’s attack.

“We’ll have to keep at him until he does. If we leave it too late, we risk getting caught out by Dumbledore; he’ll never let Dad pass his seats on to us if he thinks there’s even a *chance* of us voting against him,” Bill pointed out with a frown. “Hell, having the guarantee Dad will vote with him is the only thing that keeps him one up on Malfoy.”

With all the seat proxies given to Lucius Malfoy from various Death Eater friends who were incarcerated, or otherwise unable to take up the positions, it gave him nine votes in the Wizengamot alone. But with all of Harry’s proxies, Dumbledore held nine of his own, and several more that were his in all but magic, considering how devoted their true holders were. Considering those who kept their politics firmly neutral were often not Dumbledore’s biggest fans, losing the Weasley and Prewett backing might just tip him out of his power vacuum.

Not that Bill and Charlie would necessarily agree with *anything* Malfoy proposed, but it would stop Dumbledore passing his ridiculous, restrictive bills that so many people didn’t realise were merely cementing the old man’s foothold in society.

“If you can, that’ll be a huge step in our plans,” Sirius agreed. He ran a hand through his hair in frustration. “Merlin, I wish I could do something useful.” If he were a free man, he could take Harry’s proxy seats as his godfather, without it necessarily looking like the boy’s faith in Dumbledore was waning. He could take up the Black seat, as he should have years ago.

At this rate, they would have to wait until all of Harry’s classmates began turning seventeen before any real progress could be made. And that was only if many of them could convince the current seat holders to step down — not all of them had dead parents and proxy holders, after all.

“You’re doing what you can,” Charlie protested, hand squeezing Sirius’ knee. “We always knew the Ministry would take time. There won’t be any real change until all of the Death Eaters have been weeded out. Fudge’s incompetence is just making that part of our jobs even harder.”

He was right, and they all knew it — Dumbledore’s adoring public wouldn’t matter one knut if Voldemort took the Ministry proper. All the kids coming of age wouldn’t mean anything if it was too dangerous for them to attend Wizengamot sessions.

“Now he’s got his best generals back, we know the Dark Lord won’t wait around forever,” Kingsley said solemnly. “He’ll strike eventually. And we’ll be ready when he does.” Sirius caught the man’s dark gaze, seeing it become bloodthirsty for just the briefest moment. “We know who the key players are. If we can catch them, get them off the board, we can begin to turn the tide. Enough for Harry to sweep in and do the rest, once he’s ready.”

At that, Sirius glanced over to Bill, who looked troubled. The animagus wondered how the goblins were doing on the horcrux solution.

If they couldn't figure out a way to get that soul shard out of Harry safely, it would all be for nought regardless.

He set his head in his hands, resisting the urge to tear at his hair — or turn into a dog, where emotions were much easier to deal with. He'd promised Moony he'd stop doing that.

So many aspects of their plans relied on uncertainty. *If* they could fool Dumbledore for long enough and *if* they could unseat Fudge and *if* they could destroy all the horcruxes. *If* they could get Sirius free, or get Malfoy in prison.

If, if, if. Sirius hated that word.

A gentle hand on his back made Sirius look up, and he realised the room had cleared out — everyone except for Charlie, who was watching him with concern on his handsome face. "Talk to me," he urged, fingers sweeping up to massage gently at the tense knot of muscle at the base of Sirius' neck. He couldn't stop himself from melting under the touch.

"It just feels like it won't be enough," Sirius blurted. "I feel like— like I'm not holding up my end of the bargain. Harry's at school risking everything under the noses of Dumbledore and Umbridge both. He's training his classmates for war — something *none* of those kids should need to prepare for — and he's got his friends planning an entire restructure of the government, and he's dealing with those shitty visions. Meanwhile I'm here rattling around this bloody house with nothing to do but put laxatives in Dumbledore's tea when he comes for meetings."

Charlie snorted. "Have you actually?"

"Once or twice," Sirius confirmed with the barest hint of a grin. "It's hardly worth anything, though. Harry's my godson — I should be doing more to take some of this burden off his shoulders." A burden no teenager should have to bear, least of all his beloved pup, who had already been through so much.

The dragon tamer's fingers stilled. "Sirius," he sighed. "Like it or not, you're a wanted criminal. Harry knows it, we all know it — Kingsley and Tonks are doing what they can to get info on Pettigrew, but it looks like the rat is holed up tight with his master." Sirius snarled at the mention of him. "We all wish Harry didn't have to do what he's doing, but let's be honest, half of his burden is shit he decided to take on himself, the over-achieving little bastard." His voice was affectionate, despite his words. "As his godfather, all he wants you to do — all *any of us* want you to do — is support him, and love him, and give him a safe place to call home whenever he needs it. And you've done all those things. Are doing all of them."

Charlie's hand moved to cup Sirius' cheek, his other hand coming up to do the same, cradling the older man's face tenderly. He kissed him, and Sirius' heart ached. "You're doing everything you can, Sirius. I wish you'd stop being so hard on yourself."

But couldn't he see? Everything Sirius could do wasn't *enough*, not while he was trapped in this bloody house. "He needs someone who can protect him from all the crap he's getting. All the crap that's coming his way." If Harry were attacked, Sirius would be one of the last to know, and no one would let him fucking do anything about it for risk of his capture.

Blue eyes softened, a thumb stroking the line of Sirius' cheekbone. "I hate to say it, but if you tried to protect Harry he'd be the first one to shove you out of the way. Kid has even less self-worth than you do." Sirius wasn't sure whether to be more offended on his own behalf or his godson's. "We all feel useless. We're all playing a waiting game. Don't you think I wish I could take up the Weasley seat and put Dumbledore in his place? But it's not time for that. And I get the feeling that when it finally is, we'll be *longing* for the days where we sat around thinking how useless we all were."

He grinned, cheeks dimpling, and Sirius' heart thudded hard in his chest. "We're all doing what we can. Yourself included. This breakout... it's shit. There's no denying that. But the *second* those bastards show their faces, we'll get them. Until then, we just keep the lies going, so we don't put Harry in danger. That's the most important thing."

They could both agree on that; while Harry was stuck at school, they all had to fool the world into thinking he was just an average fifth year who happened to have a Dark Lord after his head.

A long sigh escaped Sirius' lips, and for a moment he let himself fall forward, forehead resting against Charlie's. "What would I do without you, Charlie?" he murmured. The hands on his face slid down his neck, resting on his shoulders.

"Don't know. But I can think of plenty of things you can do *with me*," the redhead replied flirtatiously. Sirius barked out a laugh, and it was harder than ever before to pull himself away.

"I keep telling you, you don't want to be saddled with me."

"And *I* keep telling *you*, that's my decision to make," Charlie retorted without missing a beat. His eyes, when they met Sirius', were sad and tired. "You deserve to be happy, Sirius. But I don't know how long I can keep trying to convince you of that."

The admission made Sirius' stomach clench, but before he could say anything Charlie was gone. Sirius was alone in the room, staring at the door, bereft.

He'd been telling himself for weeks now that he would be glad when Charlie gave up, when he could get on with his life in his solitude without gorgeous redheads trying to tempt him into breaking their hearts.

So why did he feel like his own heart was breaking?

.-. .

Exhaustion tugged at the edge of Harry's senses as he headed down for his latest 'Occlumency lesson', and he pushed it away stubbornly. He had stayed out a little too late

with Draco the night before, and he wouldn't let Snape punish him for his tiredness, less he accidentally admit the source.

To his surprise, Snape was stood in front of his desk when Harry arrived, rather than at the wall ready to enter the chamber. Harry cocked his head curiously. "I have a different lesson in mind for today," the Slytherin declared. He gestured for Harry to sit.

"What kind of lesson, sir?"

"Legilimency," Snape said, and Harry's eyebrows rose.

"I... but I thought my Occlumency shields were fine?" He hadn't felt much since the Azkaban breakout, and at night the only dreams he got were of the endless dark corridor. Voldemort was fully aware of the connection now, and making sure things only got through when he wanted them to.

"They are. I will be teaching *you* to perform Legilimency," Snape said, to Harry's astonishment. "It will be beneficial for you to know what an intrusion of the mind feels like from the other side — perhaps, should the Dark Lord ever become... vulnerable, the skill may allow you to dig a little deeper when he draws you into his own thoughts."

"But..." Teaching Harry Legilimency meant Snape allowing Harry into his mind. The Slytherin nodded, mouth in a thin line, clearly of the same thought.

"It is necessary. I have used the pensieve, for once. And I am confident in my ability to throw you out of my mind should you go searching for something I do not want you to see." He peered down his large nose at Harry, and Harry knew then that no matter how much progress had been made between them, how much they had become family due to their shared love of Remus Lupin, if Harry violated this trust he would *never* be forgiven.

"I'll behave," he promised. "Tell me what to do."

Snape drew up a chair to sit opposite him, and set his wand in his lap. "You know the incantation. To truly breach the mind, you must have absolute focus — there are billions of moments and memories inside a single person's brain, and if you do not know exactly what it is you are looking for, it can be easy to get lost in there. The hardest part is not the spell itself, but removing yourself from the other's mind."

Harry's fingers tightened around his own wand, attempting to stop them trembling. "I could get stuck?"

"In an untrained mind, yes," Snape said with a short nod. "I have enough skill in Occlumency to eject you myself, though I will not until you have gained a feel for it. First, I will lower my shields for you, so you can see what it is to enter a mind without resistance. We will work upwards from there. Are you ready?"

Harry nodded, meeting Snape's near-black eyes, imagining he could see some of his own trepidation reflected back at him. He took a deep breath. *Focus.*

“Legilimens.”

At first it was like being plunged into a pool of icy water, not knowing which way was up. Sensations and sounds were bombarding him from all angles, so overwhelming he could hardly breathe. *Focus*, he reminded himself. He had to try and find his way around. Find a memory, intentionally.

Immediately, his mind went in one specific direction. *Show me Lily*, he thought, yearning with his whole heart to see his mother through this man’s eyes.

The sensations faded a little, and Harry wondered if Snape was kicking him out, if he’d asked to see something off-limits. Then everything blurred around him — and he was stood on grass.

It was like being in a pensieve memory but... sharper. *More*. He could smell the grass, feel the wind in his hair.

He could see the sunlight glinting off the vibrant red hair of the little girl in front of him.

It was not the kind of memory Harry had anticipated; they were in a park — a rather rundown one, by the looks of it, with a swing seat hanging from only one chain and a climbing frame that looked like an absolute death trap. But all he could feel was joy, excitement, and the warm glow of receiving this girl’s wide smile. There was a boy with the girl; twig-thin and knobbly-kneed, with a curtain of dark hair falling in front of a pale face.

“It came! Sev, you were right — it really came!”

“Of course it came,” Harry heard the boy say — Severus Snape’s voice to be sure, but pre-pubescent.

And *northern*.

Lily Evans, too, had a thick Birmingham accent, crying out to “Show me yours, show me yours!” She thrust a piece of parchment in Snape’s direction.

Dear Miss Evans, we are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

In Snape’s hand was an almost identical letter, crumpled at the edges from being held so tight; proof that he was worth something, that he could be *more* than this silly little mining town.

“Mum and Dad thought it was mental, but I told them it weren’t a joke,” Lily continued. “They wanna talk to your mum, though.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea, Lils.”

“Oh, come on, Sev!” A small hand on the boy’s skinny arm, a bright smile directed his way. Nothing could possibly be bad when Lily was smiling like that. “They’ve met your mum, they know what she’s like. As long as your dad’s not around it’ll be easy.”

"That's easier said than done," young Snape pointed out. "He got let go from the factory again." A flash of pain, a wince. Lily's smile was gone, replaced with righteous fury blazing in those vivid green eyes.

"What did he do to you?"

Harry saw those dark eyes widen a fraction. Saw Snape scrambling to think of a lie, something Lily might believe, anything to get her off the subject.

"Lily! Mummy says it's time to come in, now! I— oh. You're with the *freak*." And that could only be one person, with that sort of contempt. Harry looked across the park to see a girl a couple of years older than Lily, her blonde hair cut in a wavy bob, a look of disgust on her face as she stared at them. Petunia Evans, aged thirteen, and just as hateful as always. She had the same accent as her sister, though her words were clipped and over-annunciated, like she was already trying to train herself out of it and into the crisp RP accent Harry knew her to have as an adult. "Come away, Lily."

"Leave him alone, Tunie!" Lily argued, glaring at her sister. "You're just jealous because we get to go to magic school and you don't!"

A sneer on Petunia's face, so cold it made Lily flinch. "Why would I want to go to such an *awful* place with a couple of *unnatural weirdos* like you? I'll be glad to see the back of you. Maybe Mum and Dad can ask that old man if they can keep you over the holidays, too."

And then Harry felt a sharp shove, and he was back in his own mind, his body feeling even more worn and leaden than ever. "I'm sorry," he gasped, looking up awkwardly at Snape's face. It was remarkably blank. "I... I got carried away." He hadn't intended to linger so long in the same memory, but his mother was *right there*, tiny and fierce and so incredible.

"I could have removed you at any time," Snape replied — his way of assuring Harry that he had not overstepped. "You must learn not to get trapped in memories, however. No matter how... appealing they are. Had I been of the mind to, I could have caged you there for as long as I wanted. Especially since you did not keep any connection to your own mind — a true Legilimens needs to be able to slip into another's mind while remaining in their own, to avoid leaving themselves unguarded. Or arousing suspicion."

That made sense; when Dumbledore tried to sneakily use Legilimency on people, he didn't go all slack and vacant-eyed like Harry no doubt had. He could hold entire conversations while rummaging through peoples' heads!

"It's harder than I thought it would be."

A flicker of a smile crossed Snape's lips. "You have only seen it done well, and that makes it look easy."

Snape leaned back in his chair, no doubt giving Harry a little time to recover from what he'd seen. Harry's head was full of his mother's voice, her face; it was so different than seeing pictures.

“When did you lose your accent?” he blurted, eyes going wide at the faintest blush on Snape’s pallid cheeks.

“Summer after my first year, for the most part,” he confessed. “Speaking in such a way, to the other Slytherins, was... uncouth. I didn’t need even more for people to bully me over, so I trained myself out of it. I... slipped, on occasion. Remus found it particularly amusing to make me revert to my childhood accent.” He blushed deeper, and Harry started blushing, too.

“I never knew. Aunt Petunia hasn’t a trace of it.”

“Oh, Tunie was speaking like a toff before she hit sixth form,” Snape told him, and there it was, just a *tiny hint* of a Brummie twang. “Though it took her far longer than it did me to learn proper elocution, and it certainly didn’t endear me to her any further.” A small twitch of Snape’s lips. “Lily, on the other hand, made a point of getting even more northern the longer we spent away from Cokeworth. Said she wasn’t ashamed of where she came from and there was nothing wrong with a good regional accent. It was quite entertaining, watching her yell at your father — he was as posh as anything, and when she really got going I think he only understood a quarter of the words from her mouth.”

Harry laughed, imagining that tiny red-haired girl yelling at a tiny Indian boy, her accent ever-thickening. “Would— would you show me, sometime?” he asked before he could help himself. “Not in your head, if you don’t want.” Experiencing things with the full weight of young Snape’s emotions was a little alarming. “But... in the pensieve, maybe?” While they had it, it couldn’t hurt to take advantage, surely?

“Perhaps,” Snape drawled, and he — thankfully — didn’t look offended. “If it will incentivise you to learn Legilimency faster.”

Harry straightened up in his seat. “Deal.”

To watch memories of his mother, he would do just about anything.

.-.-.-.

Harry was starting to feel like he was going insane.

Between the *Prophet* still denying the truth of the breakout — running a series of increasingly ridiculous articles about the criminal mastermind Sirius Black and what he could possibly be gathering Death Eater accomplices for — and Umbridge cracking down on any *hint* of independent thought within the walls of Hogwarts, the school began to move on from it all, and Harry often felt like he was the only one who realised how close to impending disaster they actually were.

Well, not the *only* one. His friends were right there with him. But just when he started to think they might be gaining a majority on the side of truth, he was knocked right back down again — like right now, in the Great Hall, overhearing a group of Ravenclaws in his own year laugh about how much of an attention-seeking crazy person he was, to be full of such anti-Ministry conspiracy theories. This, naturally, was the result of yet another detention with

Umbridge after he mentioned in class that sending dementors out to search for the missing prisoners was not going to work when the dementors had let them escape to begin with.

He forgot, sometimes, that despite his growing friendships with people outside his own house, he didn't have everyone on his side. Padma and Mandy were the only Ravenclaw girls in his year that he spoke to, and there were still a fair few Hufflepuffs who gave him dirty looks whenever he was nearby. Hell, even within Gryffindor he was not entirely supported — Seamus and Dean had become Ron's new friends, and even though Ron was fully aware that Voldemort had returned and Sirius was an innocent man, he was happy to make jokes about how Harry had finally gone 'round the twist.

It was disheartening, to say the least. He was trying *so hard* to prepare people for the dark times to come, and they would much rather stick their heads in the sand and keep going with business as usual.

"If it's this bad inside the school when I'm *right here* telling the truth, I dread to think what the rest of the country thinks," Harry muttered, turning back to his lunch. He had Ginny on one side and Neville on the other, and the Weasley girl patted his shoulder sympathetically.

"With the *Prophet* against you, there's not much you can do."

Harry still scowled, absently wondering if Susan had any plans in her arsenal for laws about unbiased media reporting. He was on the verge of calling Mrs Frobisher back up, but he doubted there was much she could legally do about it; they were insinuating a lot, to be sure, but they weren't outright calling Harry a liar or a lunatic. He couldn't sue them just because they were saying not to worry about Voldemort.

"It's like last year all over again," he muttered, "only worse, because it's about other peoples' safety rather than just me being a glory-hound."

Suddenly, Ginny froze, and then a slow smile stretched across her face. "If it's like last year," she drawled, "why not take the same approach?"

Harry blinked at her, and then it clicked. "Write another article?" She grinned wider, nodding.

"People listened to the last one. Mostly," she added, remembering her own mother's firm denial on the subject. "But anyone with a brain can tell that the Ministry's story doesn't add up — if you tell the world the truth, it'll be harder for them to deny it. Not everyone will believe you, but you'll get plenty to think about it at the very least."

"Half the magical folks in the country only have the *Prophet* for news," Neville agreed. "They've no reason not to trust it. And they might not know anyone at the school to know that your story is a whole lot more plausible."

Harry thought it over, dipping the crust of his bread into his soup. It could backfire on him spectacularly; the *Quibbler*, as much as he loved Luna dearly, was hardly a recognised source of truthful, legitimate news.

But... it was like Ginny said. If he could just get people *thinking*, get them questioning the legitimacy of the stories the *Prophet* fed them...

“Okay, then,” he declared, his heart lifting with enthusiasm for the first time in a long while. “It can’t hurt.” It could, but he wouldn’t think too hard on that.

“At the very least it’ll piss Umbridge off, and that’s always a winner,” Ginny chirped slyly. Harry laughed — that was certainly true. Maybe if Umbridge was railing at him again, she might ease up on Hagrid for a while.

“I’ll talk to Luna in Charms,” Ginny promised, grabbing her school bag. “You just start thinking about what you want to write.”

Harry groaned quietly; he’d forgotten that publishing an article meant actually having to *write* the article. He’d have to try and squeeze that in somewhere amongst the three hundred other things he had going on.

But he would, because it was worth it. The resistance needed to happen outside of Hogwarts, too.

Chapter 64

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Wandering between the rows of shelves in the library, Harry looked around for a place to study without being gawped at or whispered about. He had a stack of books in his arms all about the process of animate conjuration, and a two-foot Transfiguration essay due in the morning.

Continuing to some of the rows further back, hoping they would be more deserted, Harry froze — sat in a darkened corner, completely alone, was Cassius Warrington. And he looked *awful*.

The seventh year's usually handsome face was pale and waxy, his brown hair hanging into his eyes like it was long overdue a cut. His robes hung loosely off his shoulders; he'd lost weight, this school year.

Carefully, Harry checked there was no one snooping around, then approached the Slytherin and put up a privacy ward to block them from view. Cassius jumped as the magic washed over him, looking up in alarm. "Oh. Potter. It's just you." His shoulders slumped again.

"Are you alright?"

A derisive snort escaped the Slytherin's lips. "Oh, I'm just fine," he replied, sarcasm dripping from his tone. "Positively *wonderful*."

Harry sat down warily. "Cassius," he started, and the boy's aloof Slytherin mask cracked just a fraction.

"I have NEWTs in four months," he said, voice hollow. "And after that I will go home, to my family, where my older brother and my uncles and both my cousins are all waiting for me to *join them* in the ranks of the Dark Lord's *loyal subjects*." His face twisted in disgust. "I know they won't let me use the Ministry as an excuse to keep that foul Mark off my arm. Hell, three of them work there themselves, and it's not been a problem for them." He ran a hand through his hair, messing it up even further. "Somehow I have to pass these fucking exams knowing what's waiting for me when they're over. But even if I don't pass them I'll face the same fate, so what's the *fucking* point." He kicked the leg of the table, making it rattle.

"If I could kill him faster for you, I would," Harry remarked wryly. Cassius' eyes widened.

"I didn't— It isn't your fault, Harry," he insisted. "Even if the Dark Lord died tomorrow, that wouldn't stop my family being there. Being awful. Trying to trap me in their twisted net of dark magic." His lips quirked in a cold, bitter grin. "Best I can hope for is all of them getting sent to Azkaban when they fight in their Lord's army. Or killed. I'm not picky." The bravado faltered, and he sighed once more. "I just... the boys in my dorm are all legitimate supporters, and I can tell they're watching me. They know I used to hang out with all sorts

last year. They know I was friendly with your lot. But they're *always* there and when they're not, Umbridge is, and I can't trust that no one's reading my letters so I can hardly talk to the one person who *actually* gives a shit, and my workload is getting worse and I just—I have nowhere to go, Harry," he said, voice cracking. "I'm almost eighteen and it still doesn't matter. I'm still stuck with them. If I want the chance to save the family name, if I want to have even a *knut* to my name when I graduate, I have to do what they say. Disinheriting me would be the kindest thing they'd do — I'd much more likely end up dead."

"What about Oliver?" Harry asked, and Cassius' whole body went stiff, his hazel eyes filling with fear for the briefest moment. Then he relaxed, turning sheepish.

"Did he tell you?" he asked knowingly, and Harry shook his head.

"I guessed."

A short laugh rang through their quiet corner. "What gave me away? Anything I need to worry about?"

Harry shook his head before the older boy could second-guess himself. "Only because I know you, and him. It was a bit suspect when you were both so friendly at the World Cup, and then how happy you were listening to the match commentary that one time... Plus a couple things the twins said, here and there." Because Fred and George absolutely knew about the relationship, and Harry wouldn't be even a little bit surprised if one or both of them had had a hand in it.

A long, slow breath whistled through Cassius' clenched jaw. "He asked me to marry him, at Christmas. When I graduate."

Harry's eyes widened. "Blimey. I, uh, hadn't realised you were that serious." He should have, though; Oliver Wood was a very committed individual, to whatever he decided to give his heart to, be it quidditch or a person. And they had been together quite a while, it seemed; longer than Harry and Draco.

Not that Harry had asked Draco to marry him or anything. He was way too young to do that.

"I still don't know what he sees in me," Cassius remarked. "But I love the crazy bastard. When I'm with him... I can forget what kind of man my uncle is making me become. With Ollie I feel like I actually might amount to something better." He shook his head, eyes filled with pain. "I want to marry him, more than anything. But I can't. If my family got word that I even *spoke* to Oliver, they'd kill him in front of me and then kill me too for good measure."

There wasn't even a hint of exaggeration in his tone, and Harry believed every word.

"You have somewhere to go, Cassius," he said, but the Slytherin shook his head.

"I can't put Ollie in danger like that."

"I'm not talking about Ollie. I'm talking about me." That made Cassius pause, brows rising. "I've offered Theo sanctuary, and a few of the neutral families who have come to Blaise for

help. I can offer it to you, too. And Oliver, if you're worried about him. He's still my Captain." Always would be, as far as Harry was concerned. Harry hadn't written to Oliver since the summer because of his worries about his mail being read, but he always told Charlie to send his regards, and kept up with what the keeper was doing that way.

"As if Oliver would go into hiding when there's quidditch to be played," said Cassius dryly, and Harry laughed. Fair point.

"For you, then. He can visit whenever. Your family never have to know about the connection between the two of you."

He could tell by the look on Cassius' face that the boy was considering the idea. "If I leave the family, they'll cut me from the tree. I'm not like Theo — he's the last of his line, for both Nott and Avery. They can't disinherit him or both those lines die out for good. The family magic might've rejected my brother, but I've got two cousins and an uncle who are still eligible. I can't risk the family seat going into their hands."

Harry bit his lip; that was all perfectly good reasoning. He knew he was lucky that Sirius hadn't been properly, magically disinherited by his parents. But he hated the idea of Cassius staying with them, "I won't force you to make any decisions," he said eventually, wishing there was more he could do. "But you'll always have a place of safety as long as I'm alive to offer it to you. If things get bad — if they force you into the Mark, or they find out about Ollie — you come straight to me alright? Don't risk your life just to keep that fucking Wizengamot seat. It's not worth it, yeah?" he finished passionately. Cassius looked up at him, and after a beat of silence, cracked a small but genuine smile.

"I've got too much Slytherin self-preservation instinct in me to let them kill me over a single vote," he remarked. Still, he looked like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. "Thank you, Harry. It's... it's good to know I have options. And that Ollie has someone looking out for him." He shook his head in fond exasperation. "Damned fool would take a beater's bat to my whole family if I let him."

"Sounds about right," Harry agreed, amused. "I'll kill Voldemort as quickly as I can," he promised, ignoring the boy's flinch at the name. "I can't say how long it'll take, but know that I'm trying my best."

"Never doubted it for a second," Cassius assured.

"Good. So you just leave that to me, and keep yourself safe, and tell Oliver you'll marry him when you can." Harry grinned, heart aching fiercely. "Because that is a wedding I *desperately* want to attend."

Cassius grinned back. "It'll be fucking quidditch-themed if he has his way," he warned, and Harry laughed.

A wedding to look forward to at the end of all this was exactly what he needed. A quidditch-themed wedding sounded even better.

Somehow, between homework and lessons with Snape and the HA, Harry squeezed in enough time to write an article for the *Quibbler*. It was a lot harder than his last one; he was no journalist, to be sure, and this time he had to make sure he sounded as credible and sane as possible. It wasn't just about writing from the heart — he was writing to convince people to accept danger was coming.

When he had a solid draft, he took it to Luna, the pair of them holed up in an unused classroom to read it over. Luna was surprisingly good at editing; she helped her father with the articles when she was at home, apparently.

"This is very good, Harry," she said, smiling. "And your timing is perfect, too; if I get it to Daddy soon, he'll be able to get it out before he hears back from the entrants to his writing competition. He's asked people to send in their experience with Heliopaths, so he's bound to be very busy with that."

"That's... good," Harry said, unsure how else to respond. Hopefully Luna's father would not put his article in the same space as a story about some ridiculous conspiracy theory that might make him look like even more of a madman than the *Prophet* implied. "I'm really grateful you and your dad are willing to do this, Luna."

"People need to know," she replied sagely. "And as journalists, we have a duty to report the truth."

Harry wished the people at the *Prophet* could have even a scrap of the same journalistic integrity. "Well that's it, as best as I could manage it." He gestured to the parchment of his article. He had tried his best to report everything he thought might help; both the story of what happened to Cedric, and the dementor attack on Dudley. If the general public wasn't alarmed by the prospect of a seventeen year-old boy being kidnapped from school and murdered, perhaps they might be by the idea of a dementor roaming a perfectly ordinary muggle street. Harry had leaned a little heavy on the idea of the Statute of Secrecy being broken by the Ministry's careless response to Voldemort's return, and how catastrophic that could be for everyone.

"We'll try and have it out in the next issue. That's a week after Valentine's Day," Luna promised brightly.

"Perfect." Harry glanced at the blonde girl, eyebrows raised. "Any big plans for that Hogsmeade weekend?" For days already, the school had been aflutter with people discussing their plans for the auspicious day. Harry was torn between being glad he didn't have to get involved, and wishing he could take Draco to Hogsmeade like all the other lovestruck young couples.

"Oh, I'm going with Daphne," Luna replied, fiddling with her butterbeer cork necklace. Harry stared.

"...Daphne Greengrass?" Slytherin, no-emotions-unless-they're-contempt, Daphne Greengrass? Luna nodded, her smile growing wider.

"She's awfully pretty. I partnered with her a few times in the HA and she has a very nice smile. So I asked her to Hogsmeade."

Harry wasn't sure which side of that pairing was the more difficult to believe, but it absolutely was not his place to judge, so he just offered a smile that he hoped hid his utter bewilderment. "Well, have fun with that."

"Thank you, Harry. I'm sure we will."

That would certainly be an interesting combination.

.-. .

Harry had to turn down quite a few invites to Hogsmeade himself, for the upcoming Valentine's Day weekend. From both male and female students.

"Don't know why they're bothering," he grumbled to himself after attempting to politely reject Romilda Vane for the fourth time. "They know I'm gay."

Harry heard a snort behind him, and turned. Ron was there, walking a few feet behind him with Dean and Seamus. They were all on their way to the Great Hall for dinner, and as they'd come from Herbology Harry had left Neville behind talking with Professor Sprout.

"Something to say?" he asked sharply, and the redhead scowled at him.

"Just wondering how long you're going to keep that up."

"Keep what up?" Harry was confused.

"The whole *gay* thing. We all know you're just faking," Ron spat.

"...I'm sorry, *what*?" Where the hell had he got that idea?

Far from being embarrassed, Ron continued. "Come on, don't pretend like we haven't all seen you. I heard you and Loony Lovegood were locked in a quiet classroom for hours the other day. And the way you've cosied yourself up to Lavender and Parvati in Divination, acting like you're just the *gay best friend*, like you're *safe*, when we can see them all over you. Susan Bones, too. Just how many girls have you got on the go, Potter?"

Harry stared incredulously, then looked at Dean and Seamus, who were pointedly not meeting his gaze. "You're not serious," he spluttered. They had onlookers, now; people on their way to dinner, wondering why the pair of them had stopped in the entrance hall. "It's called having *friends*, Ron."

"Friends you're always sneaking off in secret with?" Ron retorted.

"If you consider that suspect, I've got a lot of questions about you and Hermione," Harry shot back, seeing a few people go wide-eyed. Ron's face went as red as his hair.

“You shut up about Hermione,” he sneered. “She seems to be the only bloody girl in this school that isn’t obsessed with you. You’ve even got my sister under your thumb. You’ve got some nerve, parading it around in public like that, pretending to be queer so no one notices you’re sleeping with any girl that’ll have you.”

“I’m not sleeping with any girls!” Harry argued. “And I’m not *pretending* to be anything.”

Ron scoffed. “Like I believe that! We all know what Lavender’s like, I really doubt you two are just *friends* when she’s throwing herself at you in Divination.”

Smack!

Harry hadn’t noticed Lavender Brown appear, but there she was, her hand raised and a rapidly forming red mark on Ron’s face. Her face was a picture of utter fury. “*How dare you,*” she hissed.

“Lavender!” Ron was wide-eyed, in shock or fear Harry wasn’t sure. “Well— well it’s true! You’ve had half the rest of the Gryffindor boys, and we’re supposed to believe there’s nothing going on with you and Harry?”

Harry was quite impressed she didn’t slap him again. “You’re just jealous because of all the boys I’ve kissed, *you’re* not one of them,” she retorted. “And you never will be. After a comment like that, I’ll be surprised if you ever get a date in this school, Ron Weasley!”

Indeed, of the girls in the audience, most of them were looking at Ron like he was dirt on the bottom of their shoe. His face reddened further.

“So he’s fooled you, too, has he?” Ron taunted. “Haven’t you realised he’s always off with girls but never seen sneaking around with a boy? He’s always turning them down, too. Never even *holding hands* with one.”

“I have a boyfriend!” Harry blurted, and a chorus of gasps rang out. “Clearly I’m just better at keeping my private life *private*. It’s none of your damn business who I’m with, Ron.”

“Mr Potter!”

Harry’s heart sank at the high-pitched call. Umbridge was approaching the hall, face severe. “Detention, for inappropriate behaviour. Tomorrow evening, my office.” She looked around at the gathered students, who quickly dispersed, heading in to dinner. Ron was still glaring at Harry, even when the pink-clad teacher had left.

“Come on, Harry,” Lavender huffed, linking her arm with his. “Let’s go sit down.”

Harry let her take him to the Gryffindor table, fury still pounding through his veins. It would be all over the school by morning, his mysterious boyfriend. Draco was going to kill him.

“I’m sorry he said that to you, Lavender,” he sighed, and the girl shot him a sharp look.

“Don’t you dare apologise for his *slut-shaming bullshit*,” she snapped. “I swear, just because he’s got his emotions so far up his arse he can’t find enough of them to tell Hermione

Granger how he feels, doesn't mean he needs to take it out on every girl who's so much as looked at a boy."

"Well, he'd better hope Hermione figures it out eventually, because I think you're right in saying he won't get a date otherwise," Harry muttered under his breath, looking further up the table, where Ron was sat alone. Even Dean and Seamus had distanced themselves, no doubt not wanting the Hogwarts girls to tar them with the same brush.

"Speaking of *dates*," Lavender purred, eyes lighting up. "Boyfriend?"

"Secret," he replied ruefully, and she gave an exaggerated pout.

"No fun."

Harry chuckled. "Sorry."

She left it at that, happily filling him in on the rest of the romantic gossip of Hogwarts. Harry could feel the eyes of the rest of the hall on him, and desperately wished they would all accept his secrets with as much grace as Lavender Brown.

.-. .

Considering Harry thought he may end up hexing Ron Weasley into the hospital wing if he went to Gryffindor Tower after dinner, he instead went down to the Chamber of Secrets, happily ensconcing himself in front of Salazar's bookshelves. He'd narrowed it down to eight books that mentioned the word 'horcrux', and was now trying to focus enough to read in further detail, his brain tripping up on the archaic form of English. Salazar was blessedly silent, except to offer translations into Parseltongue when Harry was truly stuck on a word.

The first three didn't contain much; they described the process to make horcruxes, though only one of them actually gave the explicit spells and rituals. The rest just said that 'certain magics' were involved during the cold-blooded murder of an innocent, and the soul was split and placed in a vessel. It was interesting to confirm that the soul was halved each time, making what remained progressively weaker with every additional horcrux.

Clearly, that had not been in any of the books Voldemort had read on the subject, given he'd made at least three of them.

It was the fourth book that had Harry's jaw dropping, his pulse picking up excitedly. Typically, it was one of the most confusingly-written ones, and eventually Harry gave up and just held the book up to Salazar, asking for a translation.

"Should your horcrux be kept within a being of sentient life, there are dangers inherent to the natural lifespan of said host," the founder hissed. *"It is recommended that horcruxes be held within inanimate objects, but where that is not preferred, it is possible to transfer the horcrux into a new living host, when the current host approaches their end. This must be done before the death of the host, as the death of one soul is the death of both."*

Salazar stopped reading, and Harry went wide-eyed. “*Does it say how?*” he pressed. Salazar nodded.

“*It does, but I will be honest, I do not expect you to understand it, lad.*” His tone was not designed to be disparaging, but it made Harry scowl all the same. He looked at the book, and at the utter gibberish on the page — both in the writing itself and in the form of the complex Arithmantic diagrams of some kind of ritual. Salazar had a point; even if the whole thing were in modern English, Harry likely wouldn’t make heads nor tails of it.

But he knew who would.

“*I need to show this book to my friend,*” he hissed. “*He works for the goblins, as a curse-breaker. His team is trying to find a way to remove the horcrux from my scar.*”

“*You may make a copy of it,*” Salazar assented. “*The original texts will not leave this office, but I doubt any of them are still under Copyright Charms. Duplicate it, and take it to your friend.*”

Harry waved his wand, and sure enough the book duplicated easily. He quickly put the original back on the shelf, before he forgot which was which. “*My friend is going to ask where I found this,*” he said cautiously. Salazar’s expression soured.

“*Now is not yet the time to reveal my presence to the world,*” he insisted.

“*One person is not ‘the world’,*” Harry retorted defensively. “*Bill can keep a secret.*” He’d done well so far, keeping Harry’s.

Salazar still didn’t look impressed, but he let the argument slide.

Then Harry realised there was one more obstacle. His only way of getting the book out of Hogwarts quickly was Snape, and he would *definitely* want to know where it came from. And to see for himself what sort of obscure magics Harry was discovering. “*How would you feel about me inviting the head of Slytherin House down here? He is helping with this research, and he would likely be more useful than I would.*”

He waited patiently for Salazar to consider the subject. “*This is the man who plays triple agent? He is family to you?*” he clarified, and Harry nodded. A flicker of a smile crossed the man’s painted face. “*He is a worthy Slytherin. You may bring him.*”

Relief filled Harry’s veins. That would make his life easier; not in the least because it would ingratiate him to Snape even more than letting him harvest the basilisk had. Harry was going to introduce him to *Salazar Slytherin himself*, let him look through the founder’s private library.

Snape was going to *love* him.

.-.-.

Valentine’s Day arrived in a flurry of excited students — and an increase in detentions due to *inappropriate behaviour*. It seemed Umbridge considered almost any expression of positive

human emotion *inappropriate*, for Harry had seen her take points from two people just stood close together.

At least there were no headache-inducing decorations, as the colour pink had been ruined for everyone over the last six months.

Still, even Umbridge's wrath couldn't dampen the joy of celebrating the love-filled holiday with a Hogsmeade weekend, and as Harry went down to breakfast that morning he was surprised to see just how many couples were lined up to leave the castle, holding hands and grinning at each other.

He felt a pang in his chest, briefly wishing he could be one of those students; but even if there wasn't the danger of Lucius Malfoy involved, Harry wasn't sure he'd want to be gawped at all day as he knew he would for taking Draco Malfoy on a date.

One day.

Not wanting to pass up the excuse to get out of the castle, Harry lined up by himself, ignoring the number of eyes fixed firmly on him. Ever since his admission in the face of Ron's ridiculous accusation, half the school seemed dead set on sleuthing out who his mystery boyfriend was. There was even a betting pool going around, which Harry found utterly ridiculous.

Mainly because the top name on the list was George Weasley. As if there would be *any* reason to hide such a relationship; the Weasleys had made themselves targets for the Dark long before Harry was around.

The second name was Blaise Zabini, which was a little closer, but it still made him laugh that Draco's name was way down the bottom with astronomical odds. One person had put a bet on him.

Harry suspected that may have been Draco himself, but the blond would never tell.

Entering the village, Harry let a smile take over him as he watched the students go about their morning — it was so nice to see people so *happy*, so carefree. In all his training in various forms, his battle of wills against Umbridge, Harry sometimes forgot that things weren't all doom and gloom just yet. There was plenty of time for his fellow students to just be normal teenagers.

If Harry had his way, there always would be.

His smile widened at the sight of two heads of blonde hair, one much darker than the other; Luna and Daphne were strolling along the main street, holding hands while Luna gestured wildly with her free one, chattering away about some creature or another with earnestly wide eyes. Daphne looked fond, and a bit bewildered — like she couldn't quite understand how she'd ended up there, but she was very happy to be there all the same.

Harry still didn't understand that one.

He saw Ernie and Hannah head into Madam Puddifoot's, which was exactly the explosion of red and pink that Harry anticipated. Neither of them looked particularly impressed by the decoration, and as Harry walked by them he caught Hannah's eye, and she mimed gagging. He laughed, absolutely no help whatsoever; it wasn't his fault the students were limited to either Puddifoot's or the Three Broomsticks.

Honeydukes was absolutely heaving with students, all trying to buy sweets for their sweethearts. So Harry steered clear of it, deciding to head towards Zonko's instead. There, he saw his second unexpected couple of the day.

He didn't realise they were there together at first. The two boys were stood close, but just talking. Then George stepped forward, pressing a bold kiss to his companion's cheek and gesturing dramatically at the entrance to the shop. Blaise Zabini chuckled, but obligingly walked through, and as he passed George's hand slid down to the small of his back. The pair disappeared inside the shop, and Harry was left gaping at them.

When had *that* happened? And why had no one told him! The pair clearly weren't keeping it a secret.

He would have to have a *long* conversation with George Weasley, tomorrow.

He chuckled to himself; that couple would certainly upset the Harry Potter Dating Pool.

After a brief detour to Scrivenshaft's for some more parchment, Harry began to get peckish, and decided to brave the Three Broomsticks for lunch. He walked past a group of girls, who burst into giggles at the sight of him. His jaw clenched.

Maybe after that he'd go back to the castle. Hogsmeade on Valentine's Day was not the place for a single person, especially when that person was Harry Potter.

Luckily it seemed like the main lunch rush hadn't properly begun yet, people still out making the most of their dates — or feeling too awkward to come inside and sit opposite one another for an entire meal.

That didn't mean there weren't plenty of people inside — almost all the tables had been rearranged into little two-seater sections — but it was quiet enough that Harry could actually see all the way from the door to the back wall. His gaze travelled over the couples sat down, wondering if he might see any more unusual pairings.

At the back of the room, sat alone in a booth, was Neville.

Harry frowned, winding his way through the tables to sit down opposite his friend. Neville looked up, forcing a smile. "Oh. Hi, Harry. Didn't know you were around."

"Yeah, thought I'd have a wander. Are you alright?" He paused, wondering if his next question would be well-received. "I, uh — I thought you'd be with Ginny, to be honest." The pair had been growing ever closer since Christmas, and Harry had been almost certain this weekend would make them official.

Neville gave him a wry look. “Not today, no.”

They were interrupted by Rosmerta, delivering a butterbeer for Neville, and the pair of them ordered lunch. Harry could feel eyes on them, but ignored them all; it wouldn’t be the first time people had thought he was dating Neville.

When they were alone again, Harry cleared his throat. “So, uh... neither of you asked each other, or...?” He wondered, for a brief horrified moment, if Ginny was out there in the village on a date with some *other* boy. If she was... Harry would be having *words* with her.

“She asked me,” Neville confirmed. Harry blinked — now he was even more confused.

“But, then...”

Neville sipped at his drink, and sighed. “Valentine’s Day is... so much pressure. It’s this big cliché of romance and grand gestures and all that, and I just... she had her time for herself, when she was dating Michael and everything. After that, after how that felt... I needed a bit of time for myself. I think we both need a bit of space to be alone for a bit, to be honest.”

“That’s understandable,” Harry agreed softly. He wondered if Neville had admitted — either to Ginny or even to himself — how much watching her with Michael had hurt him.

“I’m not saying no forever,” Neville assured. “I want to be with Ginny. But... I didn’t think Valentine’s Day was the easiest place to start from.”

As if to accentuate his point, a girl across the room stood from the table, screamed a Stinging hex at her date, and stormed out. The boy stared after her, a huge welt forming across his cheek. Harry and Neville shared a look, wincing.

“No, I get it,” Harry said, turning away from the drama. “You’re sticking up for yourself.” He gave the boy a small grin. “I’m proud of you, mate.”

Neville blushed, ducking his head, and was saved having to respond by the arrival of their lunch.

Ginny needed to see that Neville wasn’t just waiting around for her to be ready for him. He had to be ready, too. And she deserved to be the one waiting, for a change.

.-. .

After lunch with Neville, Harry headed back up to the castle — he had tried to wander the village a bit more, but Neville had wanted to go to Dogweed and Deathcap, and Harry was not willing to sacrifice the two hours of his day that would inevitably take. And since being alone just made more people stare and giggle at him, he decided to take his leave.

He had his own plans to take care of, after all.

It was nearly three by the time he made it back to Gryffindor Tower, which was mostly full of younger year students; some studying, some just hanging out, and a few brave souls clearly trying to get what romance they could from within the confines of the castle. Seeing the pair

of second years holding hands and playing cards in the corner made him grin to himself in reminiscence. If only he'd been brave enough to hold Draco's hand back in those early days.

Thinking of his boyfriend, Harry picked up his pace on the stairs up to his dormitory. He had a surprise to set up, and he wanted to shower and change before he had to start sneaking.

.-

When Harry next left Gryffindor Tower, it was under his invisibility cloak. He didn't have to wait long for the portrait hole to open, and he hurried through before it could close on him, setting off towards the stairs. He knew where he could find Draco, because he'd told the blond to meet him in their usual spot.

Harry ducked through a little-used passageway behind a suit of armour, and froze. It was... occupied.

In front of him, shadowed in the dark stone corridor, were Susan and Theo. Quite happily snogging their hearts out, Theo's back pressed against the wall as Susan stood right up on her toes to kiss him.

Well, then. This day was just full of surprises.

Harry slowly backed out of the passageway, and left a weak Notice-Me-Not on the entrance just in case there was anyone else who might be trying to find a private spot.

For Susan not to have put up her own wards, she must have been quite... distracted.

He shook the image from his head, carrying on the long way down to the third floor. He could tease his Hufflepuff friend later; he had more important things to focus on, now.

Draco was waiting for him in the classroom, and startled when the door opened to Harry's invisible form. "Hi," Harry greeted, before the Slytherin could get nervous. "Follow me." And then he turned right back out of the classroom.

"How?" Draco retorted, hurrying to follow. "I can't bloody *see* you!"

"Oh, yeah." Harry doubled back, sliding an invisible hand around Draco's elbow. "Come on."

"Where are we going?" Draco whispered suspiciously. Harry just grinned, though his boyfriend couldn't see it.

They didn't have to go far; it was only around the corner. Harry brought them to a halt in front of an ordinary patch of wall, and hissed.

The wall melted into a doorway.

"What the," Draco muttered, but Harry yanked him through the opening, and once the wall reformed behind him he whipped off the cloak, green eyes dancing.

“Hello.” He leaned in, kissing him quickly. “You look gorgeous.” He did, in a pale blue jumper and charcoal grey trousers. Draco pulled him back in for a proper kiss.

“What are you up to, Potter?” he asked, raising one blond eyebrow. “Where are we?”

Harry kept grinning mischievously. “Let me know when you figure it out.”

With Draco’s hand in his, he headed down the passageway.

Most of the secret passages to the Chamber were still quite gross after centuries of disuse, but Harry had made sure to clean this one ahead of time. With a ball of light floating above their heads, it illuminate the stone walls — and the snakes engraved in them, at about waist height. He wondered how long it would take Draco to catch on.

“Where are we even... wait.” Draco paused, clenching tight on Harry’s hand. “How did you open that passage?”

A chuckle burst from Harry’s lips, and he pulled his boyfriend to keep walking. “Oh, I think you know.”

“Fucking— that can’t be possible. Don’t tell me...” Draco trailed off as they reached the end of the passageway, stepping out into the enormous chamber. “Holy hell,” the blond breathed, his grey eyes as wide as dinner plates. He turned to Harry, speechless for a moment. “Are we — this is— *how*? ”

So Harry told him, about how Ginny’s offhand comment had made him decide to venture down and see what state the Chamber was in. “I had Snape come down and harvest the massive basilisk skeleton,” he explained. “It was incredibly gross. I also had to do a serious amount of cleaning charms.”

“I thought the entrance was in a bathroom?” Draco asked, looking up at the huge statue of Salazar.

“The one I originally found was. But when I got down here... there’s an office, hidden behind the wall, that I discovered by accident. And before you ask, I can’t take you in there. He’s a bit... prickly.” He’d only barely given permission for Snape, Harry wasn’t going to risk ambushing him with Draco.

“He?” Draco repeated, gaze narrowing. “Who...*no*.” His jaw dropped when Harry nodded.

“The only existing portrait of Salazar Slytherin,” he confirmed. “He told me there’s secret entrances hidden all over the school. It was originally supposed to be a safehold, in case the witch hunters stormed the school. Enough room to hide the students and staff, with entrances all over the place for safety.” According to Salazar there was a Parseltongue spell that would open all the entrances at once, so people could run in from wherever they were in the castle, but Harry hadn’t yet had the opportunity to try it.

It took Draco several long moments of gaping like a fish to compose himself. When he finally managed it, he whirled around to glare at Harry. “If your *surprise* is bringing me to

this Chamber and then telling me there's a portrait of my house founder you won't let me meet, you're going to have to do some serious grovelling, Potter."

Harry laughed, shaking his head. "No. The surprise is over here; the Chamber is just the location. And I promise you, as soon as Salazar is willing to allow it, I'll take you to meet him." He just had to hope Snape wouldn't tell even his godson when Harry brought him down to the office.

Taking Draco's hand once more, he led him over to the foot of the statue. With a wave of his wand, the true surprise was revealed; a picnic for two, laid out on a green and silver blanket, complete with a bouquet of red roses in a vase. "Oh," Draco said softly.

"I wish we could go out for a proper dinner somewhere nice," Harry said, kissing his cheek. "But I thought this might be a good substitute. We'll certainly have privacy down here," he added, and grey eyes flared with heat, sending a shiver of electricity down Harry's spine. He would not admit that the privacy had been the biggest factor in planning his Valentine's surprise. They could stay down here as long as they liked, without having to worry about Umbridge or patrolling prefects or anything.

Showing Draco the Chamber of Secrets had just been a bonus.

Harry knelt down on the blanket and began unpacking the basket, but stopped when a hand landed on his wrist. When he looked up at Draco, the blond was staring at him intently.

"I'm not all that hungry just yet," he drawled, kneeling down in front of Harry. "I think we'd best work up a *proper* appetite, first."

Harry swallowed thickly. "Fine by me." Suddenly, food was the last thing on his mind.

In moments, Draco had him on his back, pinned by his wrists to the blanket, their mouths pressed firmly together — as well as other parts of their bodies. Harry moaned softly, arching into the embrace. Then with a quick jerk of his hips, he flipped them over, straddling Draco's thighs. Draco gasped against him, and Harry smirked. "Y'know, something I've learned about the Chamber," he said conversationally, sitting back to start unbuttoning his own shirt. "It's got excellent acoustics." As soon as brown flesh was revealed, Draco's hands were on it, blunt nails scrabbling up Harry's chest. Harry leaned back down for another kiss, then looked Draco dead in the eye. "Bet it's going to sound amazing when I suck your cock so hard you scream my name."

Draco's pupils blew wide. "Holy fuck," he breathed. Harry grinned.

"That a yes?" Already, he was shifting down, working at the fly of Draco's trousers.

"Hell yes," Draco confirmed, lifting his hips to help Harry pull the trousers down. He wasn't wearing underwear, and it made Harry's throat go dry.

He started somewhat tentatively, licking at the flushed, sensitive skin. Even that little touch had Draco whining quietly. Slowly, Harry got a bit bolder; the taste wasn't bad, so he took a bit more in his mouth, careful to keep his teeth out of the whole affair. He was working only

off what he'd read in the book — and one embarrassing but informative conversation with George, a few days ago.

Still, Draco certainly seemed to be enjoying it. A hand slid into Harry's hair, gripping tightly, and to his surprise it sent a hot bolt of arousal straight through him when Draco tugged a little too hard. He let out a muffled yelp, and Draco pulled his hand away. "Shit, sorry."

"No." Harry pulled off of his boyfriend's erection, lips swollen and spit-slick. "No. I liked it," he admitted, feeling his face flush. Draco's cock jumped.

"Fuck, you're a walking wet dream, Potter," he groaned, squeezing his eyes shut. Harry pressed a kiss to his belly, trailing them down to the crease of his thigh, then resumed his ministrations.

It did indeed sound amazing when Draco's moans echoed through the Chamber, the ragged gasps making Harry's arousal burn that much sweeter. Eventually it was too much, and he tugged on Harry's hair in warning, giving him enough time to pull off before he came, shouting Harry's name into the huge empty space. Harry was glad, not sure he was ready to swallow on his first try, flinching a little when the hot seed spurted up onto his chest. He fluttered gentle hands up Draco's sides, stroking him through the aftershocks, watching the blond lie there flushed and panting and utterly gorgeous. Utterly Harry's.

Draco pulled him down into a fierce kiss, not remotely bothered by where Harry's mouth had just been.

"Was that... okay?" Harry asked tentatively, suddenly unsure of himself. Draco cupped his jaw, meeting his gaze, and to Harry's relief he was smirking.

"Not sure if it's beginner's luck or natural talent, but it was certainly *more* than okay," he assured. "Sweet Merlin. I— that was— fuck." His incoherence made Harry grin, kissing him sweetly.

"Worked up enough of an appetite, then?" he asked cheekily. Draco chuckled, sitting up with Harry still straddling his lap, and cast a Cleaning charm on them both.

"I'd certainly say so," he assured, running his hands through Harry's hair in an attempt to tame it. "I'm sure I can think of something fun for dessert," he added, smirking wickedly. "Unless you don't want to wait?"

His fingers trailed down Harry's bare stomach, but the Gryffindor shook his head. He was hard, certainly, but there was no need to rush things. "I'm good, for now." The idea of letting his arousal simmer while they ate was... compelling.

Draco nodded, kissing him hotly, then unceremoniously shoved Harry off his lap so he could pull his trousers up. Harry snorted, and went back towards the picnic basket, wondering how overboard Dobby may have gone in packing it.

"Happy Valentine's Day, love," he said, holding out a bottle of butterbeer. Draco took it, clinking the neck against Harry's own.

"Happy Valentine's Day indeed," he murmured. "I'm gonna have to get very creative if I want to top this next year." A competitive light entered his grey eyes. Harry snorted, lifting out a couple of covered plates.

"No need to go overboard," he assured, then winked. "You know me, I'm easy."

"Only for me," Draco purred, ghosting fingers across Harry's denim-clad backside while he kneeled up to reach into the depths of the basket. "Merlin, I can't believe you brought me to the Chamber of Secrets. I'd be the envy of every Slytherin in the world if they knew."

"Glad you approve," Harry replied, making himself comfortable on the blanket the best he could with his jeans still tight in the groin area. With his back against the base of the statue, he stretched out his legs and let his plate float in front of him, well aware that Draco's lust-filled gaze was trailing up his body. Harry still hadn't put his shirt back on. "I thought about taking you to the Room of Requirement — actual furniture in there, y'know — but I didn't want to risk being interrupted. And I thought this might impress you a bit more."

"Consider me impressed," Draco responded, not even looking at the Chamber, eyes fixed firmly on Harry's crotch. Harry smirked. "Do you have to be back in your tower by any particular time?" Draco attempted a casual tone, but missed the mark thanks to the strain in his voice.

"Not really. Before the others wake up," Harry shrugged. That, too, was one of the reasons he'd picked the Chamber — even if the whole castle were looking for him, they'd never be found down here.

He had Draco to himself for the whole night, as long as they were both back in their dorms before sunrise.

He certainly planned to make the most of it.

Chapter End Notes

There might be a lot of scary adult things going on around them, but they're all still teenagers ;)

Chapter 65

The only person who seemed to be aware that Harry had snuck back into the Gryffindor dorms at the crack of dawn was Neville, who kept alternating between smirking at him and looking vaguely ill when he started to think too hard about what Harry and Draco might have gotten up to. He didn't know where they'd been, just that Harry had planned a surprise for his boyfriend.

"Went well, then?" he asked under his breath when they eventually went down to breakfast on Sunday morning. Harry's beaming grin was enough of a response. "Spare me the details," Neville said, laughing. Harry stuck his tongue out at his friend.

"Planned on it." What had happened between him and Draco down in the Chamber was just for them.

And maybe George Weasley, once Harry was done teasing him to high hell.

Speaking of which; the twins were sat at the Gryffindor table already, and Harry slid in beside George with a smirk. "Good morning," he greeted in a quiet drawl. "You've been holding out on me, Weasley." George looked at him, raising an eyebrow. "I saw you and Blaise in Hogsmeade yesterday."

"Oh." A faint flush dusted the redhead's freckled cheeks. "Yeah. So I was gonna tell you..."

"*Sure,*" Harry agreed sarcastically. He eyed the redhead over, grinning. "You look positively *smitten*, my friend." It was true; he was happy in a way that for once had nothing to do with mischief-making, his brown eyes bright, his gaze occasionally darting towards the Slytherin table. "How long has that been going on, then?"

"Few weeks," George confessed. "We paired up in HA, when we started learning the Impediment jinx." Harry's eyes widened; that was *ages* ago! "Turns out when he's frustrated that cool-and-collected mask of his tends to slip a bit. It was *very* fun making that happen," he added lightly, and there was the mischief again. "Didn't realise I'd been going out of my way to pair with him til we left for Christmas and I missed him. So, ah, I did something about it."

"Always knew you had a thing for snakes," Harry commented, making George cackle.

"Like you can talk."

Harry couldn't argue that one. "You two had a good time yesterday?" That made George blush brighter.

"A gentleman doesn't kiss and tell."

"Good thing you've never been a gentleman," came Harry's instant retort. George laughed, running a hand through his hair.

"He's a lot funnier than most people expect from him," he said eventually, smiling like an absolute sap. Harry, familiar with Blaise's particularly dry sense of humour, nodded. "Hell of a snog, too," George added lasciviously.

"So it's official, then?" Harry asked, watching the redhead's face soften as he nodded.

"We can't exactly hide it now we've been all over Hogsmeade together," George pointed out. "He says he's happy to call me his boyfriend, even to the other Slytherins." There was a wistful note to his tone, and Harry made a mental note to have a chat with Blaise about breaking his big brother's heart. Then again, anyone who tangled with a Weasley knew full well what they were getting into.

Michael Corner's quills had been regularly exploding ink on him since January.

"Oi, you two," Fred barked, tossing a satsuma at Harry, who caught it instinctively. "Save your little gossip session for later, yeah? My brother and I were having a *conversation* before you rudely interrupted." He was grinning, and Harry tossed the fruit back.

"My apologies," he teased. "Did you want me to ask how your date with Angelina went, too?"

Fred's face turned positively filthy. "Harrikins, I'm quite certain you don't want to know."

Harry made a face of disgust, turning back to Neville, who had been listening to the whole exchange in amusement.

"George and Blaise?" he asked in an undertone, and Harry nodded. "Blimey. Good for them."

"Did you see Luna and Daphne, too?"

That made Neville's eyes go wide, and Harry reached for the strawberry jam, settling in to tell his friend that particular tale.

Really, from the number of couples that seemed to be sprouting from the HA, Harry could start offering his services as a matchmaker.

.-. .

While Harry did have a large pile of homework to do that afternoon, he wasn't remotely interested in working on it when the heirs study group gathered in an empty classroom. Not all of them were there — a few had gone down to Hogsmeade, now it was slightly less full of loved-up couples — but Blaise and Daphne were.

"I'm offended, you know," he said to the pair, entirely too smug. "Both of you found romance through my defence club, and I don't even get a single thank you!"

"Technically, the club was my idea to begin with," Blaise retorted without missing a beat. Harry scoffed.

"Yeah, but I was the one who insisted people mix up partners. If not for me, you never would have discovered the charms of George Weasley," he teased. "Or Luna Lovegood," he added to Daphne. The blonde girl sniffed haughtily.

"Luna is a law unto herself, and I'm sure I would have discovered her charms exactly when she wanted me to, club or no club," she insisted. There was probably some truth to that, but it didn't stop Harry grinning.

"I'm surprised you're even admitting to having emotions, let alone falling for Luna's charms."

The faintest blush crept up Daphne's neck. "She's interesting," she bit out defensively. "And she's not scared of me."

Harry didn't think Luna was scared of anything at all. "It's just nice to see you snakes shedding those stone-cold outer shells," he joked. "Good to know Slytherins have hearts, too."

Under the table, Draco kicked him in the shin. "Just because we have enough decorum not to wear them on our sleeves," he retorted. "It's called discretion, Potter. Something you seem to be lacking in."

Harry almost shot back a retort asking where Draco's *discretion* was when he was leaving the enormous hickey that Harry had needed to heal with Bruise Balm that morning, but he held his tongue.

"You can't get at them for not sharing about their relationships when you've not told a soul about your secret boyfriend, Harry," Susan piped up from further down the table. Harry's smirk widened.

"And would you like to share anything about secret boyfriends, Susan, dear?" he asked smoothly. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Theo's quill pause mid-sentence. Susan tensed, and narrowed her eyes.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, nothing," Harry drawled. "Just that you should really be more careful where you choose to stop for a quick snog, especially if you aren't going to bother putting wards up."

The Hufflepuff's face coloured, her jaw dropping in horror. "You—we didn't—you saw that?"

Harry nodded. "I was doing a bit of sneaking of my own, last night. I'm surprised you didn't feel the Notice-Me-Not I left to cover you." A pause, then, "I suppose you were a bit distracted."

Susan's wand twitched, and a light Stinging charm caught Harry's shoulder. "Ow! Rude! I haven't even said a name," he groused lightly. He wouldn't out the two, not if they truly

wanted to keep it secret, though the group was as much of a safe space as they were likely to get.

“We may as well own up to it,” Theo sighed, and the whole room stared at him in shock. “Potter will be *insufferable* otherwise.”

“I— Susan!” Ernie stuttered, looking between the Hufflepuff and the Slytherin. “You and Theo?”

Susan nodded, not a hint of embarrassment on her face. “We spent a lot of time together over Christmas,” she admitted, fighting down her blush. “There’s certainly something to be said for — what was it, Harry? Ah, yes — *shedding those cold outer shells*,” she teased, making Theo duck his head bashfully.

“Ah, Slytherins in love,” Harry cooed playfully. “See how much wider your options yet when you look outside the snake pit?”

He wiggled his eyebrows pointedly at both Pansy and Millicent, who looked distinctly unimpressed.

“No, thank you,” Pansy said flatly.

“I’m good,” Millicent agreed.

“Are you done acting like a third year now, Potter?” Draco drawled, sounding bored. “Because the rest of us came here to work, so if all you want to do is gossip I suggest you seek out Weasley and Lovegood.”

“I’ll do that later,” Harry replied breezily. “And don’t act as if Slytherins aren’t the biggest gossip-hounds in the school. You all just call it blackmail instead.”

“Knowledge is power,” Draco retorted. “Something your tiny little Gryffindor mind might struggle to comprehend.”

The bickering was almost instinctual, Harry fighting against a smile as he argued with Draco, riling the Slytherin up.

Suddenly, a loud thud cut them off as Parvati dropped a stack of heavy books on the tabletop. “For the love of *Merlin*, just kiss already!” she said, glaring at them. “I need to finish this essay before dinner.” Both boys froze. Draco let out a slightly strained laugh.

“I beg your pardon, I—“

“Oh, come off it, guys,” Hannah cut in. “We figured it out ages ago. You’re not subtle, either of you.”

Harry looked around the room; none of them seemed surprised by the accusation. Even Theo, the newest member of the group, just looked quietly amused.

“When you say *ages*,” Harry started nervously.

“Since, like, Christmas,” Susan dismissed, waving a hand. “Like Hannah said, you’re not subtle. And you’ve got your reasons to keep it quiet, so we never said anything.” Then she smirked, entirely too smug. “But we know.”

Harry turned to Neville, who shrugged helplessly. “I never exactly *confirmed* it.”

The green-eyed Gryffindor looked to his boyfriend, who looked offended that his emotions had been read so plainly. “This is all your fault, Potter,” he muttered, making Harry grin.

“What, for melting that *Ice Prince* persona of yours,” he teased. “Can’t say I’m sorry. You’re a lot more fun without that stick up your arse.”

“I’ll show you *stick up your arse*,” Draco muttered, and Blaise’s lips twitched.

“Not in public, if you please,” he said drily.

“Oh, shut up, you’re dating a Weasley,” Draco retorted, as if that settled the argument.

“What’s wrong with Weasleys?” Neville said, daring him to argue. Rolling his eyes, Harry got up, moving around the table to sit beside Draco.

“Don’t answer that,” he advised, leaning in to kiss his cheek. “Quit being all pouty that our friends know. Now you’ll just have to get used to being nice to me in front of people.”

“And you’ll have to learn that being an annoying little pest to those around you often comes back to bite you on the arse,” Draco said immediately, though he twined his fingers with Harry’s on the tabletop. “Now, help me with this Transfiguration homework, since you were bragging about conjuring an entire hedgehog the other day.”

“I wasn’t *bragging*, I just mentioned it.” Harry elbowed Draco playfully. “You’d figure it out if you weren’t so set on just *demanding* things into existence. Sometimes asking nicely gets better results, y’know?”

What followed was a muttered conversation of half innuendo and half comments on Draco being a spoiled little brat; meanwhile, the rest of the group watched the exchange in dawning horror.

“Oh, Merlin,” Susan groaned quietly. “This is *worse*.”

“I did warn you,” came Neville’s sage response.

Harry and Draco ignored them all, too busy arguing, while Draco’s thumb stroked lovingly over the back of Harry’s hand.

.-. .

His next lesson with Snape started out as it often did, with the pair of them heading down to the Chamber of Secrets through the passage in Snape’s office. When they got there, however, Harry paused at the threshold. “I need to show you something,” he said, wringing his hands nervously. Snape looked at him shrewdly.

“What have you done now?”

Harry almost snorted at the automatic assumption. “For once, nothing irresponsible,” he assured. “So when I brought you down here, I implied that this main room was all there is to it. That, uh, isn’t the case. And I’ve found this book and I think it’s got the answer to our horcrux problem, and I need you to get a copy of it to Bill without anyone knowing where it came from. So I need to show you where I got it.”

“You’ve been reading books you found in *Salazar Slytherin*’s secret chambers and you don’t consider that irresponsible?” Snape said sharply. “I thought a summer at Grimmauld Place would have made you aware of what kind of curses can be on books, especially books about dark magic. Are you so foolish as to test that, entirely unsupervised, where no one but you can reach?”

“I wasn’t entirely unsupervised!” Harry protested. “And, uh, that’s where the other part of this secret comes in. The reason it took so long to tell you. I had to get permission first.”

Before Snape could start assuming the worst, Harry strode over to the office wall and hissed the password, beckoning the professor to follow. “*I brought company,*” he hissed in announcement. When he turned around, Snape was stood in the doorway, as close to gobsmacked as Harry had ever seen from the reserved man. “Professor Snape,” Harry said hesitantly, “this is Salazar Slytherin. *Salazar, meet Professor Severus Snape, head of Slytherin house.*” He switched to Parseltongue halfway through. Salazar rose from his chair, looking down at Snape with calculating eyes.

Suddenly, Snape dropped into a low, reverent bow. “It is an honour, Lord Slytherin,” he greeted, voice positively shaking with emotion. Harry opened his mouth to translate — only for Salazar to smile.

“The honour is mine, Professor Snape. I understand I have you to thank for keeping my young heir alive on multiple occasions.” His voice was smooth, a little bit raspy, but his pronunciation was perfect. Harry gaped at him.

“Since when do you speak English?” he blurted. “Proper English, I mean! You always talk to me in Parseltongue.”

“It’s good for you to get used to speaking it without needing a snake around to trigger you,” Salazar replied, unrepentant. “I never told you I couldn’t speak English, you just assumed.” He narrowed his eyes, like Harry should be well aware of his opinions on assumptions.

“He does tend to do that, my Lord,” Snape agreed ruefully. Salazar chuckled.

“It is a habit I shall endeavour to break him of. And please, call me Salazar.” He returned to his chair, fingers running over the head of his pet snake. “Now, I believe there is a book young Harry wants to show you.”

Harry snapped back to attention, hurrying towards the copy of the book he’d left on the desk. “Here,” he said, flipping it open to the relevant pages and holding it out pointedly. “The language is pretty archaic but I got Salazar to translate, and I think it’s exactly what we need.

So if you would please take this copy of the book to Bill, however you can, that would be a huge help.”

Snape’s eyes were already trailing greedily over the titles on the main bookshelf. “And... the rest?”

“All the originals have to stay in the office,” Harry warned. “But... I’m sure Salazar won’t mind if you want to copy a few for personal use.”

“He’ll certainly make more of them than you would, lad,” Salazar remarked, making Harry roll his eyes.

“There’s some Potions books in the mix. I don’t know what’s what, though. Some of these books might still be around in the world.” Not all of the books were tomes lost to the ravages of time. Some were just earlier versions of books that were still in print today.

Snape was hiding it well, but behind the reserved frown he looked like all his Christmases had come at once. With great effort, he tore his gaze away from the wall of books. “You still need to practice your Bone-Breaking hex.”

“I can do that,” Harry assured. “I’ll be just over there. I promise I’ll yell if I hurt myself,” he added cheekily, watching Snape scowl. There was a brief deliberation on the man’s face — whether his need to stop Harry injuring himself was greater than his desire to start going through Salazar’s shelves. Eventually, Snape nodded decisively.

“I will choose three books to copy for now,” he declared. Harry was reminded absurdly of a small child at a library, trying to reason themselves out of taking the entire shelf home with them.

Severus Snape had *absolutely* been one such child.

“We will continue our lesson as planned, and then next time, you will bring your homework down here so you have something productive to do while I investigate these books. Provided, of course,” he added, glancing back at the portrait warily, “that I am permitted entrance in future.”

“It will be nice to have another actual adult to talk to,” came Salazar’s reply. Harry made a faint noise of indignation.

“Rude. Before I turned up you had no one but your snake,” he muttered pointedly.

“*One day you will look back on your childhood and you will understand exactly what I’m talking about,*” Salazar hissed, amused. Snape was eyeing Harry curiously, and Harry just snorted.

“*Bold of you to assume I will ever grow out of this,*” he replied, unsure exactly what part of his general existence Salazar was complaining about now. He could make a few guesses, if he had to.

Instead, he leaned against the back of the sofa, folding his arms and waiting for Snape to choose his three books.

He got the feeling the next visit was going to be a very, very long one.

.-.-.-

The Gryffindor versus Hufflepuff quidditch match was a surprisingly difficult match for the Gryffindor team, but thanks to Vicky Frobisher's keen defence of the goal, and Harry's speedy capture of the snitch, they managed to pull out another victory. The day ended in another celebration in Gryffindor Tower, and Harry went to sleep with a smile on his face.

The next morning started out great, too. But it didn't stay that way for long.

He was in good spirits at breakfast, until the post owls came in and a veritable storm of feathers swooped in Harry's direction. Some just dropped their letters on his head — or in his eggs — and went about their morning, but others landed on the table, hooting demandingly at him until he relieved them of their burden.

"What's this all about?" Ginny asked, bewildered, as a particularly round owl made itself at home on her plate, pecking at her bacon. "Oi, get off!"

"No idea," Harry replied — and then one owl caught his eye. It held a brown paper wrapped package, approximately the size and shape of a magazine.

He looked up at the Ravenclaw table, and Luna smiled serenely back at him. "Never mind. Figured it out." Harry reached for the package, tearing off the brown paper to reveal the front cover of the *Quibbler*. '*Harry Potter Speaks Out At Last*', it declared, right above a picture of his own face.

"It came out yesterday," Luna told him, having made her way over. "I asked Daddy to send you a copy. I'd imagine these are letters from readers."

His excessive postal delivery had gained the attention of half the Gryffindor table, and a few more people besides. "Well, then," he said, rolling up his sleeves. "Everyone grab an owl. Let's see what we're looking at."

It was something of a free-for-all after that, all of Harry's friends reaching out to pluck owls from the chaos, relieving them of their letters and ripping open envelopes. Remembering Hermione's incident with bubotuber pus the year before, Harry watched them all warily.

"This bloke thinks you've cracked," George volunteered, waving the letter in his left hand. "But this one says he believes you," he said of the letter in his right.

"You've got this woman convinced, Harry," Neville added happily, passing Harry the letter he'd grabbed.

"This one, too!"

They quickly began to gather two piles; those who believed Harry, and those who thought he was just an attention-seeking nutter. They were so engrossed in the pile of mail, they didn't notice the approach that had the rest of the hall going ominously silent.

"*Hem, hem.*" Harry's head snapped up, his stomach squirming in a mix of dread and excitement. "What is going on here, Mr Potter?"

"It's the morning post, Professor," he replied, watching her eyes narrow.

"Five points from Gryffindor for cheek. *Why*, Mr Potter, do you have so many letters?"

There was no point in trying to hide it. "I wrote an article recently, about what happened to me last June," he told her, watching a muscle twitch in her cheek as her jaw clenched tightly. "These are letters from people who read it."

"An article?" Umbridge repeated sharply. "What do you mean?"

Harry picked up his copy of the *Quibbler*, holding it out. "You're welcome to read it, Professor."

Umbridge took one look at the cover and turned a violent shade of red. "I see," she bit out, stubby fingers clenching around the magazine. "Clearly, Mr Potter, your continued detentions are not enough of a *deterrent*, for you. No matter how hard I try to teach you not to spread your awful lies, the message simply will not stick." Her eyes darted down to the scar on the back of his hand. "Perhaps something a touch more... restrictive is required."

Harry swallowed, wondering what she could possibly do that would be worse than having him carve his own hand open every night for a week. She, too, seemed to be struggling to think of something — until her eyes landed on the huge points hourglasses at the back of the hall. "You do not care about detentions, do you, Mr Potter? Even before I arrived here, you were no stranger to them. But," she said, a slow, vindictive smile spreading across her lips that made Harry's stomach clench. "You do care about quidditch."

His blood went cold. Her smile widened.

"Yes, that will do quite nicely, I think. Removing you from your house quidditch team might make you finally think about the consequences of your actions."

"I beg your pardon!" That was McGonagall, striding over with a look of absolute fury on her face. "You have no right to do that! Potter is a Gryffindor, it is my responsibility to think of suitable punishments! And there is nothing in the school rules that prevents students from writing articles for publication."

"He may be a Gryffindor, but I am the High Inquisitor," Umbridge returned sweetly. "I think you will find it is entirely within my right to punish students, especially when their heads of houses are not *fit* for the task." She turned back to Harry, triumph on her toad-like face. "Mr Potter, you are hereby banned from quidditch, for life. You will surrender your broomstick to me by dinner this evening."

“What! You can’t take my broom!” Harry protested. “This isn’t fair — that’s punishing the whole team!”

“You should have thought of that before you decided to spread this *filth*, Mr Potter.” She looked very pleased with herself, indeed. “You have such little care for yourself, perhaps seeing that others are affected by your bad behaviour will make you change your mind. And I’ll be keeping this,” she added, tucking the *Quibbler* under her arm. She stalked up to the head table, uncaring of the outrage she left in her wake.

Harry looked at McGonagall, who was white-faced, lips pressed tightly together, utterly outraged.

“Professor, surely she can’t do that!” Angelina said, aghast. McGonagall turned to her, and nodded sharply.

“I’m afraid she can, Miss Johnson,” she admitted reluctantly. “Mr Potter, I would like to remind you of the discussion we had at the beginning of the year.”

“We’ll be ruined,” Angelina murmured, collapsing on the bench, Fred’s hand on her shoulder. “No seeker, against Ravenclaw! With the points so tight!”

Harry tore his guilty gaze away from her, and met his housemistress’ eyes. “I’m sorry it came to this, Professor.” He wouldn’t apologise for writing the article. From the look on her face, she didn’t want him to.

She knew that some things mattered more than quidditch. As much as this would be a blow to the team.

Harry turned back to Angelina, grimacing. “I’m sorry,” he said. “If I’d known, I—“ He trailed off. It wouldn’t have stopped him, but he might not have been quite so smug about it.

Angelina bit her lip, taking a deep breath. “You can make it up to me by helping me find a new seeker in time for the match against Ravenclaw. We could do try-outs, of course, but it would take time, and who’s going to want to play for just one match?”

“She said I’m banned for life,” Harry pointed out, absently wondering if that would cause any issues with his future professional career. Surely she couldn’t ban him from the league?

“You’re banned as long as she’s here,” Angelina dismissed instantly. “Fuck, I knew we should’ve trained a reserve team this year.”

It was a testament to how much the Transfiguration professor cared about quidditch that she didn’t reprimand Angelina’s language.

Harry looked down the table, at the piles of letters all addressed to him, the people gathered to help go through them. His eyes landed on a head of long, fiery hair.

“How about Ginny?” he suggested, making the girl startle and look up at him.

“Me?”

"Yeah. I've seen you fly at the Burrow when you think everyone else is in bed. You're really good." Harry's insomnia in the summers often had him sat at the window in Ron's room, watching the youngest Weasley sneak her brothers' brooms from the shed.

Ginny blushed, but Angelina was on her like a shot. "Would you? Can you come try out after dinner tonight? We already know you fit with the rest of the team — usually the problem we have is people not being able to handle your brothers." The Weasley twins looked mildly offended, and Ginny laughed.

"I— I don't have a broom." She deflated, and so did Angelina. School brooms were okay, but Ravenclaw's chasers had the latest model Cleansweep.

"You can borrow mine." The slightly stilted call came from further up the table, and more than one person turned to gape incredulously at Ron Weasley. The boy flushed, ears going pink. "I've not really been using it and all. It's only for the rest of the year." Then, his face hardened. "Gryffindor shouldn't have to lose just because *he* keeps pissing off Umbridge."

He didn't look Harry in the eye, but the message went unspoken; he might hate Harry right now, but even he couldn't argue that Voldemort was back, and Harry had done the right thing in sharing that.

"Really?" Ginny looked hopeful, and when Ron nodded again, she dashed down the table to give him a tight hug. "Thank you. I'm sorry I called you a prick."

Ron blinked. "Wait, when did you call me a prick?"

Ginny grimaced briefly. "Don't worry about it." She quickly turned back to Angelina. "Tonight, then? Let's say six thirty?"

Angelina nodded, and Harry's shoulders slumped in relief. That was one crisis averted, at least.

. . .

By the end of first period, there were huge signs all over the school declaring that by order of the High Inquisitor, the *Quibbler* was banned from Hogwarts.

Naturally, that meant that *everyone* had read it by dinnertime. Harry couldn't help but grin to himself as he listened to people quote the article all through the hall, and watched Umbridge's eyes get so bugged with fury he thought they might pop right out of her skull.

A couple of chairs down, Dumbledore was watching the whole scene, and Harry noticed the man's twinkling eyes were conspicuously dimmed. The headmaster didn't seem to know whether to be pleased that the Ministry had been thwarted, or pissed at Harry for making such a bold move, revealing exactly what happened in the graveyard so Dumbledore couldn't warp or sanitise the story for his own gains.

He wondered sometimes if he was perhaps baiting the headmaster a little too much, but then he decided he didn't really care — all the better, even, if the slow build of annoyance resulted

in Dumbledore flipping his lid, preferably somewhere public. It would help enormously once Harry started trying to tear the man's reputation to shreds.

.-

For the rest of the week, Harry watched as Umbridge tried to ferret out the copies of the *Quibbler* interview that were clearly circulating the school, the woman growing increasingly flustered and frustrated as her efforts fail. The Hogwarts students were truly ingenious, disguising the pages as homework, or cuttings from *Witch Weekly*, or letters from home. Even the teachers were in on it, though due to the Educational Decrees they couldn't discuss any of it with their students. McGonagall's ire at Harry didn't last long — especially once Angelina confirmed that Ginny Weasley would make a suitable temporary replacement seeker — and he started earning house points in half of his classes for the most mundane things. Everyone in the school was talking about the article, and Luna told him delightedly that their sales were even better than the issue he'd contributed to the year before. Every day, more letters came in; plenty were still from people accusing him of trying to slander the Minister, but more and more people told Harry they believed him, that they were preparing for the Dark to rise again.

Judging by the low-level fury burning in the corner Harry's mind, right around his scar, there was someone else who wasn't particularly happy about it, either. Voldemort even got so irate one night that he forgot to block Harry, giving him insight into a meeting with a Death Eater named Rookwood, where Harry learned that Bode had been Imperiused into removing something, which was how he ended up in St Mungo's to begin with.

So that was what happened to someone who touched a prophecy that didn't belong to them.

It was awful information, but it wasn't anything useful, so Harry pushed it from his mind, happy to focus on Umbridge's utter outrage at the *Quibbler*. She had given him a few more nights detention — obviously mad that banning him from the quidditch team had not devastated him in the way she hoped — but even that couldn't dampen his spirits, and the first night he was free he happily went down to duel in the Chamber with Snape.

Ever since Harry had introduced him to Salazar, Snape had started pushing him even harder in their lessons. Harry wasn't sure if it was the man's way of thanking him, or just ensuring Harry had all the skills to stay alive longer so Snape would continue to have access to the portrait, but either way as the looming exams began to weigh heavy on his shoulders, Harry was more than glad to let off some steam.

"You're improving well," Snape complimented, once they finished their sixth duel of the night. Harry was sweaty and aching, but his magic was *singing*. "If only we had access to more people, so you could try your hand at duelling multiple opponents at once."

"I've done a bit of that with the HA," Harry told him, gratefully accepting the conjured goblet of water Snape handed over. "Obviously not with the kind of spells you use, but, y'know. Having a bunch of people come at me at once." From the amount of times he'd been outnumbered in a fight, he'd thought it helpful to teach his friends how to handle themselves in such a situation, and get some practice in on his own.

"Indeed?" Snape cocked a curious eyebrow. Harry grinned at him.

"It worked out pretty well. I learned that Justin Finch-Fletchley takes muggle boxing classes during the summers," he revealed. "And isn't afraid to fight dirty." A lot of them had surprised him, honestly, when he'd told them to give it their best shot. They had been lucky not to end up needing the Hospital Wing.

Snape's thin lips twitched in a brief smirk. "I'm glad to hear you're putting your little club to good use."

"You wait until exams come around," Harry said proudly. "Then you'll really see what these students are capable of."

"I'm sure." Snape straightened his robe, then vanished the empty goblets. "I believe that's enough for tonight. I have books to translate."

Harry, desperately in need of a shower and some Bruise Balm, wasn't going to argue. "How's that going?" he asked curiously, wondering what Snape might have uncovered in Salazar's old books. Surely potions had only advanced since then?

"They are fascinating," Snape admitted. "Many of the texts contain references to ingredients that have fallen almost entirely out of use in this age. Of course, many are now extinct, but those that aren't... I will have much to work on over the summer."

"Until Ceri drags you out of the lab and reminds you to eat," Harry joked; a common occurrence at Seren Du. Snape huffed.

"Damned meddling elf," he muttered, though there was no heat to it.

Sealing the passageway, Harry gathered his school bag and went on his way, heading quickly up to Gryffindor Tower. It was technically past curfew, but it was easy for Harry to avoid any patrolling prefects about. Except for one particular gorgeous blond Slytherin prefect, who he couldn't help but pull into an alcove and snog for five minutes before heading on his merry way.

His good mood deflated when he reached the common room, and saw Parvati and Lavender crying over by the fire. "What happened?" he asked, hurrying over to them. Parvati looked at him with puffy red eyes.

"Professor Trelawney's been sacked!" she wailed, crying even harder. Harry gaped at her.

"What?"

Through sniffles and hiccups, the two girls told him what had happened; the way Umbridge had tried to remove Trelawney from the castle as well as her teaching post, but Dumbledore had stepped in. The most surprising part was when they revealed Dumbledore had already hired a new teacher, and he was a *centaur*.

"Umbridge looked *furious*," Lavender said gleefully, wiping her eyes.

"What did you say the centaur bloke's name was, again?" Harry asked. Her brow furrowed.

“Firenze, I think Dumbledore said.”

“He’s *gorgeous*,” Parvati piped up with a wet giggle, her sadness temporarily forgotten.

Harry remembered Firenze. The centaur had saved his life, back in his first year. The rest of his herd had not appreciated him doing so.

Did they appreciate him doing this? Agreeing to work for *humans*?

“Well, then. S’pose we’ll have to see how long before Umbridge finds a reason to kick him out, too,” he said, shrugging. “At least it sounds like Trelawney isn’t going anywhere, so you can still talk to her.” Though now she didn’t have to stay sober enough to teach, Harry wasn’t sure the Seer would be the best conversation partner. Still, it seemed to cheer up the girls.

Harry went up to the dorm to shower, unease brewing within him. Trelawney’s sacking wasn’t unexpected, but with her gone, that meant only one thing.

Hagrid would be next.

Chapter 66

Every week, without fail, no matter what chaos was taking place in Harry's schedule, he set aside some time to teach Draco everything he'd taught to the HA. Sometimes that time ended up being midnight, but it was worth it. Whatever Harry could teach Draco, Draco would then teach Pansy and Millicent and Cassius and now Theo — the Slytherins who couldn't risk coming to the sessions themselves, but similarly couldn't risk going to Blaise and Daphne's little Slytherin House study group to do the same.

They were the Slytherins who couldn't risk being seen defecting, even by other defectors.

Luckily, sessions didn't last nearly as long as they would with the HA — Draco was just one person, not the fifty-odd Harry was now teaching, and he was an intelligent person at that. He picked things up quickly, making Harry's job a whole lot easier.

And leaving plenty of time for them to make out before they went to bed, depending on the night. Since they'd started moving their little rendezvous down to the Chamber, it was a little easier to get carried away.

Right now, they were working on the first spell to really trip Draco up, to cause him to need more than one session on the subject; the Patronus charm.

"I can't believe you're actually teaching everyone this," the blond muttered, glaring in frustration at the formless blob of silver magic lingering in front of them. "It's seriously advanced magic."

"It's seriously useful magic," Harry retorted. "And it's not impossible, it just takes some trying. This is only your second session. You remember how long it took me back in third year."

"Yeah, because you were *thirteen*," Draco said waspishly. He huffed. "Let me try again." A look of determination crossed his face. "Expecto Patronum!"

The silver magic was close, now; Harry definitely saw something with four legs and a long tail. A thought hit him, and he grinned. "That's brilliant, love."

Draco's eyebrow rose suspiciously. "Why do you look so fucking smug?"

Harry leaned in, kissing him quickly. "If I'm not mistaken, your Patronus is a fox," he informed the Slytherin boy delightedly. Draco's eyes widened.

"Oh." A smile tugged at his lips. "That makes sense, I suppose."

"I love you," Harry declared, heart full with the knowledge that Draco saw him as his greatest protector. Draco rolled his eyes.

"I love you, too, but if you tell me Longbottom gets his Patronus before I do, I'm leaving you," he deadpanned. Harry just laughed.

"To be honest, I kind of assumed you would teach yourself the spell when you knew I was learning it, back in third year. You always were a competitive little shit," he added fondly. Once again, Draco huffed in frustration.

"I did. I couldn't get it, so I gave up."

Harry moved closer, wrapping his arms around Draco from behind, propping his chin on his boyfriend's shoulder. "Well, now you've got happier memories," he pointed out, kissing the shell of his ear. "Come on. You're almost there."

He felt the shiver that prickled down Draco's body. "Not helping," the blond muttered, though he made no move to dislodge his barnacle boyfriend. He raised his wand, took a deep breath, and tried again.

. . .

"Part of me just wants this year to be over," Draco admitted, when they had finished the Patronus work and cuddled up together on the sofa Harry had conjured in the corner — conjuring a bed had seemed a bit too forward, even for him. "But then I remember what I have to go home to, and I never want it to end."

Harry ran a hand through the blond's hair. They were well into March, now; only a couple of months away from the dreaded OWL exams, and then summer.

A couple of months away from the time that Harry's school year usually went to hell in a handbasket.

"We'll figure it out," he promised, holding Draco a little bit closer. "How are the Slytherins doing?" Harry felt like he hardly saw anyone in silver and green outside of classes and meals, these days. The entire house had gone to ground, even those who supported Voldemort — they could tell something was brewing, and with all that self-preservation instinct, most of them were waiting to see how things would fall.

"Your little article put quite the bee in everyone's bonnets," Draco informed him. "Half the house has had a letter from their parents warning them one way or another. Either they know what's coming and they aren't sure they can stand against Him, or they know what's coming and they don't want their kids to get too cocky until the Ministry has been taken."

It made Harry's blood run cold, to hear how inevitable the fall of the Ministry seemed to be in everyone's minds. Not that it surprised him in the slightest.

"Any whispers about what he's up to?" Harry asked hopefully, but Draco shook his head.

"Anyone who knows isn't going to put it in writing, not with Umbridge around. She might be an awful pureblood supremacist hag, but she's not a Death Eater."

Harry scowled; sometimes, he felt like she may as well be.

"Well we're on track for having sanctuary by summer," he confirmed, brightening up a little. "I heard back from Farlig; Potter Manor is still under an Unplottable charm, but otherwise there's nothing physically stopping me from going there and taking the wards even without the deed. And they're definitely blood wards." With blood wards, even if Dumbledore tried to claim he was Harry's legal guardian, he wouldn't be able to get in without Harry's consent. He didn't have a single drop of Potter blood.

"But it's Unplottable," Draco pointed out, frowning. "You've never been there."

"I haven't, but Sirius and Remus have," Harry said. "I've asked Sirius, and he remembers it. He'll take me once exams are over and I can take the wards, then it'll be ready as soon as people leave the train." He wasn't sure how many people would need it that desperately, but at the very least Theo needed a place to go. Harry would be ready.

He could feel the stress ease from Draco's narrow shoulders at the assurance, and he tucked the blond into his side, kissing his head. "I'll take care of it," he promised. "I'll keep as many of them as I can safe."

"I just hope they'll be able to get there in time," Draco replied quietly. "My last letter from Father... he's far too pleased with himself these days."

Harry gritted his teeth. What he wouldn't give to knock Lucius Malfoy off his high horse.

.-. .

Their little heirs' study groups were getting fewer and further between, and entirely devoted to actual studying as exams grew closer. No one seemed to mind; not even Susan, who admitted there was little she could do in the way of revolution until after she had passed her OWLs.

Still, they gathered when they could; Harry liked it that little bit more, now that everyone in the room knew about his relationship with Draco. He hadn't realised how much he had been yearning to do such simple things like hold his hand or kiss his cheek, or even just watch him while he studied. Little things the rest of Hogwarts wouldn't even have to think about before doing in front of others. If it made his friends complain about how nauseating they were, that only made it better, as far as he was concerned.

Besides; Susan and Theo were worse, in his opinion.

As he unrolled his half-written Potions essay, turning hopeful green eyes on his boyfriend, the classroom door suddenly opened and every single one of them froze in horror.

Then, Luna drifted in, smiling like she had barely even noticed they were there, and sat down in a chair next to Daphne. "Hello," she greeted. Daphne stared.

"Uh... hi, Lu," she responded hesitantly. None of them moved. "What... what are you doing here?" The unspoken *how did you find us* ringing in the air. Luna just smiled brighter.

"This is where all the Wizengamot heirs meet up, isn't it? That's why you're all here?" Her wide blue eyes surveyed the group in interest. She didn't seem surprised or alarmed at the presence of all the Slytherins.

"...Yes," Daphne admitted. She reached over, smoothing down some of Luna's haphazard waves of hair. "Honey, this is supposed to be a secret meeting." She merely sounded exasperated, like Luna knowing such information was expected — then again, with her suspected Seer abilities, perhaps it was.

"I won't tell anyone," Luna promised. "But I thought it's about time I joined you all."

"Hang on — Lovegood, are you saying you're an heir?" Cassius asked sharply, causing a quiet intake of breath around the room. Luna, entirely unperturbed, nodded and began to braid a silver ribbon into Daphne's hair.

"My mother was of the Ollivander line," she declared absently. "The eldest daughter of the eldest daughter."

Harry sat up straighter. "That explains *so much*," he murmured, and Draco nodded beside him.

The Ollivander line was one that had gotten muddled over recent history, until no one knew who Garrick Ollivander's heir actually was, which caused increasingly higher alarm amongst the Wizengamot as the wandmaker grew more ancient.

The Ollivander line was also known to produce... oddities. The current family head being a prime example, his preternatural insight into magic and wandlore making him excellent at his job but also seem a bit crazy. There were Seers in the line, too, if Harry remembered his research correctly.

A slow smile spread across Daphne's face, and she kissed Luna chastely. "You are full of surprises, aren't you?" she remarked amused. Luna paused in her braiding to stroke Daphne's cheek. "Do you know why it's time for you to let us know that?"

Luna hummed thoughtfully, tying off the end of the braid. "Not exactly," she said. "But I know that I can trust everyone here. Great-granddad gave me permission to tell you."

More than a few uneasy looks passed between them all — what could be coming, for Luna to suddenly *know* that they needed to be aware of her heritage?

Eventually, Sullivan grinned. "Well, I'm glad you're here," he declared, picking up his books and moving over, forcing Ernie out of his seat. "Have you done the Arithmancy homework yet? My numbers won't add up right and I can't figure out why."

That seemed to break the spell that had fallen over them with Luna's interruption, and slowly they all started to get back to work. But it didn't stop Harry wondering, occasionally looking up to glance at the blonde-haired Ravenclaw.

Eventually, he shook his head, deciding to let the matter slide. If it was something important, Luna would tell them when they needed to know. She usually did.

.-.-.

Snape was distracted.

Harry didn't know *why*, but whatever the cause, the man was seriously off his game. Harry was practicing his Legilimency, and he kept finding his way into memories he *knew* Snape couldn't possibly want him to see. An incident with his father; his first kiss with Remus... Harry tried not to snoop, but considering Snape had instructed him to look for the things he was trying to hide, he couldn't help himself.

"Are you alright, sir?" he asked tentatively, once he was pushed out of a memory involving fish and chips on some run-down pier and a nineteen year-old Remus Lupin wearing leather trousers, Snape's whole heart filled with love for the man. It warmed Harry's own heart, to feel the way this man felt about a person Harry cared so much about, but... it wasn't like him.

"I am fine," Snape bit out, clearly lying. His dark eyes met Harry's. "Again."

Harry did as instructed, murmuring the spell to enter Snape's mind, trying to split his own focus. He was supposed to be writing about antidotes while he searched the man's mindscape, to practice managing Legilimency undetected. Eye contact was only needed for the initial spell, after all.

He appeared in the now-familiar haze of Snape's mental defences — currently at a fairly low level, while Harry was still learning — and narrowed his focus for something that would surely get Snape back to his usual self.

Show me why you hate my father.

Immediately there was a swarm of memories, but one shone brighter than any other, and Harry dove into it.

Four boys, confronting a skinnier boy after an exam. A girl, redhead and blazing with anger, coming in to defend the skinny boy. A fight, and the skinny boy was hanging in the air all of a sudden, his robes over his head showing he was full Wizarding Traditional beneath them. Jeering laughter, the redhead offering to help, *that word, that awful word, the word that ruined it all*. The four boys, faces turning cruel, led by the one with dark hair and bronze skin and vindictive brown eyes. "*Who wants to see me take off Snivelly's pants?*"

At last, Harry was forced away, returning to his own mind with a gasp. At first he wasn't sure if the ejection had come from Snape or from his own disgust at the sight — then he looked up, and saw the utter fury in the Slytherin's eyes.

"I suppose you found them funny, did you?" he drawled icily. Harry gaped at him.

“What? *God*, no!” That seemed to startle Snape. “That was what they were like? That was—that’s what *he* was like?” In none of the stories Sirius and Remus had ever told, did they mention that. “That… that wasn’t a prank. That was *assault*.” He hadn’t seen if they had in fact removed Snape’s underwear, but even without them going that far it was still sexual assault. “Why didn’t Remus do anything?”

“He stopped them, the second Potter even hinted at… well, you saw,” Snape said stiffly. “He was always… reluctant to interfere, when they got going. He worried that if they knew about us, they would abandon him, or worse. They were his pack. He couldn’t face that.”

“You don’t let that happen to someone you love,” Harry argued firmly. “How can you forgive him for that? And Sirius! Sirius was—“ Harry didn’t even have *words* for the way he felt, watching his godfather do something so cruel. “They reminded me of my cousin, and his friends.”

Snape’s lips became a thin line. “Sometimes, I forget that your childhood was more similar to mine than James Potter’s.”

Harry winced. “Sometimes I like to forget my childhood existed at all,” he retorted bluntly. He ran a hand through his hair. “God, no wonder you hated me at first. How the hell have you and Sirius managed to even be civil, let alone sort-of friends?”

“Amends were made, for various incidents,” Snape said. “Our school years were… complicated, to say the least. Sometimes in life you have to decide to move past things that hurt, because continuing to hold anger over them can make things worse. Needless to say, Black and I will never be bosom buddies, but for the cause of a greater good we can be companionable. As for Remus… that history is even more complicated, and suffice to say I do not owe you an explanation.”

Harry went wide-eyed, nodding. “Yes, sir.” But he still couldn’t fathom it, forgiving people who treated you like that. Forgiving people who stood by and let it happen. “Is… is that when you and my mum stopped being friends, sir?”

Slowly, Snape gave a jerky nod. “She forgave me, eventually,” he said. “But by that time, the damage had been done.” He rubbed unconsciously at his left forearm, where the Dark Mark lurked beneath his sleeve.

An awkward silence spread between them. Then, Harry steeled himself. “Excuse my bluntness, sir, but we both know I’m not that good a Legilimens,” he said frankly. “I should never have seen that. Any other day, you’d never let me get that far. What the hell is wrong with you today? Sir,” he added belatedly, not wanting to push his luck. Snape scowled, tucking some of his hair behind his ear.

“You’re more skilled at it than you think,” he admitted offhandedly. “But you’re right, you never should have seen that. Albus called me into his office this morning, to give a report on your Occlumency progress.”

Harry’s shoulders tensed, but he still didn’t understand how that could have Snape so thrown. “He’s done that before, right? What was different this time?”

“He seems... displeased with what I have told him I found in your mind,” Snape said, pursing his lips. “The headmaster seems to believe even more strongly than before that the horcrux within you is... controlling you.”

A startled laugh burst from Harry’s lips. “He what?” That was the most ridiculous thing he’d ever heard! “I thought he agreed that I wasn’t possessed?”

“Not possession,” Snape corrected. “Albus believes that as his compulsions on you have eroded — not that he explicitly admitted to ever doing such things, merely referencing how you were *growing older* — it has allowed the horcrux to start to influence your own soul, turning it dark. Making you more like the young Tom Riddle he remembers.”

“The only thing I have in common with young Tom Riddle is that we both saw through Dumbledore’s bullshit,” Harry muttered. “Why is this a problem?” He didn’t understand why it had Snape so bothered.

“Because, you Gryffindor fool — if Albus can convince himself of this, then he can convince others. He doesn’t need to tell them of the compulsions, or the horcrux; he certainly hasn’t mentioned either of them to me. He merely needs to play on your *connection* to the Dark Lord, the one half the school knows you have thanks to your dorm-mates blabbing about your vision before Christmas. He will mention how since the Dark Lord returned you have become colder, more withdrawn, more intelligent. You have made new friends — powerful friends — and you have pulled away from his own guiding hand. Exactly as another young boy once did in these halls.”

With dawning horror, Harry began to see the problem.

“He’ll have the whole of wizarding Britain against you before you can even graduate,” Snape finished grimly.

“But... surely no one will believe him?” Harry said weakly, already knowing the answer.

“He’s Albus Dumbledore,” Snape pointed out, “many people would believe the sky to be green if he told them. And as far as the general public is concerned, he knows you better than most. If he tells them your behaviour has changed, who are they to argue otherwise. Especially when he is not wrong.”

Snape had a good point. All those things, everything Dumbledore was using as a sign of Harry’s turn to the Dark — they were all technically true. He was applying himself better in lessons, he was not putting up with the gawping of the general public as much. He had split quite explosively with Ron and Hermione, and had a powerful and influential new circle of friends. Just as Voldemort once had, his original followers.

And he was definitely turning away from Dumbledore’s *guidance*, which to many in this country was a sure sign of darkness.

“What do I do?” he asked. Snape leaned back in his chair, thoughtful.

"I am assuring Albus that I saw no signs of outside influence in your mind, other than the obvious. No memories of secretly practicing Dark Arts, or torturing animals," his lips quirked briefly, "but as he believes me unaware of the horcrux within you, I suspect he just assumes I do not know what to look for." His frown returned. "You must not let this derail your plans. Your public divide from the headmaster is inevitable; we can only hope that it comes at a time when public opinion is in your favour. Leave manipulating Albus to me."

"If you're sure." Harry didn't like the idea of just leaving that whole thing alone, but there was little else he could do. He would lose so much ground if he pretended to turn back into the headmaster's docile little puppet. And his sanity, as well, before long.

"I think we are finished for the night, Potter," Snape declared, and now Harry looked closer he could see the stress in the furrow of his brow, the tension in his shoulders.

"Yeah. Yeah, of course." He scrambled to grab his bag. "I... I'm sorry I saw those memories, sir. I'm sorry for what my father did to you."

Snape's return smile was a twisted, bitter thing. "Those are not your sins to apologise for, Harry," he replied evenly.

"I'm sorry all the same." Then Harry left, his heart heavy, wondering why no one had ever told him his father was such a shithead.

..

The first thing he did upon reaching the dormitory was ward himself in his bed curtains, and pull out his mirror. "Sirius Black."

Sirius responded in moments, and the bright grin he greeted Harry with dropped as soon as he saw the look on his godson's face. "What's wrong, pup?"

"Is Remus there?" Harry asked, and Sirius frowned.

"Yes... Did you need to talk to him?" Harry could see the background shift as Sirius got up, no doubt to go find his friend.

"Both of you, if you're not busy."

Soon Harry could see both men in the surface of the mirror, staring worriedly at him. "Is everything alright, cub?"

Harry told them; about his Legilimency lesson, and the scene he'd watched in Snape's memories. As he spoke, he watched both of them grow paler.

"Harry..." Sirius began, and Harry glared at him.

"Don't patronise me," he warned. "How could— he wasn't even *doing* anything. He was just *there*."

"Things between Severus and James were complicated, Harry. And Severus will be the first to admit he wasn't exactly innocent in the matter," Remus said.

"I bet Snape didn't strip any of you half-naked in the middle of the school grounds," Harry spat viciously, glad when they both flinched.

"No, he didn't," Remus admitted. "That was too far, and even James agreed that, once he calmed down. He sort-of saw red after Severus called Lily the M word."

"But the fact that you had him like that at all!" Harry wasn't letting them talk him out of his anger. "You treated Snape the way my cousin Dudley treated me. I was just lucky he didn't have magic to help along the way." Dudley with magic... now there was the stuff of nightmares.

His accusation made Sirius wince. "We were fifth years."

"*I'm* a fifth year," Harry shot back immediately. "That's no excuse."

"No, it's not," Remus agreed sadly. "Harry, I'm sorry that we tried to shield you from the more... vindictive parts of James' school years. We didn't want you to think ill of your father — he was far more than the boy you saw in those memories."

"You didn't want me to think ill of him, or of you?" asked Harry knowingly. Both men were silent. "I thought so. Look, I love you both. I always will. But... I don't know if I can look at you the same, having seen that."

Sirius looked crushed in a way that had Harry's heart clenching.

"We understand," Remus assured. "But please understand that was just one moment. One incident; none of us at our best. When we get the chance to get the Potter pensieve out of the vault, we'll show you more. The good, and the bad," he promised. "But despite some rough moments, James Potter was a good man. As is Sirius. And I... I try my best to be worth the forgiveness Severus has offered me." Now he looked pained, too, and Harry started to feel a little guilty. He didn't want to dredge up old wounds. He just wanted to *understand*.

"You're a good man too, Moony," Sirius insisted roughly. "The best of us." A smile flickered across Remus' face, but he said nothing.

"I think that would be good," Harry said slowly. "To see more memories. If you're willing." Anything to banish the awful sight of his father's cruel, laughing face from his mind.

"We'll sort something out this summer," Remus promised. "But please, Harry — don't hold our stupid teenage decisions against us as adults. We know we were wrong, back then. We grew up. We apologised. It— it wasn't easy, at times. But we moved on."

"Snape said the same thing, sort-of," Harry admitted, and Remus' smile finally looked genuine.

"We worked through a lot of old grievances to get where we are today," he said. "I wish that hadn't been your first real sight of your father, Harry. But what's done is done. You of all

people know that such things are rarely simple.”

Harry knew he was talking about Draco, and part of him wanted to argue that Draco had been *twelve* and had never done anything as bad as that and he knew better now. But he was tired, and his heart ached, and he was worried that if he kept talking it over he would convince himself to hate his own family. He didn’t want that.

“I think I’m going to get some sleep,” he said eventually. Sirius still looked like someone had kicked his puppy.

“We love you, Harry,” he said earnestly, and Harry managed a small, but genuine smile.

“I love you both, too.” Even that awful memory couldn’t change that.

“Did Severus seem busy, when you left?” Remus asked, frowning.

“No, I don’t think so.” The way he looked, Harry doubted he could have concentrated on work. Remus nodded, looking relieved, and Harry knew there would be a visitor in the Potions Master’s quarters soon. Good — regardless of how he felt about the whole situation right now, Remus and Snape loved each other, and they could both do with company after Harry had dredged up such difficult history. Not to mention Snape’s other worries.

Harry bid them both goodnight, and lay there for a while in the silence, still in his school robes.

He would talk to Draco about it when he could, he decided. Maybe he would have some insight to soothe Harry’s soul.

For now, he really did need to sleep.

Chapter 67

Harry looked around the Room of Requirement, watching all the wisps of glittering silver throughout the room. Some had shapes, some did not, but almost every wand in the room was producing something. “This is brilliant,” he declared proudly, amazed at how many of his classmates had a solid, corporeal Patronus. “Once you’ve found your form once, it gets easier, I promise,” he added to those who were still struggling.

A few feet away, Michael Corner almost threw his wand across the room in frustration. “It’s just not happening,” he grumbled, and before Harry could go over to assist Anthony was already on it, carefully talking his friend through the process.

It warmed Harry’s heart to see the co-operation going on in the group, between those who had succeeded in the spell and those who had yet to do so. He might have been the ‘official’ leader of the group, but by this point in the year they were definitely working more as a team than as a class.

He looked up at the clock, surprised to see how much of their usual time had already passed — and then the door opened suddenly. Everyone in the room froze, wands raised at the intruder.

“Draco!” Harry burst out, hurrying towards the blond. Draco’s face was paler than usual, his eyes wide in alarm.

“She knows,” he blurted, sending a shock of fear through Harry. “She knows where you meet, even if she doesn’t know what you’re doing. She’s planning on having a bunch of Slytherin students waiting in the hall outside close to curfew.”

“*Fuck,*” Harry declared emphatically, his voice ringing through the otherwise silent room. When he turned around, half the room were glaring at Draco suspiciously.

“Why should we trust Malfoy?”

“How did he even know we were in here?”

Calls of alarm and distrust began to start up, and Harry shot off a firework from his wand. “That’s not the problem here,” he snapped. “Draco knows where we are because I trust him, and because I’ve been teaching him in here as well. Not everything outside this room is as it seems.” It was too late to shove that particular cat back in the bag, now. “And I’ll remind you all, you’re still under a secrecy contract for everything that happens in here.” Though clearly, someone had broken that contract. He looked around suspiciously — everyone here still had their memories of the HA, so they had not spilled the beans. So who was missing?

He whirled around to look back at Draco, who had taken a half-step behind Harry, putting the Gryffindor firmly between himself and dozens of raised wands. “You said she’s waiting to ambush us at curfew?” he repeated, and Draco nodded.

"She can't see the door, obviously, but she's been told where it is, and that you're doing something secret behind it. She wants to catch as many of you as she can when you leave." He grimaced. "I can't stay long, I'm supposed to be getting ready to join them."

More murmurs from the crowd, which Harry ignored.

"Why don't we just use the other doors?" Susan suggested, gesturing to the four house doors hiding the secret passageways. "Leave her waiting all night."

It was tempting, but Harry knew that was only going to delay the inevitable. "If she doesn't get anything she'll just keep trying harder," he pointed out. "The rest of you can leave through those doors — be careful at the other ends, just in case she's waiting. Hide yourselves if you can."

"So we're just going to believe Malfoy, then?" Angelina said archly.

"Yes," Harry replied, not rising to the bait. "I told you, I trust him."

"Draco isn't loyal to the Dark Lord," Blaise piped up. "But it's too dangerous for his father to catch wind of that."

A ripple of unease flickered through the group; all of them knew what Lucius Malfoy was like.

Draco's jaw clenched, and he tugged on Harry's sleeve. "I need to go. If she catches me leaving here..." He didn't need to finish that sentence.

"Go with Blaise and Daphne," Harry urged. "All of you, get going, quickly!"

"Don't do anything stupid, Potter," Draco hissed, the look in his eye saying he knew exactly what Harry was thinking and he didn't approve in the slightest. Harry winked at him, wishing he could kiss the blond the same way George had just kissed Blaise, a worried expression on his face. Instead he squeezed Draco's shoulder, and urged him towards the pair of Slytherins.

In a quick and orderly fashion, the group began to disperse through the four doors, and Harry hoped they all had the sense not to just run in terror back to their common rooms. If they went to the library, or pretended to have been enjoying the balmy April evening in one of the courtyards, or literally *anything* less suspicious than walking back from seemingly nowhere in particular.

The room began to empty, and Harry pushed away the sour anxiety in his stomach, thinking about what he had to do next. He would have to play it very carefully, or he could ruin everything.

At last, there were only two people in the room; himself, and Neville. "Nev, you should go," Harry urged, but the blond shook his head.

"It's gonna look really suspicious if you walk out of here by yourself, mate," he insisted. "Umbridge knows you're up to something, she'd expect you to have at least one accomplice. I'm coming with you."

“Neville—“ Harry broke off when his friend fixed him with a stubborn glare. “Ugh. Fine. But if your Gran murders me for getting you fucking expelled or something, I’m blaming you.”

Neville paled slightly at the possibility, but nodded anyway. Bloody Gryffindors.

Before they left, Harry reached out to the magic of the room, and felt it change — it grew smaller, the four house doors disappeared, and soon they were stood in a cosy room with a pair of sofas and a table in the middle. The mirror wall disappeared entirely, taking their little message board safely with it. “Just in case she comes in to check,” Harry pointed out at Neville’s astonished look.

“I didn’t realise the room worked like that,” Neville murmured. Harry shrugged. It did for him, at any rate.

Heartbeat a hard staccato against his ribcage, Harry headed for the door, wand still in hand. Neville was right behind him. Harry pushed open the door, stepped outside — and immediately ducked a bright red jet of light. “He’s here!” a shout rang through the corridor, and suddenly there were spells firing at him from multiple sources. Harry put up a Shield charm, blocking most of them, but he knew he needed to let himself be overwhelmed — and he didn’t want Umbridge knowing just how capable he was in a fight.

Still, he quite happily disarmed the Slytherin student in front of him. He tried to run, and let himself be hit with a Tripping jinx, skidding across the stone floor. In an instant, there was a knee pressed to his back, and his hands were bound. “I’ve got Potter!” It sounded like Montague, the quidditch captain. Harry craned his neck, trying to see if Neville had managed to escape. Unfortunately, the other Gryffindor was lying Stunned on the floor only a few feet away.

“Well done, Mr Montague! And you, Mr Malfoy. Twenty points each!” Umbridge cooed in delight. Harry tensed when Montague pulled him roughly to his feet, setting him face to face with the pink-clad High Inquisitor. Umbridge looked like she had just been declared Minister for Magic herself.

Behind her, with the faintest trace of apology in his eyes, Draco had hold of a bound Neville.

“You, Mr Potter, are in very deep trouble,” Umbridge declared, sounding very, very happy about that.

.-

For the second time that school year, Harry found himself riding the revolving staircase up to the headmaster’s office. This time was about as cheerful as the last, though the company was different. It was just him and Umbridge, her stubby fingers gripping him tightly by the shoulder — she had let Neville go with a week’s detention, and sent the Slytherins on their way to see if they couldn’t find any more suspicious-looking students. She had checked the inside of the room, but still seemed convinced Harry was hiding something.

When they reached the office, Harry’s heart stuttered — the Minister himself was already there, with a smiling Percy Weasley and a pair of aurors, stood close to Dumbledore with

blank expressions. Kingsley was one of them, though he showed no recognition.

“Sit.” Umbridge practically threw him into a chair.

“Well, Dolores? Did you find them?” Fudge was eager-eyed, but Umbridge’s face went stony.

“Only Potter and Longbottom. The room was empty otherwise,” she admitted begrudgingly.

“Well, then, that seems to be that,” Dumbledore declared cheerfully. “There is no Educational Decree preventing two boys from being in a room together.”

Harry hated the drawl of insinuation in his tone. Fudge puffed up angrily.

“We both know what they were really up to, Dumbledore!” He turned to Harry, sneering at him. “I expect you know why you are here, Potter.”

“No, sir,” Harry replied blankly. Fudge’s face turned purple.

“I beg your pardon?”

“I don’t know why, sir. Neville and I were just doing homework.”

“A likely story,” Fudge scowled. “You truly claim to have no idea why Professor Umbridge has brought you here? No recollection of breaking any school rules? Or *Ministry Decrees*? ”

Harry maintained his polite expression. “No, sir.”

Fudge looked like he was about to have a stroke, his anger rising.

“I think, Minister, it is time I fetch my informant,” Umbridge piped up, shooting Harry a gloating smirk. Harry didn’t let himself react; not even when Umbridge disappeared through a side door, and returned with none other than Marietta Edgecombe.

So that was their leak.

The curly-haired Ravenclaw girl looked utterly terrified and bewildered, looking from Fudge to the aurors and back again. There was a blankness to her gaze that had a flare of triumph shooting through Harry’s stomach.

“Don’t be scared, dear,” Umbridge encouraged gently. “The Minister is very pleased with you. Tell him what you told me.”

Marietta’s wide eyes flicked to Umbridge, and a quiet whimper escaped her lips.

Umbridge pressed further, but Marietta remained silent. She looked to Harry, horror in her gaze, and he stared back impassively.

She would have no memory of the HA, but she would know what she had done.

“Very well, *I’ll* tell him,” Umbridge snapped eventually, turning to Fudge. “Earlier this evening, Miss Edgecombe came to my office and told me that should I proceed to a particular

spot of the seventh floor and wait until curfew, I would find something that I had been looking for for a very long time. I questioned her further, but all she would tell me was that there was some sort of illegal meeting going on, of which Potter was the leader. At that point, she became too scared to say anything further.”

Harry would bet she was scared — having her memory suddenly disappear in the middle of Umbridge’s office, no longer knowing why she was there.

Fudge turned to Marietta with an expression that was probably supposed to be kind, but mostly looked constipated. “You did a very brave thing, going to Professor Umbridge. Can you tell me more about this meeting? Who was there? How many people were involved?”

Marietta shook her head silently, and frustration passed across Fudge’s face.

“You will remember, Minister, that back in October I heard word of Potter’s intention to form a duelling club, to circumvent the Ministry-approved Defence Against the Dark Arts curriculum,” Umbridge volunteered, sending a venomous look to Harry. Harry wondered how that rumour had made it to her ears.

“I was going to, but then you introduced the new Decree, so I didn’t,” he replied blandly. Umbridge’s lips curled in a brief snarl.

“And yet here we are, hearing of such a thing six months later. Six months *after* the Decree was put in place.”

“And yet, Dolores, we do not have any evidence that any meetings occurred at all,” Dumbledore cut in, offering his ever-present eye twinkle and genial smile. “So I believe you have brought Mr Potter here on false pretences.”

“We have Miss Edgecombe’s word!” Umbridge insisted, gripping Marietta’s shoulder tightly. “Tell him, you silly girl!”

“I don’t know anything,” Marietta blurted, tears welling in her eyes. “I don’t—I don’t remember any meetings.”

“You’re lying!” Umbridge screeched. “You told me yourself!”

“I ask you, Professor Umbridge,” said Dumbledore, voice going stony, “not to yell at my students, if you please. It is clear that Miss Edgecombe has no memory of the illegal duelling club you are referring to. Likely because it does not exist.” He glanced back at Harry. “All you have evidence of is Mr Potter and Mr Longbottom using a hidden room within the castle to quietly complete some homework. Hardly a crime,” he added, chuckling.

Fudge rounded on Umbridge, fury in his gaze. “You told me you had proof, Dolores,” he hissed. Umbridge’s eyes bulged.

“I did! I do!” She floundered for a moment, and Harry sat there, watching her impassively, trying to force down his grin. She had absolutely nothing on him, and they both knew it.

Then Umbridge went completely still, before turning to the headmaster, a cold smile forming. “Miss Edgecombe has *no memory* of the events, does she?” she echoed his previous words. “Perhaps because she’s been... Obliviated?”

The portraits of previous heads of school, who were all shamelessly listening in, gasped in outrage.

“That is quite the serious accusation, Dolores,” Dumbledore replied evenly.

“I have known for weeks, *months* even, that something is going on here!” Umbridge continued, a hysterical light in her eyes. “Heard the little brats whispering around the school, thinking they’re *so* very clever. They have been meeting, Minister, I assure you. And what’s more, do you know what they call themselves?” She smiled a crazed, dangerous smile. “The *Hogwarts Army*. ”

That wasn’t entirely true, but it was enough to have Fudge sucking in a sharp breath, rounding on Dumbledore with accusation plain on his face. “I knew it! My advisors thought me mad, but I knew it!” he bragged. “I told them you were plotting against me, training the students to fight me! I suppose Potter was your little general, was he? You’ve always had quite the soft spot for him. And now you’ve erased this poor girl’s memory to keep your own secrets!”

For one heart-stopping moment, Harry was sure Dumbledore was going to throw him under the bus. *Sure* the headmaster would use this as the perfect excuse to punish Harry for his rebellious ways and blame him for everything; Umbridge would likely accept it, even if Fudge didn’t. Her enemy had always been more Harry than Dumbledore anyway.

But Dumbledore merely smiled, and laid his hands on the desk, one still holding his wand. “Well, I suppose the game is up,” he agreed. “Would you like a statement, Cornelius?”

Harry didn’t move as Fudge practically salivated over the information, keenly directing Percy Weasley to write it all down as Dumbledore admitted to plotting to overthrow the Ministry. Umbridge kept shooting Harry little glances, as if expecting him to defend his headmaster — especially when Fudge mentioned arresting the man — but Harry stayed silent. Dumbledore knew what he was doing. He obviously recognised it was best to keep Harry in school, that it would be easier for him to get the bullshit charges dropped than it would be to get Harry un-expelled. And he seemed far too eager to make Fudge squirm.

It all came to a head when Fudge attempted to have the aurors subdue Dumbledore, and suddenly there was a bright flash of light and a loud bang. Harry dropped to the ground instinctively, and when he raised his head the room looked like a bomb had gone off; everyone was unconscious, except for himself and Dumbledore. The headmaster stood behind his desk, and he looked at Harry — though very carefully did not make eye contact. He was still scared of what he might find.

“You must be careful, Harry,” he insisted quickly. “This will not stop Dolores from watching you. I will not be around to help a second time.” He gathered some things from his desk, sweeping them into his robe pocket. “Work hard on your Occlumency, and remember what

you are fighting for. What you are *truly* fighting for. The same cause your parents sacrificed themselves for.”

And with that cryptic statement, he raised an arm, grabbing onto Fawkes’ tail feathers as the phoenix swooped low over him. In a flash of fire, the pair were gone.

The rest of the room awoke, seemingly with no idea they’d been out for any longer than a split second, and Fudge immediately sent the aurors to the stairs. Harry and the bewildered Marietta were almost forgotten about in the chaos — eventually, Umbridge dismissed both of them, though not before giving Harry another week’s detention.

Harry didn’t waste time on his way back to Gryffindor Tower, practically skipping with glee. He wasn’t expelled, and Dumbledore was gone from the school — and clearly under the impression that with enough belief in *love* and practice in Occlumency, Harry could be redeemed from his supposed Dark leanings.

His day had turned out much better than anticipated, all things considered.

. . .

In the morning, the *Prophet* ran a full story about how Albus Dumbledore had been training Hogwarts students as his own private militia to one day overthrow Fudge’s power, and there was *outrage* in the Hogwarts Great Hall.

No one knew the full story, but naturally word had spread that it was Harry Potter’s fault that Dumbledore was gone. Suddenly, his popularity — which had been slowly rising since the *Quibbler* article — was at an all time low; he was the reason they now had Umbridge as a headmistress.

Harry would forever be amazed at the accuracy and speed of the Hogwarts rumour mill; within hours half the school seemed to have their own version of Dumbledore’s daring escape, and not all of them were entirely off the mark. Perhaps Marietta had said something, but Harry doubted it — when he arrived at breakfast, the curly-haired girl was sat alone at the end of the Ravenclaw table, with her head bowed so low she was practically face-first in her porridge.

“I’m so sorry, Harry,” Cho hissed in the corridor on the way to their respective classes, clearly devastated. “I never thought she’d— her mum works at the Ministry, but I didn’t think
—“

“It’s fine, Cho,” Harry insisted. “The contract worked as expected. I can handle the detentions.” He and Neville were alternating days, since Umbridge only seemed to have the one Blood Quill.

“Still, I’m really sorry.” Cho was saved further apologies when they had to part ways. Harry hoped she didn’t feel guilty for too long; it wasn’t her fault her friend was a snitch.

By lunch, things were worse — the Inquisitorial Squad had been born. Harry watched silently as Draco, flanked by Crabbe and Goyle, made a show of taking points from both Ron and

Hermione, bragging about his new authority. Around the Gryffindor table, several members of the HA were giving Harry intent looks, as if asking him to explain the Slytherin's supposed *loyalty* now. Harry just shook his head — surely they understood such things were necessary sometimes?

Harry wasn't surprised by which Slytherins appeared to be in the Inquisitorial Squad — or the handful of Ravenclaws, too — but he was quietly pleased to see how many of them were secretly his own allies.

The Ministry was not as stable or respected as Fudge and Umbridge thought.

He kept his head down for the whole day, glad he didn't have Defence Against the Dark Arts on his schedule yet. Every time he saw Umbridge, she looked like she was trying to set him on fire with her mind.

It was Neville's turn for detention first, so Harry went up to Gryffindor Tower, intent on doing as much homework as he could before his evenings were once again limited. Almost as soon as he sat down, a tall redhead appeared on either side of him.

"Hey, mate, question for you," Fred asked in a low tone. Harry instinctively raised a privacy ward.

"What's up?"

"You know how you've been self-studying for those two OWLs?" George asked, making Harry blink; that was not what he'd anticipated. "Do you know anything about registering for exams at the Ministry?"

Suddenly, things clicked. "You don't think you'll stick around for your NEWTs?" he asked with raised eyebrows. The twins shared a look.

"With Umbridge in charge? Not likely," George remarked. "We're close to getting premises for the shop, too, but that's all hush-hush."

"It will be a help to have qualifications, though," Fred said. "And we've already put all the work into studying for them. Might as well try it."

"There are all sorts of potions ingredients you can only access if you've got a NEWT in the subject," George explained. "We didn't give a shit about OWLs because they don't really mean anything, but NEWTs are important."

Harry knew they'd only passed three OWLs each, but he also knew that half their professors had let them continue their classes even in the subjects they'd failed, knowing it was not through lack of skill. The twins were two of the most talented students in the entire school.

"I don't know anything, but I have ways of getting letters out to Remus. I'll ask him," Harry assured, earning twin grins. "How soon d'you think you'll be off?"

Again, they shared a look over his head. "Depends how the next few weeks go," Fred admitted, frowning. "We'd like to stay til after the match against Ravenclaw. But we also

have absolutely no intention of letting Umbridge enjoy her new position,” he added with a devilish smirk.

“And if we leave, at least we know you’re here to look out for Ginny. And Ron, too, I suppose,” George said.

“I’ll do what I can,” Harry promised. “For Blaise, too.” George’s face softened; Harry knew how much the redhead worried about the dangerous line his Slytherin boyfriend was walking.

“He told me about the sanctuary offer,” George revealed. “You bleeding heart, Potter.”

Harry just grinned. “You know me; saving people is what I do,” he joked. “The offer is open to you, too, y’know. If anything happens — with your mum, or Dumbledore, or if Death Eaters come after you. I’ll always have somewhere safe for you to go.”

Each of them laid a hand on one of his shoulders, squeezing gently. “We know, little brother,” Fred assured. “But don’t you worry about us. We’ve got more than just silly little tricks up our sleeves.” He winked, and then they were gone, halfway across the common room before Harry could even blink.

There were only two and a half months left of term. Harry wondered what the twins had planned, that they didn’t think they could last that much longer.

He couldn’t wait to find out.

. . .

Charlie straightened his robe nervously, and Bill slapped his hand away for the dozenth time. “You’re making it worse,” the eldest Weasley boy said, shooting his brother a look. “Calm down. It’ll be fine.”

This was, perhaps, not the best timing to be doing this. Then again, as Bill had pointed out the night before, the timing was only going to get *worse*. With Dumbledore out of Hogwarts, Fudge would only get more vehement in his desire to stamp out Dumbledore supporters within the Ministry.

But Dumbledore leaving the school had been of benefit to them, as it meant their dad had been able to sit down with the headmaster and discuss the possibility of his two eldest sons taking up their civic responsibilities. Dumbledore, believing Bill and Charlie to be just as dedicated to him as their father was, had given his blessing on the matter.

So now, they were here. Waiting outside the Wizengamot chambers for the door to open, Charlie feeling like he was going to overheat in the stuffy dress robe Bill had forced him into. Merlin, he *hated* formalwear.

At last, the door clicked ajar, beckoning their entry. Charlie took a deep breath, steadied himself, and fell into stride behind his brother.

The Wizengamot chamber was intimidating to say the least. Even with barely half the seats full thanks to the number of proxies between Lucius Malfoy and Albus Dumbledore, seeing

them all dressed in their official garb, staring down at him, made Charlie's neck prickle with sweat.

"With the permission of my father, Lord Prewett, Arthur Weasley; I, William Weasley, have come to claim the Prewett seat of my birthright," Bill declared, his voice strong. Charlie stared hard at a point on the wall ahead of him.

"With the permission of my father, Lord Weasley, Arthur Weasley; I, Charles Weasley, have come to claim the Weasley seat of my birthright," Charlie echoed. A heavy silence filled the room. Then, there were two bright glowing lights up ahead.

The seats had recognised them, and accepted them. Their robes changed, transforming into the same plum robes the rest of the Wizengamot wore.

In the Chief Warlock's seat, Fudge looked apoplectic with rage. Beside him, writing the minutes for the meeting, Percy had dropped his quill in shock. Seeing his younger brother made Charlie's heart clench. He only felt delight at Fudge's anger.

But the magic of the Wizengamot chamber was as old as the Ministry itself, and so complex even the Unspeakables didn't understand it fully. There was no arguing with the magic of birthright.

"Welcome, Lord Prewett, Lord Weasley," Fudge declared reluctantly. "Please, take your seats so we may begin."

Charlie glanced at Bill, who grinned at him, and together they walked up to their glowing chairs, sitting in unison. Instantly, Charlie felt the warm flare of the Weasley magic, accepting him into the family headship. It filled his chest and settled on his shoulders, an *awareness*, a power like nothing he'd ever felt before. And this was only the Weasley half of the magic.

He went wide-eyed for a moment as he thought about how it might feel for Harry, once he could fully accept lordships over all his family magics.

No wonder Dumbledore was afraid.

But as he looked down at a burst of warmth on his hand, he saw the Weasley lordship ring materialise on his right middle finger. He now technically had more of a say in the family than his father; than anyone but Bill. The Prewett magic was stronger than the Weasley magic, and Bill was the elder, after all.

He settled back, listening to Fudge begin some droning speech, his blood fizzing through his veins. They had done it. Now there was no way Dumbledore or their father could take the power away from them. The headmaster didn't know it yet, but his sphere of power had just grown a little bit smaller.

..

They flooed back to Bill's flat, and as soon as they were home Charlie reached up to loosen the collar of his robe, letting out a whoop of triumph.

“We did it!” Bill exclaimed, grabbing his brother in a rough hug.

The Wizengamot meeting had been long and boring, with very little to actually vote on, but that didn’t matter. They had taken their lordships, and that was the important thing.

Once his robe was open over the plain t-shirt and jeans Charlie wore underneath, he looked back down at his Weasley ring, quietly awed. He’d never really seen it before; Dad didn’t wear it because he thought it was a bit pompous, especially when he had turned his political power over to Dumbledore’s discretion. But it really was beautiful.

Bill was rummaging through his kitchen cabinets for a celebratory drink, and Charlie slumped down on the sofa — only to immediately jump up when someone pounded on the door.

“What the hell?” Bill murmured, eyeing his own front door warily. Charlie approached, wand in hand, and opened it. He did not expect the person he found.

“What do you two think you’re playing at!?” Percy thundered, bursting into the flat without waiting for an invitation. His face was pink, his blue eyes narrowed behind his glasses.

“Taking up your lordships like that! Dumbledore put you up to this, didn’t he?”

“How do you even know where I live?” Bill questioned incredulously, bottle of firewhiskey in hand. Percy waved him off.

“Doesn’t matter. I can’t *believe* this; I never expected our father would ever turn his seats over while Dumbledore was still alive! Do you have *any idea* how that made me look in front of Minister Fudge, to not give him warning about something my own *brothers* were planning? He looked like a fool!”

“That’s not hard,” Charlie muttered with a snort. “We don’t really care that we made you look bad in front of your boss, quite frankly — not after everything you’ve put Mum and Dad through lately. The seats are our birthright, it’s none of your business when and how we choose to claim them.” His eyes were hard, though it made his stomach squirm to look at Percy in such a way. He might be a prick, but Charlie could still remember the little boy peppering him with endless questions the Christmas of Charlie’s first year, begging him to tell him all about the school and his classes and his friends, pleading to spend the night in Charlie’s room because he’d missed him so much. Percy was his responsibility, like he had been Bill’s, and the rift in the family *hurt*.

Percy’s face reddened further as he sucked in a breath, at a total loss for words, puffing up like a balloon — then, to the surprise of both his older brothers, a ragged sob burst from his lips. “*How the fuck am I supposed to protect you when you pull shit like this?*”

And then he threw himself into Charlie’s arms.

Charlie held him close automatically, throwing an alarmed glance in Bill’s direction. The curse-breaker looked back at him with the same expression. “What do you mean, protect us?” Charlie asked, rubbing Percy’s back, being his big brother as easy and instinctual as breathing. Percy’s hands gripped tight to the open lapels of Charlie’s robe.

“You think I’m doing this because I want to?” he gasped. “Ignoring the family, devoting my every *bloody* moment to the Minister, making Mum—making Mum cry, like that?” Percy himself was crying, his eyes bloodshot when he looked up at Charlie. “Char, *please*, you know me. I’m just trying to keep everyone *safe*.¹”

“Safe from what?” Bill asked, suddenly right there at Charlie’s shoulder, firewhiskey abandoned. He had one hand on Charlie’s shoulder and one hand on Percy’s, and for a moment Charlie was twelve again and being told that Fred and George might have Dragon Pox but they were going to be *fine*, and it wasn’t Percy’s fault for catching it first, not at all.

“From everything!” Percy wept. “Fudge is running the Ministry into the ground and Dumbledore’s got his own fucking agenda that I don’t trust for a second, and everyone knows You-Know-Who is back and I *know* he’s got people in high places and I’m trying to weed them out in case Harry bloody Potter actually manages to kill him and we can finally start getting some actual fucking competent people involved, but until then the whole bloody family is under Ministry watch because our parents are right in Dumbledore’s pockets and I thought if I could get Fudge to trust me, I could keep him *away* from you, but you had to go and ruin it by taking your *fucking lordships* and now Fudge wants to keep an eye on you!”

This was all said in one long, hurried breath, and finished with a weak fist thudding against Charlie’s chest.

Charlie looked up again, his own horror mirrored in his older brother’s eyes.

“Fuck, Perce,” he breathed, running a hand through Percy’s short-cropped red curls. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

Percy snorted, pulling back to fix him with a shrewd look. “It had to look *real*,²” he insisted mulishly. “If Fudge didn’t believe I absolutely hated all of you and the headmaster besides, he’d never let me so close to him.” He blinked away tears. “Except I’ve just gone and cocked that up because now you’re going to go to Dumbledore about it and he’s going to try and get me to spy on the Minister!”

“Hey, hey, none of that,” Bill soothed as Percy began to cry harder. “Easy. Look, why don’t you sit down, I’ll make some tea, and then Charlie and I can tell you why we *really* took our lordships, yeah?”

Percy looked bewildered, and heartbroken, but let Charlie gently manhandle him over to the sofa.

Charlie mentally apologised to Sirius, who had been expecting them both to visit Grimmauld Place that evening to discuss the Wizengamot meeting. But he would understand; he’d been a big brother to a difficult little brother too, once. Even if things hadn’t ended quite so nicely for Regulus, in the end.

Bill got the kettle going, and Charlie offered Percy a handkerchief, rubbing his back until the shaking of his shoulders subsided.

The three of them had a whole lot to talk about, it seemed.

Chapter 68

Chapter Notes

I hope this is worth the weekend wait ;)

Despite having gotten rid of Dumbledore over the matter, Umbridge was not remotely satisfied with leaving Harry and his friends well enough alone. Every time Harry snuck past the entrance to the Room of Requirement — always under his invisibility cloak — there was at least one member of the Inquisitorial Squad waiting outside it.

She knew Harry wouldn't give up so easily, and she was determined to catch him in the act. Every day in classes and at meals and between lessons, Harry found himself on the receiving end of a dozen intent looks; all HA members wondering if this was it, if they were finally finished. Harry merely shook his head slightly, and carried on. He would find a way.

With all of them under such close scrutiny, the heirs couldn't meet either. This was mostly fine, as they had only been studying the last few times, but it was still annoying to have his social groups so limited by Umbridge's bug-eyed ever-present stare.

But Harry wouldn't let it stop him. He knew far more secrets within Hogwarts than Dolores Umbridge could *dream* of knowing.

"I won't tell anyone about the office," Harry hissed in promise — even though Salazar had admitted to speaking fluent modern English, he still insisted they converse in Parseltongue. *"But unless you know of any better ideas for a space big enough for fifty-six people to cast spells without getting caught, the Chamber is my best option."*

Salazar, to Harry's surprise, gave a hard smirk, his eyes glinting. *"Harry, lad; the four of us built Hogwarts to rebel against a form of government that wanted magic to remain secret, taught only between master and apprentice,"* he pointed out. *"Rebelling against the government is what we're all about! Of course you can bring your friends down here, as long as they do not leave the main Chamber itself. They cannot explore without you, after all."*

He was right; Harry had long ago closed the gaping mouth of the statue of Salazar Slytherin, and he knew the hissed command that would lock down every exit in the main room. There were no other Parselmouths in the school to go against him.

He beamed up at the founder. *"Brilliant."*

The next evening, after his detention with Umbridge, Harry went up to his dorm and reached into his bedside drawer for a particular inkwell. A few quiet questions had enlightened him to

the quidditch practice times, and he wanted to move as quickly as possible. He raised his wand, carefully etching a short phrase into the silver plate on the bottom.

'Thursday 7PM. Library, row 82'

There. That would certainly keep them guessing.

..

In the morning, he was ambushed by Ginny as soon as he and Neville entered the common room. "We can't do it in the library!" she hissed, her sentence earning raised eyebrows from a couple of sixth-years walking past at the time. Harry flushed despite himself. "Pince will have our heads!"

"It's not exactly hiding," Neville agreed doubtfully. Harry grinned at them both.

"The pair of you, no faith at all," he said mock-sadly, shaking his head. "We aren't going to do anything in the library. That's just the least suspicious place for everyone to go in the evening." Umbridge couldn't ban students from the library, not so close to exams.

"So what, you just wanted to talk to everyone?" Ginny asked, brows furrowed. Again, Harry shook his head.

"I have a place we can go, and we can get there from the library. It's a little... unorthodox. But it's more secure than even the Room was."

All of a sudden, Ginny stopped in her tracks, realisation dawning on her face. "Harry, tell me you didn't," she murmured, voice wavering.

"It's not scary anymore, Gin, I promise," he assured her, reaching out to squeeze her hand. "I swear; I cleaned it up, there's no trace of it all left, and I wouldn't be taking anyone down there if I weren't absolutely confident of that." He'd even scrubbed off the black ink stain on the floor.

Ginny bit her lip. "You're absolutely sure?"

"Positive," he swore without hesitation. "You won't be alone down there, Gin. Not again."

Neville was following the whole exchange, confused and a little bit suspicious. When he opened his mouth, both Harry and Ginny shook their heads; they couldn't talk about it, even in a corridor that seemed empty.

They could never be sure when people were listening.

Ginny wasn't the only one with questions, but the rest of the HA were wisely keeping them to themselves over breakfast, Umbridge sat upon Dumbledore's old throne-like seat, smiling down at them like a medieval queen wondering which of her servants to behead next.

Harry kept his rage quietly burning through the day, right up until dinner time. Neville bid goodbye to head off to his detention, looking extra morose — he was going to be missing the

HA meeting. Harry felt bad about it, but he knew Neville understood; they had to move quickly. They couldn't afford to wait two whole weeks for both of them to be done with their detentions.

Harry went about his evening as if it were any other, hitching his schoolbag over his shoulder and walking towards the library with his hands in his pockets. He looked like any other student, headed to get some studying done, and no one looked twice at him when he entered the library. Except for the other members of the HA, some of whom were already there, waiting.

He took his time perusing the shelves, slowly making his way back into the lesser-used parts of the library, right back to row 82, which contained old copies of the *Daily Prophet* for historical purposes.

At the end of the row was a small alcove set with a window, and Harry approached it. On the left side wall of the alcove, there was a Hogwarts crest engraved. Below that crest was a tiny little snake.

Harry checked his watch, then cast a wandless Notice-Me-Not charm; just a gentle one. Just enough that anyone who was not expecting to see him would look right past that row of shelves.

Then he hissed quietly, and the wall became a doorway, just narrow enough to fit a single person.

Harry stood in the doorway, and waited.

Unsurprisingly, the twins and Ginny were the first to show up. All three brown-eyed Weasleys looked guarded, making Harry wonder if Ginny had told the twins what to expect. Harry discreetly waved them over.

“It’s down there, then?” Ginny asked, looking a bit green. Harry nodded.

“I promise you, it’s safe.”

“Come on, little sis,” George crowed quietly, slinging an arm around her shoulders. “Trust Harry. This is wicked!”

The twins joked and cajoled Ginny into the narrow passage, but Harry didn’t miss how both of them had tight grips on their wands, ready to defend their sister from anything that might be lurking in the Chamber.

He wished he’d had a little more time, to perhaps give Ginny a chance to face her demons quietly, but he hadn’t wanted her to dwell on it too long. Going down there and getting straight into a HA lesson would keep her mind off the last time she’d been down there.

A small cluster of Ravenclaws led by Cho Chang was next, and Cho still looked guilty, though Marietta was notably absent. Harry nodded to them all, and stepped aside to let them

squeeze into the passageway. “Keep going, all the way to the end. The twins and Ginny are down there already.”

The whole group looked relieved to hear they would be welcomed at the end, lighting up their wand tips and heading down. Already, the next group was approaching from the end of the aisle, and Harry was glad to see the Hufflepuff seventh-years removing Dissilusionment charms from themselves. While it was not suspect for so many students to be in the library, it would be *very* odd for them all to disappear into the same row and not return for hours.

He trusted in the HA’s discretion, by now.

A steady trickle of students continued, and by quarter-past Harry was fairly sure everyone was in. Anyone else clearly wasn’t coming; Harry wouldn’t wait around for them forever. He stepped into the passage, closed it with a hiss, and hurried to catch up with his friends.

He couldn’t help but grin at the sight of the whole group spread around the Chamber, looking around in a mix of awe and horror.

“So, what do you think?” he asked with a mischievous grin, spreading his arms wide.

“Is this what I think it is, Harry?” Blaise asked, his dark eyes incredulous. Harry laughed.

“If you’re thinking it’s Salazar Slytherin’s Chamber of Secrets, then yes, it is. Did all the snakes give it away?”

A few squeaks of terror sounded.

“The Chamber of Secrets is *real*?” Zacharias Smith blurted, face pale as he looked up at the statue. “I— but what about the monster?”

“Harry killed that, didn’t he?” Fred pointed out. “With that big old sword in Dumbledore’s office.”

“I thought I’d told you guys what happened in my second year?” Harry asked, confused. Several people shrugged, and more than a few glanced at Ginny Weasley.

“Not really,” Justin piped up. “Just something about a big snake and saving Ginny from being possessed by You-Know-Who.”

Ah, of course; Harry had given the bare minimum, not wanting any information to slip out that might lead anyone on the Dark side to realise what the diary was. Likely Voldemort already knew one of his horcruxes had been destroyed — Lucius Malfoy would have had to own up to it eventually — but the fewer other people who knew, the better.

“Well, it’s real. There was a basilisk but it’s dead now. So we’re good to practice in here. Though I’ll warn you now,” he added, and hissed the command to lock down the Chamber. All over the walls, huge snakes wriggled in place, barring the exits. Several people jumped. “I’m the only one who can command the passageways in here. I’ll let us all out in the same place we came in from, but if anyone was thinking about going *exploring*, I would strongly

advise against it. I'm not so arrogant as to think I've discovered all of the secrets down here, and I don't want you getting hurt."

He was sure Salazar still had a few that he wasn't sharing, the sneaky bastard.

"So." He clapped his hands together, determined to get them all on track before they could freak out too much about the new surroundings. "Back to Patronus charms, then?"

Umbridge certainly wasn't going to find them down there.

.-.-.-.

Sirius wanted to punch something. He stalked through the corridors of Grimmauld, restlessness coursing through his veins. He hadn't been outside since Dumbledore had fled Hogwarts; the old man had practically moved in to Grimmauld Place, showing up at all hours, sometimes with nothing in particular to say — like he was checking to see Sirius was where he was supposed to be. It was utterly galling, being checked on like a recalcitrant child, and Sirius *desperately* wished he could give the man a piece of his mind.

But he couldn't, because they were still pretending they didn't hate the manipulative bastard.

Fleeing Hogwarts in such a *courageous* move and letting the media paint him as the driving force behind the students learning to defend themselves had done nothing but strengthen Dumbledore's reputation as protector of the Light, to the point where Sirius was beginning to wonder if he hadn't orchestrated the whole thing himself. The man no longer had to worry about the students, or Umbridge breathing down his neck, and there was no auror in Fudge's pocket *actually* capable of arresting the great Albus Dumbledore.

As long as the headmaster made sure to look sad and express how *awful* he felt about leaving the school vulnerable — though assuring that Minerva had everything in hand until he could return — everyone ate it up. Sirius wanted to strangle him.

"Hey." He whipped around at the whisper, raising his eyebrows at the sight of Charlie Weasley, dimples and all, leaning in a nearby doorway with mischief in his eyes. Sirius' heart thudded painfully. "You busy?"

"Do I look busy?" Sirius retorted, a little sharper than necessary. It didn't bother Charlie, who held out a hand.

"Come here, I want to show you something."

It took less hesitation than it probably ought to for Sirius to slip his hand into the dragon-tamer's calloused one, letting the shorter man drag him up the stairs and down the left hand corridor. Sirius' brow furrowed in confusion when Charlie opened the door to the formal dining room. It was the largest room in the house, used for parties and the like when Sirius had been a child, and Sirius hadn't stepped foot in it since he'd ripped all the wallpaper down and painted it pale gold. What could Charlie possibly want to show him in there?

The redhead just grinned at the look on his face, tugging him over to the tall window. It was dark outside, the half-moon shining brightly.

Then, to Sirius' surprise, Charlie pulled out his wand and tapped it against the centre of the window. Suddenly, the glass flexed, stretching outward, melting down until Sirius was looking at a small balcony, barely big enough for two people to stand on. "Tonks showed me the trick," Charlie revealed. "Said her mum told her about it. They used to do it at parties, for all the people smoking cigars."

Sirius remembered, now; being a child, seeing a cluster of people all gathered around the open window, plumes of multi-coloured smoke drifting into the air.

He stepped forward, and the gentle breeze ruffling his hair made his eyes flutter shut in ecstasy. "That's not even the best part," Charlie whispered, suddenly very close to Sirius, his breath tickling the man's stubbled cheek. "Watch this."

Charlie stepped onto the balcony, turned to the side, and reached up. Then he was gone. Sirius hurried out after him, turning around to see the redhead climbing the stonework up to the roof. Once he was sat on the edge, he beamed down at Sirius. "Come on up! It's gorgeous out."

Sirius couldn't refuse a challenge like that, and soon he was gripping the decorative gargoyles and hauling himself up onto the roof beside Charlie. There wasn't much space for both of them to sit, so they ended up pressed close together, Charlie's arm braced around Sirius' back. He was warm, always so warm — constantly joking that working around dragons made him run too hot — and just having him so close was making Sirius' head swim. Combined with the air on his face, the feeling of finally being *outside*... it was a heady sensation, bubbling away in Sirius' belly.

"Sometimes I come up here when I want to think," Charlie admitted. "It's quiet, and the muggles can't see. I wish you could see the stars, though." This deep in London, the sky was far too thick with pollution to see much of anything. "You should see the sky at the reserve. It's incredible."

He spoke quietly, his wonder palpable. "Do you know many constellations?" Sirius asked abruptly, and Charlie shook his head.

"Nah, I was never good at Astronomy," he admitted. "I liked the ones that were shaped like animals but I was rubbish at finding them."

A chuckle rumbled through Sirius' chest. "One of these days, when I can, you should take me out to the reserve to see this incredible sky of yours. I can show you all the constellations. Bit of an Astronomy expert, me."

"Name like Sirius, I'd expect nothing less," Charlie teased. He shifted, and in a move that was entirely too smooth for Sirius' liking, the hand splayed on the tiles behind him slid across to cover Sirius', tangling their fingers together. It moved Charlie even closer, the pair of them practically cuddling. "Would you really come to the reserve with me?"

"Wide open space, full of dragons?" Sirius retorted. "Sounds perfect." He was starting to forget what actual nature looked like.

"It's a date, then," Charlie murmured. He let his head fall forward, nose brushing Sirius' ear. "Please say it's a date."

Sirius' chest ached at the earnest hope straining his voice. It had been weeks, months even, and Charlie Weasley wasn't giving up on him. "I don't know what you see in me," he confessed quietly. "I don't... I don't know how to do this anymore."

"There's lots of things I see in you," Charlie said. "You're funny, you're clever, you've got a fantastic arse," he added, dimples returning for a moment. "But I think the thing that really hooked me was seeing how much you care about Harry. Us Weasleys, we're all about family, y'know. People thought I was the odd duck because I buggered off to Romania, but... it's just a different kind of family, out there. You're the kind of man that would do anything to make that kid's shitty life better, even if it made you miserable. That kind of devotion... it's an attractive trait, that."

And oh, that hurt, because if Charlie had just talked about his arse more, or even his sense of humour, Sirius might have been able to brush him off as a young man looking for a challenge, a boyfriend more interesting than the last. But to talk that way about him, about Harry... Charlie had seen him, in ways most others didn't.

"I'm older than you," he reminded, and Charlie scoffed.

"Only twelve years."

"Twelve years I spent in Azkaban," Sirius pointed out, voice getting sharp again.

"So mentally we're the same age, then," Charlie reasoned, grinning ever so slightly. Sirius shot him a look.

"I was shit at relationships even before I spent time in that hellhole," he said flatly. "Ask Remus. I... I don't know if I can be what you want me to be."

"Won't know until you try, will you?" Charlie said, unfazed. "I reckon you'll be a lot better at it than you think you will."

"I don't know how to love anymore, since the dementors."

"Bullshit," Charlie retorted, not even hesitating. "You love Harry. You love Remus. You love Tonks. You love blackberry crumble in a way that's more than a little bit obscene, quite frankly." He grinned, eyes glowing in the moonlight, and Sirius could hardly breathe, "You know how to love, Sirius Black, and we both know it. You're just scared of it. And of all the things I've learned about you in the last year, I never took you for a coward."

There was a challenge, bright in his blue gaze; the kind of challenge that set Sirius' blood afire.

“And if you’re talking euphemistically, well; I’ve taught more than a few people how to *love*, and I’d be very happy to remind you of the finer details,” he drawled huskily, dry lips pressing feather-light against Sirius’ jaw.

Something deep inside Sirius broke. All of a sudden, his free hand was cupping the side of Charlie’s face, pulling him into a deep, *filthy* kiss. It wasn’t their first, not by a long shot — but it was the first Sirius had initiated. Charlie moaned deeply into his mouth, gripping Sirius’ shoulder for purchase, his tongue doing truly *sinful* things.

“You win,” Sirius admitted in a raw, ragged whisper, once they parted. “You persistent little shit, you win. But don’t blame me when I break your heart.” It would take a stronger man than him to keep denying this beautiful man, this man who seemed so determined — determined not only to woo him, but that Sirius was truly someone worth wooing. And Sirius *wanted* it, so deep down it hurt his soul, he always had — he’d dated his way through Hogwarts, always desperately seeking the kind of connection James had with Lily, the connection he later learned Remus had with Snape.

He wasn’t lying when he said he thought the dementors had destroyed his ability to form a connection like that. But Charlie Weasley made him want to find out for sure.

Charlie kissed him again, running fingers through his hair. “The only way you’ll break my heart is if we get off this roof and you tell me you’ve changed your mind,” he breathed. Sirius smirked into the kiss.

“Why don’t we get off this roof and find out, then?”

Truly, he was amazed neither of them fell and broke their necks, the way they were so eager to climb down to the balcony. But they made it, Charlie’s fingers like brands as they chased Sirius’ bare skin, sneaking up his shirt as soon as both of them had two feet on solid ground. Sirius’ heart was racing like it hadn’t in years, he felt *alive*, he felt *wanted*, he felt like if he didn’t get Charlie on a flat surface in the next ten minutes he might combust from the force of his arousal. He pinned the redhead against the wall, devouring his mouth, and Charlie groaned loudly.

“Knew it would be hot when you finally pushed back,” he declared smugly, eyes bright. “Fuck, that feels so good,” he said, pressing up against Sirius’ body. One of his hands snuck down to squeeze just the right side of too-hard on the bulge in Sirius’ jeans. “Was starting to wonder if this had fallen off from lack of use.”

“Cheeky fuck,” Sirius growled, pulling back and grabbing the redhead’s wrist, hurrying him towards the door. “I’ll show you *fallen off*.”

“Yes, please.”

Thankfully, they weren’t disturbed as they snuck up to Sirius’ room, and a silencing ward hit the door as soon as it was closed. Sirius stared as Charlie shamelessly began to strip, revealing tanned, freckled skin and a number of detailed tattoos. A good number of burns and scars, too; Sirius couldn’t wait to get his mouth on every single one of them.

Not one to be outdone, Sirius pulled his shirt over his head, enormously glad for Ceri's insistence on over-feeding him in the last two years. He was a far cry from the skeletal figure he'd been when he escaped; still a little skinny, but with more muscle, a healthy flush to his olive complexion.

Certainly nothing to be ashamed of, especially the way Charlie was looking at him, both of them stood naked in Sirius' room. "Get on that bed, right now," Charlie said huskily, pupils blown with lust. "I've been waiting far too bloody long for this."

Sirius didn't need telling twice, practically launching himself onto the bed, reaching greedily for Charlie. The first press of warm skin against his own had his vision almost whiting out, the simple feeling so *incredible* he could hardly stand it. "Fuck, touch me," he begged. "Don't care where, just— your *skin*, so good."

"I've got you, sweetheart," Charlie assured, hands somehow everywhere at once on Sirius' body, his bulky form pressing him down on the mattress — comforting, not suffocating, grounding him to reality, the only thing stopping him vibrating out of his own *skin*, Charlie's lips whispering words of affection between open-mouthed kisses down his neck and collarbone. He was so *warm*, Sirius wanted him all over, warming all the parts of him he'd thought Azkaban had turned cold forever.

Sirius whimpered, a sound he might've been embarrassed by if he hadn't lost control of himself entirely, so overwhelmed by the contact. For a second he thought he might be *too* overwhelmed, and tensed up in fear — Charlie immediately pulled back, still whispering to him, still touching him but not quite so much.

"I forgot it could feel like this," Sirius gasped, utterly broken. He might have been crying, it felt so good. He was probably embarrassing himself, probably making Charlie regret the whole decision. What kind of thirty-six year-old man couldn't handle being *touched* while naked? Charlie hadn't even laid a finger on his cock yet!

"Oh, sweetheart. Sirius," Charlie murmured, still there, still looking at him with so much adoration in his eyes, more than Sirius could handle. "I'm going to make you feel *so good*, I promise, baby steps." His hand stroked Sirius' flank, his powerful thighs still tangled with Sirius' slimmer legs. "I'll take care of you, I swear, fuck, you're so beautiful. Never thought you'd actually let me do this."

His touch was reverent, his kisses like molten gold, and it didn't surprise Sirius when he tipped over the edge of bliss with a full-body shudder, going boneless in Charlie's embrace. The redhead moaned, pressing him down into the mattress once more as Sirius' hands scrabbled at his back, urging him closer, needing that weight to cover him before he floated away entirely.

When sense slowly returned, his cheeks were burning, and he could hardly look Charlie in the eye. "Sorry," he muttered. "Probably not what you were expecting." His first time being intimate with another person in fifteen years, he should've expected a bit of an overload, but he hadn't anticipated a full fucking breakdown and the most premature orgasm he'd had since puberty!

“Are you kidding?” Charlie whispered, stroking Sirius’ damp cheeks. “That was amazing. You’re amazing.” He propped himself up on his elbows, his erection digging into Sirius’ thigh. “I could get addicted to watching you enjoy yourself, Sirius Black.”

Something fierce in Sirius’ heart lurched to the surface, and part of him knew he was done for there and then. “Well, I might be a bit... sensitive, but I’ve never left a lover unsatisfied, and I don’t intend to start now,” he remarked, shifting his hips a little and moving upwards, clenching Charlie’s cock between his thighs, whispering a quiet Lubrication charm to ease movement. Charlie’s eyes rolled back, a purring groan spilling from his lips. Sirius held his breath, enraptured, watching the redhead fuck his thighs with abandon, pleasure written all over his face.

Charlie wasn’t the only one who might get addicted.

.....

The school was rapidly becoming something of a war zone. After almost an entire school year with Umbridge looming over them, having her become headmistress was the last straw for so many; or perhaps it was her unseating of Dumbledore that had the students so shaken. Either way, there was something... feral about the Hogwarts student body, these days. The Weasley twins were happily in the centre of it all, and business was booming for the pair as they sold their inventions to kids all over the school. Students were dropping from DADA lessons like flies with some ailment or another, and Umbridge knew it was not natural illness but didn’t seem to be able to catch any culprits. Subtle rebellions against her ridiculous rules were everywhere; untucked shirts, holding hands in hallways, copies of the *Quibbler* — new copies, entirely unrelated to Harry Potter, but still banned — turning up in Umbridge’s classroom and office and even, reportedly, in her private rooms.

Harry thought it was brilliant, though he didn’t have much to contribute himself; all his anti-Umbridge energy was going towards keeping the HA running, and making sure everyone who needed it learned how to do the necessary charms after a Blood Quill detention session. The day after his own detentions had finished, he came across a pair of second years with bleeding hands in the common room — Umbridge had procured more of the blasted quills, obviously frustrated at how slow it was to punish only one student at a time.

And then the invitation came.

“Potter!” It was Filch, shuffling down the corridor in Harry’s direction, a twisted look of glee on his face. “The headmistress wants to see you!”

“What for?” Harry asked warily. He was with the Weasley twins, who stood either side of him with their arms folded intimidatingly, and Filch stopped abruptly. But then he smirked again.

“You’ll soon find out, won’t you?” He looked positively joyous, and that was definitely not a good sign. “Reckon you two will finally get what’s coming to you, and all,” he added, glancing at the two redheads.

Silently assuring the pair he would be fine, Harry followed Filch down the corridor, dread trickling down his spine as the caretaker muttered about the new Decree coming that would allow him to reintroduce corporal punishment. Was Umbridge bored of her quill, finally? Of only punishing one student at a time? Or was she just trying to get Filch on her side; his knowledge of the castle was far better than her own, after all. She probably thought she could use him to try and smoke out the HA. The idea made Harry smile to himself — did she really think him that naive?

Filch led him all the way to Umbridge's office — Dumbledore's had sealed itself since shortly after the man's departure, and wouldn't open no matter how many curses Umbridge flung at the gargoyle. When he knocked, the door opened immediately, and Harry was half-shoved into the familiar room. Filch gave him one last oily smile, then left them to it.

"You wanted to see me, Professor?" Harry asked politely. Umbridge smiled, her eyes like daggers.

"Sit down, Mr Potter. Have some tea."

At the doily-covered desk where he usually wrote lines, there was a single cup of tea. Harry began to draw his own conclusions, watching the way Umbridge stared keenly at his hands around the cup.

"I just thought I'd call you in for a little *chat*," she said, giggling girlishly. "Drink up!"

Harry lifted the teacup to his mouth, and pretended to take a long drink. As he did, he Vanished half the contents of the cup. When it hit the table, Umbridge's gaze lit up.
"Excellent. Now, tell me — where is Albus Dumbledore?"

That was her angle, really?? "I don't know, Professor."

Her jaw clenched. "Drink your tea, Mr Potter."

Amused, Harry pretended to drink again, Vanishing the rest and setting his empty cup down. He even let his stare go a little vacant.

"Where is Albus Dumbledore?"

"I don't know," he said again. A tiny noise of frustration escaped Umbridge.

"Has he written to you? Contacted you in any way?"

"No, Professor." She didn't like that answer any more than the last. She made a face like sucking on a lemon, and leaned forward in her chair.

"Who is in your little defence club?"

"I don't have a defence club," Harry told her.

"Impossible!" she screeched, glaring. "I know you've been hiding it from me! Where are you meeting your little friends?"

"I study with Neville and Ginny in the common room," Harry answered, keeping his tone even. "And sometimes I do homework with my other yearmates in the library."

"That's not what I meant and you know it!" Umbridge hissed, wild-eyed in her anger. "Let's try another question — where is the criminal Sirius Black?"

Harry didn't even need to bother lying about that one; before he could open his mouth, a huge explosion rocked the castle. The colour drained from Umbridge's face, and she shot to her feet.

The sound of screams began to echo through the castle. For one horrified moment, Harry wondered if Death Eaters had attacked, taking Dumbledore's absence as a sign of weakness.

"Back to lunch, Potter!" Umbridge yelled, already hurrying from the office. Harry gave her a small head start, then left after her, wand in hand. It soon became all too clear what the source of the chaos was.

There were fireworks *everywhere*. By the time Harry reached the top of the main staircase, there was a riot of sparks in all colours and shapes filling the air; huge dragons made of coloured fire that roared as they shot off smaller fireworks; whizzing Catherine wheels screeching as they spun through the air; rockets trailing sparks as they soared higher through the castle. It was an endless supply, all originating from the Entrance Hall, and Harry had a very good idea who had done it.

The fireworks lasted through the entire rest of the day — thanks largely in part to the array of spells on them that had them multiplying or changing shape whenever anyone tried to vanish them.

And, of course, thanks to the rest of the staff, who seemed largely unconcerned by the displays. And with all the Educational Decrees about what was within their proper *authority* to handle, many of them seemed perfectly happy to summon Umbridge whenever they came across a firework, rather than disposing of it themselves. In Transfiguration, Harry had to bite his lip to keep from laughing as McGonagall continued to teach despite the purple dragon shooting around the classroom, which she had sent Lavender to go alert Umbridge of. The sweaty, soot-blackened headmistress appeared and raised her wand feebly, clearly exhausted from the whole affair.

Everyone was talking about it at dinner, and everyone seemed to know who the culprits were. Not that Fred and George were really trying to hide it, promising that their full line of fireworks would be for sale in the summer, and people could pre-order now.

A hush fell over the hall when the headmistress finally staggered in, her lurid pink robe slightly charred at the edges, her hair entirely in disarray. "Weasley! Weasley!" she called, and four heads of red hair popped up at the Gryffindor table. "Not you two," she snapped dismissively at Ginny and Ron.

"Can we help you, Headmistress?" Fred asked politely, eyes dancing. A vein in Umbridge's temple pulsed.

"You can count your lucky *stars* I'm not having you expelled for this little stunt," she snapped. "But don't you think you've gotten away with it. Two weeks detention, both of you. And no more quidditch!"

That made the twins sit up a little straighter. "What?"

"That's right!" Umbridge was almost delirious in her fury. "You're clearly cut from the same cloth as Potter, so you'll suffer the same punishments! And be *very* careful how you conduct yourself over the next few weeks, boys," she warned, before stalking off to her seat, waving her wand angrily at a bright orange firework whizzing through the air above the Hufflepuff table.

The twins looked at each other in dismay. A few seats over, Angelina got abruptly to her feet, hands clenched in rage, and stormed from the hall.

A few horrified seconds later, the entire Gryffindor quidditch team was up and following her — and Harry, too, even though he wasn't technically part of the team any longer.

They caught up to Angelina in the Gryffindor common room, where she was repeatedly punching a cushion. In the corner, a sparkler was writing rude words in the air.

"Angie, we're sorry," Fred started, and Angelina whirled around, expression furious.

"*Don't*," she growled. "I'm not mad at you. The fireworks were fucking brilliant. I'm mad at that *bitch*." There were tear-tracks on her cheeks, and as Fred edged closer, her shoulders slumped. "This was supposed to be *our year*," she despaired. "You two, me, Alicia; one last year to win the cup, to play *together* before we graduate and life takes over. It was bad enough when she kicked Harry off, but this..." She sniffed noisily, "One more match. We only had one more match together before it would all be over, and she's fucking *ruined everything!*"

She punched the cushion one more time, so hard it split open and spewed feathers everywhere. Fred hurried forward, wrapping his arms around her.

"Hey, hey, it's okay," he murmured, kissing the tears off her cheeks. "Angie, it's okay. We'll play together again. Maybe not like this — not as students, not as Gryffindor. But we'll be a team again. You're not getting rid of me or George any time soon." He grinned, and she laughed wetly.

"I just really wanted this last year to be perfect," she sobbed, "and it's all gone to shit!"

Harry stood back awkwardly as the twins and Alicia crowded around their yearmate, hugging her tightly. There was nothing he could say, really; Umbridge might have ruined the whole year, but at least he had two more. Sure, his school years rarely went to plan, but he was an oddity there. He could understand Angelina's desire to have a perfect final year of school; especially with how grim the outside world was looking.

"It's only Ravenclaw, Angie," Alicia comforted, attempting a smile. "The boys aren't missing much."

Angelina snorted. “Easy enough to say; we’ve got to find two new beaters and get them ready in the next three weeks.”

“You’ll find them,” Harry said supportively. “Even if they’re shit, you girls are so great it won’t matter.”

“I bloody hope so,” Angelina groused. “I might not be able to play my last match with my boys,” and she looked over pointedly, including Harry in that statement, “but you can be damned sure I’m going to win it anyway.”

The whole team cheered at that, and Fred gave Angelina a sweet kiss. “We did warn you we might not stick around ’til the match,” he murmured, getting comfortable with her on the sofa, while George sank into the armchair. Harry perched on the arm, leaning back against the space beside George’s head.

“I know, but I thought you’d make it. And at the very least, I thought it would be because you’d gone, not because that hag banned you.” She kicked off her shoes, tucking her legs up beneath her. “What made you do the fireworks today, anyway? I thought you were saving that one.”

The twins shared a look, then looked up at Harry.

“She pulled me into her office,” Harry volunteered. “Tried to interrogate me. I think she drugged my tea, but I didn’t drink it. She seemed pretty angry that I wouldn’t tell her about the HA, or where Dumbledore was.”

Angelina’s face screwed up in disgust. “What a cow. Did she hurt you?”

Harry shook his head. “Fireworks went off before she could do more than ask questions.” He wasn’t so naive to think she wouldn’t have resorted to violence, if she thought it necessary.

“Good,” George said quietly, resting his head against Harry’s shoulder. “Happy to be of service.”

Harry wished it hadn’t gotten them banned from quidditch, but from the way their pranks had been escalating, it likely would have happened eventually. They were just lucky she didn’t have enough proof to kick them out properly.

. . . .

Remus let his thigh press against Severus’, the pair of them sat together on a sofa at Grimmauld Place. It still felt risky, to be so close to each other anywhere but Seren Du or Severus’ quarters, but Sirius had assured them the three of them were the only ones still in the house. They had just finished another Order meeting, and Sirius clearly had something to tell them.

“Dumbledore tried to break my Occlumency shields the other day,” the dog animagus announced without delay. Remus cursed, and felt Severus tense beside him. “He didn’t get

through,” Sirius hastened to assure, “but he tried, and he knows I’m blocking him. He’s suspicious.”

“Do you know what he was searching for?” Severus asked intently.

“I think he was looking to see if I’d been in contact with Harry,” Sirius replied, frowning. “But honestly, it could be anything. He’s making it nigh on impossible for me to do anything, these days. He’s around here so often, I haven’t been home since he left the school.”

Remus’ heart clenched in sympathy; it couldn’t be easy for Sirius, locked up in Grimmauld all the time. “Is there anything we can do to put him at ease?” He turned helpless eyes to Severus, whose lips were pursed in thought.

“I think we may need to accept that Albus will find out the two of you are not loyal sooner rather than later,” he said eventually. Remus knew that his partner was planning on playing the triple agent for as long as physically possible. “Have you heard back from Bill at all?”

“He said the book you gave him was really helpful,” Remus relayed. “That they should be able to figure out a way to get the horcrux out by summer.”

Severus’ shoulders twitched, the tiniest betrayal of his relief. Remus wasn’t sure where the book had come from — sometimes he knew best not to ask — but he was glad Severus had found it.

“I’m worried if Dumbledore pushes my shields again he might break them,” Sirius admitted.

“He will expect you to avoid looking him in the eye, now he’s been caught out,” Severus reasoned. “It is unlikely he will try again; he may, however, find other ways of trying to question you on Potter’s movements.”

“If he does, he’ll get a reminder that this is my bloody house, and Lord Black or not I still hold the wards,” Sirius growled, eyes flashing. Remus smirked; he would quite like to see that.

“As satisfying as that would be,” Severus drawled, clearly of the same mind, “need I remind you that Potter is still stuck with that *hag* at the school, and putting him on Albus’ shit-list will not help in the slightest?”

“How bad is it there?” Sirius asked, the light in his eyes fading until he just looked weary. Remus hated that look on him, the reminder of the twelve years his friend had spent in Azkaban. It appeared less and less these days — especially with Charlie Weasley around — but when it did pop back up, it made Remus’ heart grow heavy.

“The students are united against her,” Severus supplied. “The Weasley twins are certainly making her life difficult. They’re better than you and Potter ever were,” he added with a smirk, making Sirius laugh.

“Having seen their inventions, I’ll concede to that,” he said. “Bloody brilliant, the pair of them. Glad to hear they’re keeping Umbitch on her toes.”

“How’s Harry?” Remus pressed, stomach sinking when Severus looked concerned once more.

“Currently, he is well. I have it under good authority that he’s started holding his little defence club sessions in the Chamber of Secrets.”

Remus goggled at him. “That’s...” It was either genius or madness. Perhaps both.

“Indeed,” Severus agreed, eyes amused for a moment. “We shall have to see how that plays out. But Umbridge certainly isn’t willing to let it go; not after he embarrassed her in front of the Minister. She asked me to provide Veritaserum for a little *chat* she wanted to have with him last week.”

“And you told her where to shove it?” Sirius asked hopefully. Severus’ lips quirked.

“I told her I would be delighted to oblige,” he drawled, waiting a beat, “and I gave her a bottle of simple syrup. Salazar knows the fool woman won’t bother testing it first.”

Remus laughed, patting Severus’ thigh. “Devious snake,” he murmured fondly, ignoring the brief expression of disgust that Sirius pulled.

“Using Veritaserum on minors is enormously illegal, and no matter what free passes she has from Fudge, I will not be complicit. Even if it weren’t Potter,” Severus said. “There’s far too many of the little idiots running around that school with secrets the Ministry mustn’t learn.”

That was all too true. Remus brushed a kiss on his jaw, briefly inhaling the man’s comforting scent. “I’m glad the students have you looking out for them,” he said. “Even if they don’t realise it.” No doubt they all thought the evil Dungeon Bat was on Umbridge’s side, stealing all their joy.

“All the professors are doing what we can in Albus’ absence,” Severus said instead, not acknowledging the compliment. “With any luck, we may be able to keep them safe long enough to reach summer, when hopefully this whole mess can be put to bed for good. The students can go home and tell their parents about the gratuitous use of Blood Quills as punishment, and both Umbridge and Fudge will be out before they can say Hogwarts.”

Remus desperately hoped that was the case — that would be the quietest, easiest outcome of it all.

But he knew how Harry’s school years usually ended, so he didn’t raise his hopes too high.

Chapter 69

It was fun, taunting Umbridge.

Since the fireworks, Harry had gotten bolder, and so had the rest of the students. They seemed to be realising that she couldn't put everyone in detention at once, and by the end of the Easter holidays she had mostly stopped trying. Education Decrees were popping up out of nowhere, trying to ban anything that might give the students — especially Harry — any kind of joy. There had been a revolt from the entirety of Ravenclaw house when Umbridge had tried to limit library hours to between ten AM and eight PM, noticing how many students were spending time in there; particularly the HA members, not that she knew why. The Decree had been rescinded within three days, when Umbridge had taken so many points from Ravenclaw house there was nothing left in the hourglass, and the students were still refusing to leave the library.

She should have known better than to try and curb their study habits so close to exams.

But now they were back for the summer term, exams so close Harry could practically taste it, and once again students were falling mysteriously ill in Umbridge's classes, or just not bothering to show up altogether. The headmistress had vastly underestimated how much work it was to run a school — at least, when every other person in the school was determined to make it as difficult as possible.

Like all fifth years, Harry had a careers meeting with his head of house set up during the first week of the new term. He really shouldn't have been surprised by the sight of Umbridge perched in the back corner, holding her clipboard. Seriously, did the woman not ever teach classes outside of Harry's?

McGonagall looked distinctly unimpressed at the intrusion, her nostrils flaring. "Well, Potter, this meeting is to talk over any career ideas you might have had, and help you decide which subjects to continue on through your sixth and seventh years," she said, once Harry was sat down.

Harry looked at his housemistress, then glanced back at Umbridge. When he turned back to McGonagall, a tiny smirk was playing at his lips. "Well, Professor," he began, "I'd thought I might become an auror."

McGonagall blinked. She knew full well he had plans to go into professional quidditch — and to avoid the Ministry as much as possible. Then she took in the look on his face, and her mouth twitched, ever so slightly.

"Indeed?" She reached for a leaflet out of the stack on her desk. "Well, it's no easy path — they ask a minimum of five NEWTS, all E or higher. Then there's a series of character and aptitude tests that are very rigorous; the auror department take only the best. I don't think we've had a successful applicant in the last three years."

That didn't surprise Harry even a little bit. Behind him, Umbridge made a small noise that might have been a cough, and was summarily ignored.

"Given your grades, especially this year, I can't see you having a problem with that part of the application."

Umbridge coughed again, a little louder. McGonagall's jaw clenched. "There are a few subjects that are mandatory — Defence Against the Dark Arts, naturally."

Another cough. And another, at each pause McGonagall made as she talked Harry through the subjects required, until finally she could ignore it no longer.

"May I offer you a cough drop, Dolores?" the Scottish woman bit out, and Harry pursed his lips tightly to avoid laughing.

"I was just concerned you may not have received my note on Mr Potter's most recent Defence Against the Dark Arts grades," Umbridge said sweetly.

"Oh, this thing?" McGonagall held up a piece of pink parchment between two fingers, like it was something particularly foul. "Yes I got it. Anyway, Potter, as I was saying; you've made generally high marks in Defence Against the Dark Arts — Professor Lupin in particular thought you had an aptitude for the subject—"

Umbridge's interruptions continued, her voice getting higher and higher until Harry worried she might strain something, her insistence that Harry would never become an auror so vehement.

Harry would have felt bad about faking his career interest just to wind her up, but he couldn't, not when McGonagall was so clearly enjoying the verbal sparring, and so clearly winning. Harry's recent grades spoke for themselves, in everything but Potions and DADA; and Harry knew he could ace both of those exams without breaking a sweat.

"If you cannot control your behaviour, Dolores, I will ask you to remove yourself from my office while I advise my students," McGonagall snapped eventually, cutting through Umbridge's rant about Harry's unsuitability for any Ministry profession.

"The Minister would never employ Harry Potter!"

"I'd suspect he's more worried about his own job than Potter's, at this point," came McGonagall's swift reply. Umbridge recoiled as if slapped.

"Yes, yes, that's what you want, isn't it! You want Albus Dumbledore to replace Cornelius Fudge — I'm sure you think you'll be where I am, then, hmm?"

McGonagall's deadpan stare was at odds with Umbridge's wide-eyed fanaticism. Harry sat in the middle, trying not to crack a rib from holding in his laughter.

"Dolores, you're starting to look a little... purple," McGonagall said, holding a remarkably straight face. "Perhaps a trip to the hospital wing is in order?" Earlier in the week, Ginny and Colin had slipped something into her dinner that made her head swell up like a giant

blueberry every time she got particularly irate. It had all the muggle-raised students quietly singing Oompa-Loompa songs whenever Umbridge passed, which of course made it happen all over again.

Umbridge's hand flew to her face — which was its usual furious shade of magenta — and horror filled her eyes. "This discussion is not over," she hissed, before storming from the room. As soon as the door shut in her wake, Harry dissolved into helpless giggles.

"That was amazing," he croaked, watching a small but satisfied grin cross his housemistress' face.

"You're not actually thinking of becoming an auror, are you, Potter?" she asked, raising her eyebrows. "Because I hate to disappoint you, but I feel they've far too many rules for your liking."

Harry snorted. "Oh, no, Professor. I want to play professional quidditch," he confirmed brightly. "I just wanted to see Umbridge's face." And it had been far better than anything he could have imagined.

McGonagall pinched the bridge of her nose in exasperation. "You have been spending far too much time with your godfather, Potter."

"Thanks," Harry chirped.

She stared at him, then shook her head. "Regardless, I have no doubt that you'll be able to take any subjects you please at NEWT level — except perhaps Potions; Professor Snape only accepts O level students, and while I understand his judgement of your skill is... weighted, I'm not sure you're quite there yet."

"I'm studying hard," he promised, making her nod approvingly.

"Also, Potter," she added, flicking through his file, "it says in my notes that you have been enrolled in both the Arithmancy and Ancient Runes OWL exams."

"Yes, Professor," he confirmed. "Remus has been helping me self-study."

"A few weeks of summer may not be enough to get you up to OWL level," McGonagall warned. She studied him carefully, and clearly saw something in his gaze. "But if anyone could surprise me on that front, it would be you. I shall confirm the request."

Harry grinned at her. "Thank you, Professor." He wouldn't let her down.

"Just do me a favour, Potter," the Gryffindor housemistress requested, and Harry cocked an eyebrow curiously. "Make sure your little group gets the highest OWL scores this school has seen in years, will you?" There was a fire in her gaze that reminded Harry exactly why she was head of Gryffindor.

"I'll do my best," he promised. It was an easy one to make.

His students were going to blow their exams out of the water.

.--.

The tension in the school was reaching dangerous levels, between Umbridge and the rest of the school. The Inquisitorial Squad had grown bored of their point-docking privileges once all hourglasses but Slytherin's were empty, so many of them began prowling about, looking for a fight they knew they wouldn't be punished for. With so many students beginning to crack under the pressure of impending exams, the whole castle was a powder keg waiting to blow.

And blow, it did.

It started when Ginny was given a detention for '*too short a skirt*' — a detention she returned from at two in the morning, dangerously pale and with blood dripping from her hand. Harry saw the hard look that passed between her twin brothers, and he knew deep down what was coming.

By breakfast, the school was chaos. Harry barely made it down to the Entrance Hall, having to use all his knowledge of the school's secret passageways to avoid getting stuck in some prank or another. One corridor had everyone who stepped in it turning upside down and walking on the ceiling. Another seemed to have turned to ice, sending people sliding around in all directions. There were large brightly coloured soap bubbles floating through the air that belched when you popped them and covered the victim in vibrant paint. And, rumour had it, there was a literal *swamp* somewhere in the east wing.

In the Entrance Hall he saw Umbridge, drenched head to toe in lurid green paint, hands on her hips as she glared at the Weasley twins. "You think this is *funny*, do you?" she accused, and the twins shared a look.

"Pretty funny, yeah," George replied nonchalantly.

Filch, covered in yellow paint, came skidding around the corner, brandishing some parchment that was now slightly soggy. "I've got the forms, Headmistress!" he crowed in delight, and a dangerous smile slipped onto Umbridge's face.

"Excellent. You two," she stepped closer threateningly, "are about to learn what happens to delinquents like you in *my* school."

The twins were unmoved. "Nah," Fred said, shrugging.

"Don't think we are," George agreed.

Harry watched with his heart in his mouth as the pair of them sassed Umbridge, then summoned their brooms and took off into the air above the gathered crowd. The front doors were wide open, and Harry couldn't help but laugh as George swooped low, blowing a dramatic kiss to Blaise with his little group of Slytherins. Blaise rolled his eyes, but he was smiling.

And then they were off, out of school in a blaze of glory, exactly as they deserved. Umbridge looked like she may have a heart attack on the spot, staring after them — until she realised

how many students were staring at her, and yelled at them all to get on with their mornings.

For the whole day, the story of the Flight of Fred and George swept the school, the students who had witnessed it all regaling those who jealously wished they had. Much like with the fireworks, there was some kind of Anti-Vanishing spell on the paint, and Umbridge was forced to teach while looking like Slimer from Ghostbusters right up until lunchtime, when she could finally disappear for a shower.

The only dim moment of it all was the sight of Angelina and Lee, curled up on the twins' usual sofa in the common room late that evening, their faces tired from holding smiles even though their best friends were now gone. Harry approached them tentatively. "Did you know it was coming?"

"Yeah," Lee confirmed. "We said our goodbyes. And we'll see them in a few months." Still, his voice was sad.

"Listen," Harry leaned in closer, "I've got ways of getting letters in and out of the castle. And I know where the twins will be. If you want to write to them, let me know; I'll make it happen."

That made both of them brighten up, even as Angelina eyed him in consideration. "You're full of surprises, Potter," she remarked. "Fred and George always said you had more mischief in you than you let on, but I never really believed it until this year."

Harry grinned lopsidedly. "Been a bit busy, most other years," he pointed out wryly. "Besides, the twins always had mischief covered."

"You're not wrong, there," she agreed, shaking her head with fond exasperation. "Thanks for the offer, Harry. I'll probably have a letter for you in a week or so. Let them know what madness they've spawned in their wake."

"Sounds good." Harry bid them goodnight, heading up to his room, ensconcing himself in his bed curtains with the mirror and calling Sirius' name. "Hey, Padfoot. You get the package today?"

Sirius snorted. "If by package you mean those red-headed demons of yours, then yes, they showed up safe and sound just after lunchtime. Hell of a story with them, too."

"I'll pensieve the memory this summer," Harry promised. "I saw everything, it was brilliant."

The animagus grinned. "Good, good. Were you just calling to check they made it safely, or have you got time for a chat?"

"I've got time," Harry assured, getting more comfortable. "I actually wanted your advice on something."

"Boyfriend or exams?"

Harry laughed. “Neither. I’ve been thinking, today — now the twins are gone, I’m really the only bit of the Marauders’ legacy in this school. Maybe I should take up the mantle a bit.” So far, he’d really only stuck to little things to piss off Umbridge, and sneaking around the school in fox form at night when it was easy to be mistaken for a cat.

Umbridge would think she was safe, now the twins were gone.

He couldn’t have that.

.-. .

Harry didn’t seem to be the only one who was determined to fill the void left by the Weasley twins; everyone was trying their hand at becoming the next Master Prankster, inspired by their boldness. It was now impossible to go anywhere without a Bubblehead charm thanks to the number of dungbombs being dropped everywhere — Harry was highly amused to see one of the Ravenclaw seventh year prefects herding a group of first and second years down to dinner on one of the worst days, all the kids’ heads in one giant bubble like some sort of ridiculous aquarium. A niffler had been deposited in Umbridge’s office, the suits of armour were liable to jump out and challenge you to anything from a duel to a dance-off, and amidst it all Peeves was taking the twins’ parting shot to heart, causing more chaos within the school than all previous years of Harry’s memory combined.

Despite Filch’s insistence that he would get permission to exorcise the poltergeist, that had yet to happen. And with so many troublemakers popping up, Filch couldn’t keep track of them all, pacing the corridors and yelling at any student he happened to find but unable to punish any of them.

In between the times in which he was stationed at the edge of the swamp in the east wing, which Umbridge had been unable to remove despite many attempts, hauling over any students who were incapable of levitating themselves. Harry had spent one excellent lunch hour hidden as a fox, watching Filch punt first years across the foul-smelling miniature biome.

On top of all that, members of the Inquisitorial squad kept suffering strange and mysterious accidents, leaving them unable to help Umbridge put a lid on this wave of terror. Nothing particularly serious, but all very entertaining.

Harry didn’t feel the need to join in until a few days after the twins’ disappearance, when the initial wave of pranking began to die down. Then he prepared his supplies, and got to work as soon as curfew had passed.

He had asked Draco to join him, hoping to spend a little quality time with his boyfriend, but the blond had studying to do apparently. Still, Harry was surprised to see a different Slytherin waiting for him outside the Gryffindor common room.

“That you, Harry?” Blaise whispered, after seeing the portrait open for seemingly no one. Harry lowered the hood of the cloak.

“Everything alright?”

Blaise smirked. “Draco said you were up to something fun, needed a helping hand. I had nothing better to do tonight.”

Harry stared at him, surprised, then nodded after a few moments. “Yeah, alright then.” He wouldn’t turn down an assistant. “Come on.” To his credit, Blaise didn’t blink at talking to a floating disembodied head as they made their way down to the Great Hall. Any time someone came nearby, Harry put his hood back up; while Blaise wasn’t a member of the Inquisitorial Squad, Slytherins could practically do what they wanted these days. Even Slytherins who were dating Weasleys, apparently.

“So what’s the plan?” the Italian boy asked eagerly, once they were in the Great Hall. It was eerily silent so late at night, the stars twinkling overhead. Harry shed the cloak properly, stuffing it in his bag.

“First thing’s first,” he declared, striding up to the head table. Reaching the headmistress’ chair, he quickly Vanished the seat, then put up a glamour to make it look like it was perfectly ordinary. Umbridge would fall right through when she sat down for her breakfast.

Blaise snorted at the sight of it. “Good, but a little… tame,” he drawled. Harry straightened up, setting his bag on the table and pulling out several egg-shaped objects.

“This is the main plan. That was just for my own amusement,” he admitted. “I need these eggs hidden up in the rafters; they’re already enchanted. Whenever Umbridge says the word ‘detention’, one will fall down, splatter whatever it lands on with slime, and hatch an origami toad that’ll follow her around and repeats everything she says back at her.” Umbridge couldn’t go five minutes without screaming for some person or another to be put in detention, so Harry was confident all the eggs would hatch before the end of breakfast. She’d be hearing her own voice echoed twenty times over all day. “Also I wanted to hex the table to dump her food in her lap.” It was a classic, after all.

Blaise stared at him, reluctantly impressed. “You devious little bastard,” he remarked. “I’m in. Where do you want me?”

Between the two of them, setting up the eggs went much faster than they would have with Harry alone. When they were finished, they stood at the doors and surveyed their work, all hidden under careful Disillusionment charms.

“Should make for an interesting morning,” Harry declared in satisfaction.

“George will be sad to have missed this,” Blaise mused wistfully. Harry glanced at him.

“Yeah, but you know he’ll be crazy proud once he hears you were involved,” he said, watching the boy blush through his smile. “Hey, I can sneak letters to him, if you want to write,” he offered; Blaise would be missing the twins plenty, he deserved the same as Angelina and Lee.

The Slytherin’s eyebrows rose. “Umbridge is monitoring every letter that crosses the wards.”

“She certainly thinks she is,” Harry agreed mischievously.

“...You can really get a letter to him? And he can write back?” Blaise’s voice was so hopeful, it sent a pang through Harry’s chest — oh, those boys were so smitten, it warmed his heart to see it.

“Takes a couple days, but yeah.” If Snape couldn’t deliver him letters, Ceri was always down for the job, and no one had yet figured out they needed to ward against house elves. Harry was amazed he was the only one who seemed to have discovered such an obvious flaw in the school defences.

“Brilliant.” Blaise ran a hand over his short hair. “I’ll have a letter for you by the weekend. Thanks, Harry.”

“Happy to help.” He bumped Blaise’s shoulder companionably with his own. “You two are good for each other.” He hadn’t been sure at first, but seeing the pair of them together made sense — even more so now he had discovered this mischievous side of Blaise.

“It won’t be easy, my last two years now he’s graduated,” Blaise admitted. “But we’ll make it work. And it’ll be easier once Umbridge is gone.” There was no doubt in anyone’s mind that Umbridge would not last until September. She would not be the one to break the DADA curse.

“I hope so.” There was a loud noise outside the hall, and both of them froze. “We should get to bed.”

Blaise nodded, watching Harry disappear under his invisibility cloak. He shook his head in amazement. “I can’t believe you have a cloak like that,” he murmured enviously. Harry let out a soft laugh, and bid the Slytherin goodnight, heading back up to Gryffindor.

Maybe next time he’d let Blaise in on the secret of the Marauder’s Map.

.-.-.-.

Harry’s prank went off without a hitch, and with no clear signs of where Umbridge could place the blame. The frogs followed her around for the entire day, resistant to all attempts at Vanishing them — and burning, freezing, stunning, or just about anything else she could throw at it. Flitwick quietly offered thirty points to whoever had come up with such ingenious magic, but the rubies in the Gryffindor hourglass didn’t give anything away — nor did they last long. But no one cared about the house points anymore; the only thing worth anything anymore was the quidditch cup. And no one wanted it more than Angelina Johnson.

Given the last-minute need for a replacement pair of Gryffindor beaters, no one was expecting miracles. Anyone in fifth or seventh year was far too stressed about exams to give up their precious free time, and the younger candidates were... not fantastic. After a rather haphazard try-out, they ended up with a pair of third years; Andrew Kirke and Jack Sloper.

They weren’t the *worst* beaters Harry had ever seen, but they were certainly close.

“It’s just one match,” Angelina was muttering to herself at breakfast before the game. “We just need a sixty point lead to take the cup.”

“You’ll get it,” Harry assured confidently, feeling incredibly strange being in jeans and a t-shirt while the rest of the team wore their quidditch gear. “You’re all great at dodging bludgers. You’ll be fine.”

They would certainly need to be great, because Kirke and Sloper were more likely to hit themselves with their bats than a bludger. Harry couldn’t believe there was so little talent in the younger years of Gryffindor; it did not bode well for next year’s cup.

Harry went with Neville to get a good seat in the stands, his stomach still squirming anxiously. “I hate this,” he muttered, and Neville clapped his shoulder.

“You’ll be back out there next year,” he said with confidence. Harry hoped he was right.

The match began, Lee Jordan’s commentary not quite as lively as usual, and while the female members of the Gryffindor quidditch team were performing as excellently as always, it was clear the two boys were not up to scratch. At one point, Kirke was so afraid of the bludger coming towards him he screamed and fell off his broom.

Harry’s hands were clenched in his lap, his eyes intently on the play. He’d already spotted the snitch thrice, and was desperately trying to will Ginny to notice it. But the Ravenclaw beaters were gunning for her, trying to give Cho the best chance, and with useless beaters Ginny could do little but dodge and hope for the best.

At one point, Harry noticed Hagrid further down in the stands — he was as bruised and bloodied as he had been all term, and was talking to Ron and Hermione. After a brief conversation, the trio left the stands. Harry was almost curious enough to go after them; he’d tried to talk to Hagrid about whatever it was that was causing all those injuries, especially after relaying a few cryptic warnings from Firenze, but Hagrid just kept gruffly insisting that Harry had enough on his plate.

With any luck, Ron and Hermione would be able to help the half-giant out with whatever he was doing.

Shaking it off, Harry turned back to the match, gaze flicking to the scoreboard at the commentator’s box. Gryffindor was down sixty-thirty, their chasers hardly able to keep possession of the quaffle because of their useless beaters.

“Come on, Ginny,” he urged, watching the redhead fly.

Another twenty minutes passed, the score becoming ninety-forty, when at last Ginny turned into a sharp dive, a bludger hot on her tail. Harry followed her line of sight, eye catching on the glint of gold, and he leaned forward in his seat. The bludger chasing her was actually doing her a favour; because of it, Cho couldn’t get close, circling her dive awkwardly.

“Yes, yes, go!” Neville muttered at Harry’s side, practically on his feet.

Ginny’s hand clenched around the tiny golden ball, and the Gryffindor stands *exploded* with noise.

Harry jumped to his feet, shouting and hugging Neville — he didn't mind this part of being in the crowd, getting to celebrate in the huddle of red and gold, watching the team fly a breathless victory lap. It hurt, not being with them, but there was always next year for him.

Angelina and Alicia took an extra lap, just the two of them, bidding goodbye to the pitch they had loved for the last seven years. More than just Gryffindors cheered for them, and Harry whistled loudly, whooping. They were joined by Roger Davies, who would also be graduating in a few weeks, and the three of them flew together before heading back down, tumbling to the grass in a tight embrace. Roger had a few words with Angelina, then shook her hand and went back to his team, who patted him on the back all the same.

It took a while to file out of the stands, and Harry and Neville headed up to the castle with Parvati and Lavender, all four of them beaming.

"Did you see Umbridge's face?" Lavender crowed in delight. The headmistress had looked outraged that even banning three players couldn't stop the Gryffindor team from winning. Harry thought he'd seen Colin take a picture of the expression, and he made a mental note to hunt the fourth year down and see about getting a copy to send to Fred and George.

Speaking of Fred and George... "You guys head up," Harry urged once they hit the Entrance Hall. "I've got to go sort something first."

Neville eyed him shrewdly, but let it lie, walking with the girls towards the stairs. Harry turned in the direction of the corridor to the kitchens.

The twins were usually responsible for the epic feasts present at Gryffindor victory parties, and Harry had to step up in their absence. Luckily, Dobby was more than happy to help.

"We is taking care of it!" the elf promised with an enthusiastic salute. Several other elves grinned up at Harry, hurrying to fill a picnic basket with enough food to feed an army.

"Brilliant, thank you all so much. Can you just go ahead and send it up to the Tower?" Harry had another stop to make.

Hugging Dobby goodbye, Harry continued on his way, sneaking through the one-eyed witch and down to Hogsmeade. Madame Rosmerta only look half surprised to see him, raising one amused eyebrow. "Gryffindor won, then?" she presumed, and Harry nodded.

"I'll take as much as you're willing to give me," he declared, setting a stack of galleons down on the table. The barmaid laughed.

"It was getting far too quiet without those Weasley boys around," she declared, levitating a crate of butterbeer with her wand. "Glad you're picking up their legacy, Mr Potter."

Harry shrunk the crate and put it carefully in his pocket, then disappeared again, racing through Honeydukes' cellar and back to the castle.

By the time he reached the Tower, the party was well underway, though the quidditch team hadn't arrived. Someone had hung one of the 'Go Go Gryffindor' banners up on the wall, and

the picnic basket had been unpacked onto a conjured table.

A round of cheers went up when Harry revealed his purchase, enlarging the butterbeer crate and setting it in the usual place, grabbing a finger sandwich off the table.

“I don’t want to know how you managed that, do I?” Neville asked wryly, accepting a bottle. Harry beamed at him.

“Ask me no questions—“

“You’ll tell me no lies, right, yeah,” Neville finished, rolling his eyes.

The portrait hole opened, and a roar of cheering filled the room as the quidditch team entered, wearing Gryffindor house hoodies and beaming widely. Harry whooped, grinning when he met Angelina’s eyes — he was *so* glad she could experience winning the cup one last time.

Ginny was striding towards them, a determined glint in her eye, and Harry was about to ask what the matter was when she stepped up to Neville, grabbed him by the shoulders, and pulled him down into a kiss.

Neville froze only for a moment, before his arms wrapped tight around the redhead, butterbeer bottle still in his hand as he kissed back like there was no tomorrow. Harry laughed, wolf-whistling loudly, and another round of cheers filled the room along with several cat-calls and more whistling.

Across the room, Harry could see a red-faced Ron gearing up to head over, only for Hermione to grab him by the arm and begin yelling at him. Good. Ginny and Neville deserved this moment.

When they finally surfaced for air, both of them were grinning like loons, and Harry clapped them both on the shoulders like a proud parent. “About fucking time, I say!” he declared vehemently, making them both blush.

“I, uh— we’re gonna go talk. Somewhere quieter,” Neville told him, his cheeks as red as the Gryffindor banner, but his hand still firmly clasped in Ginny’s.

“No worries. Here, take these with you.” He handed Ginny a butterbeer, and Neville a napkin stacked with chocolate chip scones. “They might all be gone by the time you get back. Also, fantastic catch, Ginny,” he complimented, making the girl beam wider.

“Thanks, Harry! I hope you’re ready to have me at chaser try-outs next year!”

He pat her on the back, then ruffled her hair. “You’re on. Now get out of here, lovebirds.”

The only reason neither of them flipped him off was because their hands were full, but Ginny’s glare did the work anyway. Harry watched them go fondly, then looked for the three chaser girls in the crowd, eager to hug the life out of them for their victory — and make Angelina and Alicia cry again, probably.

He might not have played this match, but he would always be part of their team.

....

Listening to his little cousin's increasingly worried report, Sirius frowned; it certainly sounded like things at the Ministry were going downhill fast.

'How long do we think before there's a vote of no confidence?' Bill asked, but Kingsley shook his head.

"There are too many people who are happy to let him keep blundering through," he pointed out. "Something big would have to happen first."

None of them said what they were all thinking; Voldemort would have to rear his ugly head.

It was even more worrying, in Sirius' opinion, that the Dark Lord hadn't made any obvious moves yet, not since the breakout from Azkaban. Either his ten Death Eaters were in worse shape than he'd thought, or he was taking advantage of being presumed dead to work under the radar and get something big in place. The flurry of belief caused by Harry's *Quibbler* article had been slowly worn down by the lack of activity and the *Prophet*'s continued insistence that it was all lies.

"It's bloody frustrating," Tonks growled, running a hand through his bright orange hair. "There's nothing we can do but sit back and watch more and more departments get headed by obvious Death Eaters, or at least Death Eater sympathisers."

Kingsley squeezed his partner's shoulder. "We can keep the aurors legitimate for as long as possible. Scrimgeour may be a bastard, but he's an honest one."

Sirius remembered Scrimgeour; a senior auror back in the day, gruff and a little too rough with the suspects — a little *too* keen to accuse people of dark magic. Cut from the same cloth as Alastor Moody, which wasn't ideal, but it was better than a Voldemort lackey in charge.

Tonks sighed, and shook his head. "You're right. As always," he added with a mock annoyed look. Kingsley smirked.

"We should get going. I've got to be at work in an hour."

That seemed to be the cue for all four of them to make their leave, and Sirius started to clear the table from their impromptu lunch meeting. He smiled when a familiar scarred hand picked up one of the plates. "You don't have to be anywhere?" he asked, and Charlie shook his head, sending the dishes into the sink with his wand and reeling Sirius in by the hand.

"Not 'til five," he replied, kissing him slowly.

Sirius still felt giddy, even more than a month into their relationship. After all those months of that in-between stage where he'd been trying to deny things, it felt like he and Charlie had been together for much longer than they had. But this was so much *better* than the way they were before.

"That's good," he said, leaning into Charlie's embrace, relishing in how *warm* the dragon-tamer always was. Sirius hardly ever felt cold these days, thanks to him. "Want to come read

in my room for a bit?"

"Read, or *read*?" Charlie asked, wiggling his eyebrows. Sirius snorted.

"Actually read," he clarified. "I'm... I could use some company, today."

"I'm all yours," Charlie promised, kissing his cheek, entirely unaware of the way that made Sirius' heart skip with joy.

They cleaned up the kitchen, then wandered up to Sirius' room, shedding their jeans and shirts before climbing into bed in just their underwear. There were two books on the nightstand, and Charlie's long arm reached for them, passing one to Sirius.

Sirius wasn't sure he'd ever get used to being freely allowed so much skin-on-skin contact. Charlie was happy to be naked, or close to it, even if they weren't going to be doing anything sexual. He would lie there and read with Sirius in his arms, one hand stroking the animagus' chest and belly gently, like he was petting Padfoot rather than the very human Sirius. It was the best feeling in the world.

"Hey, can I tell you a secret?" Charlie said, once they'd been reading in silence for a little while. Sirius hummed, setting his book down.

"What's up?"

Charlie nosed his temple, hand on Sirius' stomach pausing in its motions. "Bill wants to ask Fleur to marry him."

"Really?" Sirius grinned. "That's brilliant!" He had never met the French witch, but from everything he'd heard about her from both the Weasleys and Harry, she was a spitfire, and perfect for Bill. "That is brilliant, isn't it?"

"Yeah, no, she's great, I'd love to have her in the family," Charlie assured quickly. "But they want a longer engagement, since they've only been together a year or so. So he's thinking he's gonna ask her to marry him, and then if she says yes, she'll move in to his flat with him. Gringotts don't care about cohabiting before marriage or whatever."

Sirius now understood Charlie's dilemma. "And you don't want to third wheel your big brother and his future spouse?" he finished knowingly. Charlie nodded.

"He's said I can stay as long as I like, and it's not like Fleur would really mind. But... they should have their privacy, y'know. To figure out how to live together as a couple before they get married, without me being there." Charlie sighed. "I'm fine with moving into reserve housing, I suppose. It'll just be a pain in the arse to travel to and from because of the wards."

Sirius knew the wards on the dragon reserve were incredibly tight, with limited and designated access points, to make sure none of the dragons got out — and no one got in to the dragons who wasn't authorised.

"Why don't you move in here?" he suggested without really thinking. He felt Charlie tense. "I'm serious," Sirius continued, the idea sounding better and better the more it rattled around

his head. “It’s safe, you’re right here for Order meetings, and you can come and go as you please. And, y’know, I’m here too.” He felt a flutter in his belly at the idea of having Charlie warm and heavy in his bed every night.

He felt lips curve into a smile against his temple. “Six weeks ago you wouldn’t even admit you liked me,” the redhead pointed out.

“Six weeks ago I was an idiot,” Sirius retorted. He turned, shuffling on Charlie’s broad chest to look his boyfriend in the eye. “If you don’t want to, forget I asked. Or if you want to move in to one of the guest rooms, that’s totally fine. I’m not gonna tie you to my bed,” he teased, watching blue eyes light up playfully.

“Shame,” Charlie drawled.

“It just seems stupid for you to get a flat at the reserve when you’re always either here or at Bill’s when you’re not at work,” Sirius pointed out. “And I know you hate living alone.”

He had different reasons than Sirius, but as one of seven children he had confided in Sirius that being in any empty house felt unnerving. He’d had two housemates back in Romania, the three of them living in a little two-bed cabin on the reserve.

Charlie let out a long breath. “Are you sure?” he asked worriedly. “I don’t want to rush things. I don’t want to overwhelm you.”

“I’d love to have you around all the time.” Sirius couldn’t think of anything better, in all honesty, except perhaps having Harry home. Charlie was the perfect companion; he knew when to be quiet and read versus when Sirius needed conversation and laughter and music; he was happy to give Sirius his space when he wanted, but always seemed to know when the animagus was slipping into dark thoughts; and, Sirius thought with a blush, he was an incredible lover, which certainly didn’t harm things.

He set his book properly aside and leaned up, cupping Charlie’s face. “I know I took a while to come around to this,” he said softly, “but it’s not because I don’t care about you.” If anything it was because he cared too much, he wanted Charlie to have better than some fucked up ex-convict. “I don’t think having you move in will overwhelm me. Except in the good ways,” he said, winking. “Hell, it’s a big enough house; if I need to avoid you, I can do so.”

Charlie snickered, and then he was rolling them over, trapping Sirius tenderly against the mattress. “You’re not wrong,” he mused. Sirius hummed absently — it was always a little harder to think with Charlie’s weight on top of him, his brain turning into a happy puddle of goo. Sometimes he thought Charlie did it just to get an honest answer out of him while he didn’t have the brain cells to lie. “You really want me to move in here?”

“I really do,” Sirius assured, eyes falling half-shut. “Want you here, all the time.” He clenched his jaw shut before he said something foolish. Charlie kissed the corner of his mouth.

"Okay, then. When Bill proposes, and Fleur says yes, I'll move my stuff over here." There was no doubt in Charlie's voice that the French girl would accept the proposal. "You do know that me moving in here means my parents will probably find out eventually," the redhead added. Sirius groaned quietly. "I mean, we could try and fool them, but we'd probably slip up eventually..."

"Fuck it," Sirius murmured. "Let them find out. I don't care. Give Molly another reason to hate me."

"Mum doesn't hate you," Charlie said, and Sirius snorted.

"She does," he insisted. "Thinks I'm a reprobate. It'll be worse when she finds out I'm fucking her son." He grinned at the prospect.

"Okay, I need you clear-headed," Charlie declared, and with another quick kiss he rolled off of Sirius, leaving the older man pouting. "Do you mean it? Not about Mum hating you. About you not minding if her and Dad know."

Sirius did his best to look serious, sitting up. "They'll find out sooner or later. It's going to be an argument whether it's now or six months down the line. Might as well get it over with." He grinned ruefully. "You spent this long wearing me down, it's not like an argument with your parents will be enough to break us." He wouldn't have given in if he wasn't at least hoping for the long haul. "I just want to tell Harry first," he added, frowning. "I don't want him thinking I'm keeping secrets."

Charlie's eyes were bright, sparkling in the lamplight. "Of course, yeah," he agreed. The dimples were back, and this time Sirius didn't resist reaching for them, slotting his thumbs into the little divots. Charlie laughed, surging up for a kiss.

"I'm so happy you said yes," he sighed. "Sometimes I still can't believe it."

Guilt wormed its way through Sirius' gut. "I'm sorry I made you wait so long."

"Worth it," Charlie insisted without hesitation. Sirius stole another kiss, leaning over the redhead, wondering how he got so fucking *lucky* that someone like Charlie Weasley was willing to even give him the time of day.

"You need to leave for work soon," he said, looking at the clock on the wall. "Let me suck you off before you go?"

Charlie's eyes darkened with lust.

"An offer like that? How can I refuse."

Yes, Sirius would definitely like having Charlie in the house all the time.

Chapter 70

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Looking around the Chamber of Secrets at the gathered teenagers casting spells with increasing fervour, Harry was quietly glad that this was the last time he'd have to do it. Teaching had been fun, but trying to sneak everyone in and out of the Chamber once a week was exhausting; there was *so much more at stake* if he got caught with that, than there had been with the Room of Requirements. But exams were almost upon them, so they were holding one last session, just to cover anything anyone was alarmed about.

Harry let it go on until about half an hour before curfew, then wound everything down, wanting to make sure everyone had plenty of time to make it back to their common rooms safely.

“Before we all go,” he said, rummaging through his bag, “I just wanted to let you know that I’m going to burn the contract.” He pulled it out, holding it up for them all to see. Several people gasped.

“What? Why?”

“The last thing I want is any of you getting asked about learning a spell during your exam, and accidentally triggering the contract, wiping your memories in the middle of your practical,” Harry pointed out. Many faces went green at the prospect. “If I burn it, the magic is ended. I think by now I can trust all of you not to say anything.” With any luck, by the summer it wouldn’t matter.

Then, he smirked. “Besides,” he added, “if any of you *did* tell someone that I was sneaking you into the Chamber of Secrets to practice spells, they’d never believe you.”

Laughs rang out, which turned into a cheer as Harry lit the contract on fire, the parchment turning to ash in front of him. “No matter what happens in your exams, I’m proud of each and every one of you,” he declared firmly. “And I dearly hope you never have to use what you’ve learned this year in the real world, but… I’m glad you know it, just in case.”

Embarrassingly, Ginny started up a cheer for Harry, thanking him for teaching them in the first place. He blushed, hurrying over to open the passage that would take them back up to the library. “Let’s just get out of here,” he muttered bashfully.

Safely back in Gryffindor Tower, Harry made his excuses and headed up to his dorm, intending to call Sirius. He hadn’t spoken to his godfather in a little while, and probably wouldn’t get the chance much once exams began.

“Hey, Padfoot,” he greeted, and Sirius grinned back.

“Hi pup. How are you doing? All ready for exams?”

"I think so." He had a few things he wanted to go over, but for the most part he was confident. "I'm going to go over Runes and Arithmancy with Draco at the weekend, just to check I'm up to standard." Remus and Sirius had taught him well, but it had also been twenty years since they had taken their exams, and Harry wanted to be absolutely sure he hadn't missed anything on the curriculum.

"Good lad," Sirius approved, then smirked. "Just don't get too side-tracked, yeah?" he wiggled his eyebrows, but Harry just rolled his eyes.

"As if Draco would let me. He's in study-mode now, it's all business." There was a touch of annoyance to his tone, but he couldn't help it; his boyfriend wouldn't let anything more than light kissing happen, not wanting to be *distracted* so close to such important exams.

Though he had promised something great to make it up to Harry, after. But Sirius didn't need to know that.

They chatted a little about inconsequential things, and Harry slowly began to notice that his godfather seemed... out of sorts. "Is everything alright, Sirius?"

Sirius blinked like a deer in headlights. "What? Yeah, yeah. I just... I need to tell you something, actually."

Cold fear gripped Harry. "Who's been hurt? Is it Voldemort?"

Sirius' eyes widened. "What? No! Nothing like that," he assured quickly, and Harry slumped in relief. "Probably should've prefaced that it's nothing life-threatening or alarming."

"Yeah, probably," Harry agreed, trying to calm his racing heart. "What's up, then?"

Sirius bit his lip, and Harry watched him, perplexed. What was happening that was so difficult to say?

"Well, see, it's like this," Sirius began haltingly. "You might hear something, from someone else, and I want to make sure you know before any... rumours might get to you. Because I'm not trying to keep secrets. I just—you've had a lot on your plate lately, and I didn't want to add to that with my drama, mundane though it may be. But things are changing and I just don't want you thinking I was trying to hide it from you."

"Padfoot, just spit it out," Harry urged, wondering what could have his godfather so tied up in knots.

"I'm dating Charlie," came the blurted response. Harry blinked. And blinked again.

"Charlie Weasley?" he echoed. Sirius nodded. "Oh. Wow. Okay, then." That was unexpected. "And that's... a new thing, then?"

"Sort-of. Not really. It's complicated." Sirius ran a hand through his hair. "But for various secret reasons I'm not allowed to tell you yet, he might end up moving in with me here at Grimmauld, which means Molly will probably find out soon, and I wanted you to know

before she does.” He grimaced ruefully. “So that when you start to hear about how I’ve corrupted and defiled her precious baby boy, you know what it’s about.”

“God, yeah, that is not going to be pretty when she hears about it,” Harry said with a wince. “But he’s at the stage of moving in already?” How long had that been going on?

Harry raked back through his memories over Christmas, and suddenly certain things were making a whole lot more sense. “How—I mean, you say complicated… you’re happy, right?”

The blinding force of Sirius’ grin was like a punch to the chest. “So happy, pup,” he assured. “Charlie… he’s brilliant, really.”

“Yeah, Charlie’s great.” Harry liked the dragon tamer a lot. He just hadn’t expected the redhead to start dating his godfather. “Blimey, if only I’d known this would happen when I asked him to keep an eye on you,” he muttered to himself.

Then again, thinking back to Bill’s reaction to such a request, perhaps Harry *should* have known, even then.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Harry dismissed. “You know I’m going to want the full story, right? All the complicated bits and everything.” Then he paused, making a face. “But, uh, none of the corruption and defiling, please, if you don’t mind.” He might have had a tiny fleeting crush on Charlie once, and Sirius was attractive enough, but they were family and Harry did not need those mental images, thank you very much.

Sirius’ cheeks pinked, though he was still grinning. “I’ll tell you all about it after your exams,” he promised.

“Deal.” Then Harry smirked, every bit a Marauder. “You’re in for *so much teasing*. After all the shit you gave me about Draco.”

“But pup! I’m your godfather!” Sirius yelped indignantly, making Harry laugh.

“Exactly; godson’s prerogative to be a little shit,” he retorted in glee. “*Especially* since it’s Charlie. Got yourself a handsome boy-toy, haven’t you?”

The blush on Sirius’ face flared brighter. “You think my boyfriend’s handsome?” he returned instead. Harry raised an eyebrow.

“I have eyes,” he pointed out dryly. “And it is very weird to hear you call Charlie your *boyfriend*. But in a good way!” he added hastily, when Sirius’ face began to fall. “It’s good. A surprise, but good. I… you didn’t seem like you wanted to date again, for a long time.” Every time Harry had brought it up, even jokingly, Sirius had changed the subject.

The animagus let out a slow breath. “I didn’t, really. S’why it got complicated. And why it took so long to figure things out. But I’m glad Charlie talked me round.”

Harry was so very desperate to hear that whole story, but Sirius was right; they didn't have time for that right now.

"Well I'm happy for you," he declared, grinning. "And Charlie. I'll be happier when I'm home and get to tease you both, but this'll do for now." He winked, and Sirius barked out a laugh. "Will he come home with us? To Seren Du?" Would Harry even get to go to Seren Du this summer, or would he be sent straight to Grimmauld?

Sirius ran a hand through his hair, shrugging. "Honestly, pup, fuck knows what's happening this summer. We'll get there when we get there. But considering Molly might be ready to murder me once she finds out, I'd say there's a high chance of Charlie coming to Seren Du with us."

"Fair point," Harry agreed with a smirk. "Well, the more the merrier." Having Charlie around would be great. He would finally have someone who could fly seeker against him, other than Draco's birthday visits.

Besides; anyone who could put that smile on Sirius' face was someone Harry wanted around as much as possible.

.-. .

Finally, the time had come.

OWLS were upon them.

Harry largely kept to himself in the few days before; everyone was stressed out enormously, liable to snap at the slightest provocation, especially in Gryffindor with all those volatile tempers. Hermione was known to start hexing anyone who interrupted her revision time — when she wasn't busy confiscating every fake brain elixir and concentration booster making its way around the school.

Harry wondered why Umbridge seemed to care so much about reading mail in search of Dumbledore, but didn't seem to give a shit about people sneaking in banned substances prior to the exams. Clearly the Ministry's priorities were incredibly narrow.

On Sunday afternoon the examiners arrived. There was only a small handful of them; Harry had expected more, considering they had both OWL and NEWT students to examine. But, he supposed, students dropped quite a few subjects at NEWT level usually, so there were fewer to examine individually. The scheduling seemed a bit brutal to Harry, but who was he to judge? As long as he got to take his exams, he would be happy.

"You ready for this, then?" he asked Neville on Monday morning, as they forced themselves to eat as much breakfast as they could manage. Neville shrugged.

"Have to be, don't we?" he pointed out wryly. "I think I'm alright, though." Since getting his new wand, Neville's spellcasting had improved in leaps and bounds, and Harry was glad to see his friend's confidence rising. He hoped exam results would show Neville that he wasn't nearly as incapable as he thought he was.

"Good luck, boys," Ginny said, once it was time for her to go to class. She kissed Harry's cheek, then kissed Neville properly on the lips, leaving him flushed and smiling. "You'll do great."

"Thanks, Gin," Harry replied, since Neville seemed a bit too dazed to form words. The pair had been an official couple since the quidditch match, and were still firmly in the honeymoon phase, all starry-eyed at each other and holding hands whenever they could. It was *adorable*, and Harry wondered if half the reason they were so sappy was because the twins were no longer around to tease Ginny about it all.

Either way, he was glad to see them happy together, after so long dancing around and crossing wires so painfully.

The fifth and seventh years were booted out to wait in the Entrance Hall while the Great Hall was adjusted for exams, and then finally they were being sent into the hall to take their Charms exams, directed to single desks each marked with a name in alphabetical order. Harry gave Neville a fleeting squeeze on the shoulder, then moved to sit at his desk between Sally-Anne Perks and Oliver Rivers from Hufflepuff. All the seventh years were at the back of the hall with their NEWT papers.

As he waited, watching the examiners stroll the aisles to double check no one was trying to hide any contraband, Harry was struck with the sudden fear that he had forgotten everything he had ever learned in Charms.

Then he was given permission to turn over his paper, and skimmed his eyes over the first few questions. He grinned to himself.

Yeah, this wasn't so bad.

..

The Charms practical in the afternoon went as smoothly as he thought the theory had gone in the morning; they were called up in groups of four and sent to the nearest available examiner, which meant that as Harry was starting his exam, Draco was just finishing his own. Harry tried not to watch him too hard, but he still had pride welling in his chest as Draco offered a small bow to Professor Marchbanks, who congratulated him on his performance.

"I think the rest will be less scary, now we know what they're like," Neville said to Ginny that evening in the common room, while all the fifth and seventh years were gathered trying to cram as much last-minute Transfiguration knowledge into their heads as possible. It was a point of pride for Gryffindor house, being their housemistress' subject, and no one wanted to let her down by doing anything less than their best. Some of the fourth and sixth years with friends or partners taking exams, like Ginny, had volunteered themselves to be quizmasters, shooting off questions from textbooks or hand-written revision cards.

On Wednesday it was Neville's time to shine with their Herbology exams, and as they were waiting in the Entrance Hall before the written exam the Gryffindor boy was being peppered with questions from students of all houses — and even a few of the NEWT students, too.

Harry imagined it was something of a relief for the blond boy when they were called in to sit at their desks.

Then he got to see *exactly* what it was like for Neville the next day, because it was time for Defence Against the Dark Arts.

“Harry, remind me which spells can’t be blocked by Protego?”

“Help, I’ve forgotten all the things you need to subdue a redcap!”

“Can you go over the counter to the Jelly-Legs jinx one more time, Harry?”

He almost shouted in joy when the doors opened and they immediately went silent, filing into the hall. Harry did his best to offer a reassuring look to every member of the HA — they all knew their stuff. They would be fine.

He hoped.

He himself breezed through the paper, enjoying going into more detail on some subjects than the examiners would likely expect. When he dared glance around the hall, he saw plenty of his friends looking calm and focused as they wrote furiously — and Hermione Granger biting her fingernails, already having twice requested extra parchment, as she had in both the previous exams as well. Was she even making it to the end of the questions, over-answering like that? It would be interesting to see her results.

It was the DADA practical he was actually looking forward to; as much as a person could look forward to an exam, at least. The proud feeling returned as he watched both Parvati and Padma perform exemplary Stunning and Disarming charms in their exams, and as Harry went through each spell as instructed, he could see Professor Tofty’s bushy eyebrows rise higher and higher, clearly impressed.

It was even better to see Umbridge watching with thinly-veiled anger as the students she’d kept from performing magic all year showed off all those spells with the accuracy of clear practice.

“Well done, Mr Potter!” Tofty crowed in delight. “Now, that’s everything I need to see from you... however,” he leaned in a little closer, “I have heard among the rumour mill that you, Mr Potter, can produce a Patronus. Perhaps, for a bonus point...?” He trailed off hopefully, and Harry grinned, raising his wand.

“Expecto Patronum!”

Everyone in the room halted in astonishment as the huge silver stag galloped around the room. Other members of the HA might be able to do a Patronus as well, but none of them were as solid and impressive as Harry’s — and none of them would likely be asked to perform it in their exam.

If looks could kill, Harry would be dead from the glare Umbridge sent his way. He made sure to smile extra wide at her on his way out.

..

Friday's exam day was the one Harry had been quietly anticipating; the Ancient Runes exam. There was just the one written exam, with no practical; the afternoon would be taken up by the Muggle Studies exam.

All the students who had not chosen Runes as an elective eagerly left the hall at breakfast, keen to get in a day of relaxation — or of more revision for the exams to come. Harry waited with the small group of Runes students, hands in his pockets as he mentally went over his notes.

It took several minutes for Hermione to notice him. "Harry, what are you doing?" she asked, and he shrugged.

"Waiting for the exam?"

"But you don't take Ancient Runes," she said rudely. Harry nodded.

"I know. I've self-studied."

The very concept seemed to outrage the girl, and just as she was gearing up for what would no doubt be a very impressive rant, the door opened. Hermione wheeled around instantly. "Professor Marchbanks!" she called. "Harry says he's taking the exam but he's not in Ancient Runes class, he can't do that! You must tell him he's got it wrong."

Professor Marchbanks frowned faintly, then looked down at the parchment in her hand, one gnarled finger trailing down the list of names. "Potter...Potter... yes, there he is! Potter, Harry. He registered his intent with the Ministry, young lady. He's as much of a right to this exam as you do. Come on, in you go, all of you!"

"But—but—that's not fair! He isn't in the class!"

No one listened to Hermione's protests, filing past her to enter the hall. As Harry walked past, she grabbed his sleeve. "You're going to fail, Harry. You shouldn't do this. It'll look bad on your record."

"I think that's my problem, not yours, don't you?" he replied neutrally, tugging his sleeve free and carrying on to his desk.

It was incredibly satisfying watching Hermione try and look back at him without getting scolded by the examiners, as if she expected to see him staring blankly at his paper or having a breakdown over all the things he didn't know. On the contrary, Harry was fairly confident with how he did in the exam; between Remus and all his friends helping him — and Draco, of course — Harry faced no surprises in the paper.

Hermione was probably going to regret paying more attention to his progress than her own, though.

He left the exam with a smile on his face, which widened when Hermione just glared at him and stormed off. "Oh, you have upset her, haven't you?" Blaise remarked in amusement as he

and Daphne appeared at Harry's side. "You'd think in all her *supreme knowledge* she'd have learned it's fairly common for students to self-study for elective exams."

Harry knew there were at least ten muggleborn and muggle-raised students signed up for the Muggle Studies exam just for an easy O, despite never having taken the class. He had thought about it himself, but ultimately couldn't be bothered.

"One day she'll realise that she can only control her own education, not everyone else's," Harry said. Daphne laughed.

"She hasn't even been controlling her own very well. You should've seen her in her Defence practical; some of the shakiest wandwork I've seen in ages."

Harry did feel the tiniest pang of regret, but he forced it away; it wasn't his fault Hermione wasn't trustworthy enough to invite to the HA. It wasn't his responsibility to educate all his yearmates. She was perfectly capable of practicing the spells in secret, just like everyone else in the school; not only the ones Harry was teaching. But Hermione had always been more capable with the theory than the practical. Spells — especially combat spells — were often about intuition, and she struggled with that sort of fluidity that didn't come out of a textbook.

His thoughts were interrupted by Luna skipping towards them, rocking up on her toes to press a kiss to Daphne's lips. "Your exams went well." It was a statement, not a question, and Daphne smiled — at least, the closest she got to smiling in public.

"Did they? Oh, good."

In Luna's wake came Ginny and Neville, holding hands. "Great, you're all done, I'm starving," Ginny declared, nudging Harry towards the doors as they reopened, the hall set for lunch once more.

With Umbridge's stupid Educational Decree in place they couldn't all sit together, so they bid goodbye to their Slytherin friends and found a spot where Luna could sit at Ravenclaw and still be within conversation distance of the Gryffindors at their own table.

"I'm not letting you spend all weekend with your head buried in Potions books, Nev," Ginny insisted, happily scooting up the table to make room for Parvati and Lavender on her other side.

"Oh, Neville, don't torture yourself like that," Parvati agreed. "Your brain needs to rest."

"We'll be doing a bit of Divination revision tomorrow afternoon, though, if you both want to join us."

"That would be perfect, thanks," Harry said. It was solely down to the two girls that he thought he might actually get a decent passing grade in the subject.

Harry did do some revision over the weekend, though he wasn't hitting the books quite as hard as some. Incredibly, he managed to persuade Draco to sneak away with him to the Chamber on Sunday morning, cuddling up to the blond on their conjured sofa.

“If you don’t know it now, you never will,” he insisted, wandlessly banishing Draco’s Arithmancy book across the room.

“Easy for you to say, Mr Powerhouse,” Draco groused, watching after his book. Harry smirked, kissing him chastely.

“You’re the brainbox of the two of us and we both know it. I’ve just got enough raw magic to get away with being sloppy.” Draco raised an eyebrow.

“I’m sorry, but if you’re trying to call me a nerd I will have to insist on holding up a mirror,” he retorted. “You started doing Rune circles *for fun* the other week.”

“It was more fun than memorising Potion ingredients!” Harry retorted. Then he shook his head. “Look, never mind; I don’t want to spend the next hour arguing with you.” As much as they both usually enjoyed arguing. “Come on, lie down with me. You haven’t been sleeping,” he accused knowingly. He could see the dark circles beneath Draco’s eyes, no matter how many face creams and glamour charms the Slytherin used.

“I’m fine,” Draco insisted, though he let Harry manhandle him to lie down on the sofa, the blond cradled between Harry’s body and the back cushions. “I just... I really need to do well in these exams.”

“You will,” Harry assured, kissing his temple, tangling their legs together. “You’ll do brilliantly. Your mum will be prouder than ever, and your father can go fuck himself regardless.”

Draco snorted, arching his neck for a kiss. “No manners in you,” he teased, making Harry grin.

“None at all,” he agreed. “But I’m right and we both know it. So just relax, take a nap with me. I’ve got an alarm on my wand to wake us for lunch.”

“Hmm,” Draco murmured, though Harry could already feel him relaxing, inch by inch. “I suppose we can take a short break. I have all afternoon to study with Theo and the girls, after all.”

“Exactly.” Harry tucked his face into the warm hollow of Draco’s neck, inhaling the faintly spicy scent of the boy’s aftershave. Not that Draco needed to shave all that often, with such a baby-face and his pale blond hair. Not like Harry, whose chin-fuzz now needed taming at least three times a week to avoid embarrassingly patchy scruff all over his jaw.

“Do you know what you’re doing for the summer yet?” Draco asked quietly. Harry hummed.

“Not a clue.” They were mostly waiting to see what happened with Dumbledore and the Ministry. “You? Have you convinced your mum to move to Seren Du yet?”

“I wrote to her, but Umbridge is screening even our mail these days,” Draco sighed. “I’ll try again when I get home.” His hand moved up to tangle in Harry’s hair, stroking gently at the base of his skull. “It might be too dangerous to split so publicly from Father like that.”

“No more dangerous than living with the fucking Dark Lord in your house,” Harry pointed out. “Besides, with any luck I’ll be at Seren Du, too. Don’t you want to spend your summer with me?”

“That is a tempting prospect,” Draco agreed. He turned his head ever so slightly, lips brushing Harry’s head. “I’ll try, that’s all I can promise.”

Harry made a vague noise of agreement; his mind was already on the prospect of having his boyfriend live with him all summer. Playing quidditch together, swimming in the pool together... and all those hidden little corners of the manor they could use to escape their guardians and get up to fun things. Not that he thought any of their guardians would truly mind them getting up to anything in their bedrooms, after dating for so long. No one could become pregnant by accident, after all.

Harry’s belly warmed at the thought of being with Draco in that way; they hadn’t gone so far yet, happy getting more familiar with just their hands and mouths — but fingers had been wandering in that direction more and more, and maybe with a whole summer ahead of them they would have the time to... explore.

“Whatever you’re thinking about, stop it,” Draco drawled, amused. “I can feel you getting hard — this is supposed to be nap time, you randy bastard.”

“Sorry,” Harry replied unrepentantly, kissing Draco’s neck. “Saving it all for after exams, yeah?” It was getting a bit frustrating, having to masturbate every night after his stupid teenage libido got wound up just *watching* Draco across the Great Hall, but if Draco needed no sex to focus on his exams, then Harry would oblige.

“Hmm.” Draco sounded considering. “I suppose we are halfway through... and it *is* supposed to be good for stress relief.”

Harry tried not to get his hopes up, but the blood rapidly heading south had other ideas. Draco’s hand trailed down to his backside, squeezing. “Go on, then,” he relented, already shifting, and suddenly Harry could feel Draco’s erection too. “Shame we’ve already done our Transfiguration exam,” the Slytherin murmured, meeting Harry in a kiss. “This would be great practice for Vanishing spells.”

Harry smirked, grabbed his wand, and with a short movement they were both entirely naked. “Let’s call it early practice for NEWTs.”

Draco laughed, which rapidly turned into a moan, the sound shooting straight to Harry’s cock.

Yes, this was *exactly* what they both needed to get them through their exams.

.-.-.-.

Walking out of his Potions practical exam, Harry silently made a note to buy an enormous amount of chocolate for Remus Lupin at his next earliest convenience. If the werewolf had not been in love with Snape, then Snape would not have been so willing to tutor Harry in the

summers, and Harry would not have done *nearly* as well as he thought he had. He could get a present for Snape, of course, but he *had* already given the man the remains of a sixty-foot basilisk and free access to Salazar Slytherin's private library. Those counted as a pre-emptive thanks for the O he thought he had maybe achieved.

He hoped he had. He wanted Snape to be proud of him, to see that his efforts with Harry had not gone to waste.

"And now I never have to study Potions again," Neville declared joyfully, and Harry laughed.

"Congrats!" He clapped his friend on the back. "Bet you passed, though." Neville had started improving in Potions when he learned to look at it from a Herbology perspective. And he didn't make nearly as many mistakes when Snape wasn't in the room.

"To be honest, I could've gotten a Troll and I wouldn't care at this point. I'm just glad it's over."

Tuesday's Care of Magical Creatures exam was one that just about every student was determined to do well in, if only to spite Umbridge. She would just *love* to see all of Hagrid's students fail, and they weren't going to give her the satisfaction.

Wednesday was the toughest exam day yet for Harry; Divination in the morning, Arithmancy in the afternoon, and then at night they had their Astronomy exam.

He added Parvati and Lavender to the 'must buy chocolate for' list; the Divination exam was much less gruelling than he'd expected, and he knew it was down to them.

"Thank you, both of you," he said emphatically at lunch, and they giggled.

"It's what friends are for," Parvati insisted. "I'm pretty sure I would've barely scraped an A in Defence without you, so we'll call it even."

Harry was still going to buy them something nice.

The crowd waiting for the Arithmancy exam after lunch was much smaller than average, with few students willing to take such a complex elective, and as such Hermione spotted Harry almost immediately.

"No," she declared flatly, staring at him. "You— you can't. This is *Arithmancy*!"

Hermione was the only Gryffindor fifth year taking Arithmancy classes, and all weekend she had been biting off peoples' heads for suggesting that the toughest exams were out of the way, because of course Arithmancy was going to be *impossible*.

"Self-study," Harry explained with a shrug, hiding his smile behind a neutral facade.

"Leave it, Granger," Anthony Goldstein cut in, rolling his eyes. "If Potter wants to fail exams, it's none of your business." But then, when Hermione wasn't looking, he winked in Harry's direction. Anthony, along with Draco, had been Harry's main tutor in the subject during school time, and he had told Harry himself he was capable of getting an E at least.

Hermione glared at Harry right up until the examiners let them in, and then glared at Marchbanks when she made no move to eject him from the hall.

Harry desperately hoped he got Os in both Runes and Arithmancy, just to rub it in her self-righteous face.

After dinner, some of the Gryffindors chose to revise for their Astronomy exam, but Harry decided to take a nap instead. Sirius had quizzed him over the weekend — all Blacks did well in Astronomy, apparently, and he would make damned sure Harry did too — so after two difficult exam papers already written he'd much rather get some restful sleep before needing to write another. There were only so many constellation and moon names he could cram into his head.

The whole year group went up to the Astronomy Tower at eleven o'clock, and set up their telescopes ready to observe the cloudless sky. It was a good night for it — a full moon, bathing them in bright silver light.

Had Remus had to take exams on full moon days, he wondered? That sounded awful.

Professor Marchbanks bid them to start, and Harry reached for the blank star chart he was supposed to fill out, carefully angling his telescope.

It was surprisingly peaceful, working away up there with no noise but the rustle of parchment and scratch of quills, the occasional squeak of a telescope being adjusted. Harry thought he was doing quite well with his chart — and then he noticed the light spill onto the lawn, and several long shadows stretch onto the grass.

Ever curious, he couldn't tear himself away from the group of six figures walking across the grounds. He recognised the walk of the leader of the group; the shortest, squattest member of the group. Dread filled his stomach. They were headed to Hagrid's hut.

He tried to focus back on his star chart, which was three quarters of the way finished. He had to fill it, even if he didn't use his extra time to go back and double-check.

He heard a faint knock, and the muffled barking of a dog. He pressed his face closer to his telescope, blocking the sounds from his head, ignoring the light turn on in Hagrid's window.

Suddenly, a loud roar echoed through the night air, and Harry was no longer the only one staring at Hagrid's hut instead of the starry sky.

Tofty and Marchbanks tried to keep them focused on their exams, but even they were astonished when spells began to fly.

"Look!" Parvati squealed, pointing to another dark shadow approaching the chaos from the castle doors.

"How dare you!" the figure yelled, in a familiar Scottish brogue. "How *dare* you!"

McGonagall scolded the aurors, brandishing her wand — and was cut off mid-sentence by four bright red Stunners hitting her all at once. It blasted her back, illuminating her body for a

moment, and then she hit the ground hard and did not move again.

“Galloping gargoyles!” Tofty exclaimed, giving up on the exam entirely. He sounded outraged, and Harry was right there with them, his heart in his throat as he watched Hagrid *snap*, his huge fists flying. Umbridge kept screaming at the aurors, but they weren’t stupid enough to pick a physical fight with an angry half-giant, and with the unconscious Fang slung over his shoulders, Hagrid sprinted for the gates, and disappeared.

A tense silence fell. No one moved. Then, Tofty coughed. “Um, five minutes left, everyone.”

Harry gave his mostly-full star chart a cursory look over, but his attention was mainly focused on McGonagall’s unconscious form on the grass below. Umbridge walked straight past her, and Harry’s chest burned with hatred for the woman, magic rising in his palms. Oh, the spells he wished to cast on that foul toad.

At least the aurors seemed to have a scrap of decency left — or shame, more likely, as they huddled around McGonagall and carried her back up to the castle.

Marchbanks called time, and Harry handed his star chart over, hurrying down the tower steps.

“Harry, where are you going?” Neville called, hurrying after him. Harry glanced back.

“Hospital Wing,” he replied shortly, not slowing down. He wanted to check Professor McGonagall was alright.

He wanted to check the aurors had *actually* taken her to get help.

Some other Gryffindors clearly thought he had the right idea; Harry heard several sets of footsteps trailing him. He burst through the Hospital Wing doors, making Madam Pomfrey jump.

“Potter! And— good heavens!” she exclaimed at the small crowd of students in his wake. “It’s half past one in the morning, what are you all doing out of bed?”

“Is Professor McGonagall alright?” Harry asked urgently. “We saw the whole thing. Astronomy exam,” he explained. Pomfrey’s mouth thinned severely.

“She’s stable for now, but I’m calling a transfer to St Mungo’s first thing in the morning if she can handle the move,” she explained. Harry looked past her, seeing one bed with curtains up around it. “Four Stunning spells right to the chest, at her age? She’s lucky it didn’t kill her.”

Harry heard two gasps behind him that sounded like Lavender and Parvati.

“Will she be okay?” he asked, hating how his voice cracked ever so slightly around the lump in his throat. Pomfrey’s expression softened.

“The healers will do everything they can,” she promised. “And Minerva is nothing if not stubborn. There’s plenty of life in her yet, I’d wager.”

It wasn't as reassuring as Harry would have liked.

"What about the aurors?" Ron asked loudly, and Pomfrey's eyes hardened once more.

"Claimed it was *self defence*, and will not be facing charges," she said tersely.

"But that's codswallop!" Neville blurted.

"You'd best not say such things where our *headmistress* can hear you, Mr Longbottom," Pomfrey reprimanded. But the look on her face said she agreed with him. "Now, off to bed with you. You've an exam tomorrow, all of you."

There was nothing any of them could do, so the group of morose Gryffindors headed back to their common room.

It turned out the whole fight had been visible from the Tower, too, so the common room was full of people in pyjamas all desperate to know what had happened. They explained the story, finishing with the news that their head of house was in dire condition and being moved to hospital shortly. That sent tempers rising, and it was four in the morning before the common room cleared out.

If Harry were Umbridge, he would be fearing for his life right about now, because a tower full of furious Gryffindors was *not* a good enemy to have. Just because two year groups had not yet finished their exams did not mean retribution would not come. Ginny certainly had plenty of ideas.

Harry slept through breakfast, taking advantage of Dobby's kindness to have bacon and eggs in his dorm at around ten. He had no desire to face the rest of the school and look at Umbridge's smug face as she explained away Professor McGonagall's absence, like the whole school wasn't aware what really happened. He went down for lunch, though, and at two o'clock he and the other exam candidates filed in to the Great Hall for the final OWL exam; History of Magic.

Harry could tell which students had chosen revision over sleep, just by looking around. Indeed, it seemed cruel to have exams the day after the late night Astronomy exam; shouldn't that have waited until the end?

If Harry had been writing the schedule, he also wouldn't have put the most boring subject at the very end, when all the students were too strung-out to properly care. Or perhaps that was the point; they knew no one really gave a damn about their History of Magic result, so they saved the exam until last so students could blame low grades on burn-out rather than lack of study or interest.

He was definitely one of the students who couldn't give two shits, but he tried his best nonetheless. He wrote everything he could remember, everything he'd tried to pour into his head in study sessions because Binns was utterly useless, but clearly he did not get enough sleep because a drowsy headache began to brew at his temples, blurring his vision.

Gritting his teeth, Harry pushed past it. He just had to get through this one exam, and then he was done. Then he could pass out for a *week* if he wanted to.

His words came slower, like writing through treacle. All around him the constant scratch of quills began to grate on his sensitive ears, turning into one long discordant hum that made his brain itch. He squeezed his eyes shut, putting his face in his hands for just a moment.

Concentrate, Potter, he thought to himself, trying to visualise the timeline he and Susan had written out together.

His head ached harder. His vision swam, so he closed his eyes again.

And suddenly he was in a long, dark, familiar corridor.

Harry's heart sank. *Oh*. Of course.

It was about that time of year, after all.

He was a passenger in his own mind as he hurried down the corridor, heading through the door and into the circular room, then through a second door to a room dancing with bright lights. Onwards he went, a destination in mind — rows and rows of glass orbs, but he only needed one.

At the end of the row was a black mass; a figure slumped on the floor. Harry's own arm raising a wand, casting magic that made the man on the floor scream in pain.

A scream Harry knew.

Sirius Black raised his head defiantly, spitting on the ground at Harry's — *Voldemort's* — feet. Daring the Dark Lord to do his worst. Harry felt the pleasure that drew in Voldemort's chest; he did so enjoy making people scream.

And scream Sirius did, his voice ringing in Harry's ears. But then someone else screamed, too — Harry was screaming, back in his own body, and he returned abruptly as he fell out of his seat and onto the cold stone floor, still screaming, his scar burning.

He gasped in a sharp breath, and realised there was someone stood over him; Professor Tofty, eyeing him in concern.

"I'm fine," Harry rasped, his throat sore from screaming.

"Really, my boy, I must insist you go to the Hospital Wing," the examiner pressed, helping Harry to his feet with surprising strength for such a frail frame. Harry looked around; the exam was ongoing, but everyone was staring at him. How long had he been screaming for? How hard had they tried to snap him out of it?

There had been enough rumours about him floating around the school in the past two years that Harry bet most of them could guess what had just happened, whether they believed it or not. He met Neville's worried gaze, and looked away.

Tofty gently corralled him out to the Entrance Hall, assuring him that exam pressure could happen to anyone, and if he perhaps had a drink of water and a quiet sit down he might be able to go back in just to round off his last answer.

“No, I’ve done all I can, thanks,” Harry assured; his History grade was the last thing on his mind, now. “I think — I’m just going to go back to bed, if that’s alright?”

“Of course, of course! I’ll go collect your examination paper. I do hope you feel better, Mr Potter.” With a pat on the arm, Tofty left him to it, and as soon as the old man was gone Harry was sprinting for the stairs. He had a mirror to check.

Chapter End Notes

This is a mean place to leave you for the weekend, I'm sorry~ :P

Chapter 71

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Gryffindor Tower was silent when Harry entered; those who weren't in the exam were in class, or studying elsewhere. He sprinted straight up to his dormitory, wrenching open his bedside drawer. "Sirius Black!"

The few seconds it took for Sirius to answer the mirror felt like *years*.

Harry deflated in relief as his godfather's face appeared, frowning at him. "Harry? What's wrong? Shouldn't you be in an exam?"

Immediately, Harry relayed the contents of his vision; a trap, he now realised. A lure to get him to the Ministry. "They don't know I have the mirror," he pointed out. "They think I can't contact you." Voldemort and his lackeys probably thought they were very clever, choosing Harry's most beloved person outside the castle when all communication was monitored. A person who would not be missed, who was supposed to be hidden anyway; a person who was known to be reckless.

"The Order is out at the moment, anyway," Sirius said grimly. "Death Eater raid on a muggle village. Likely intentionally timed, just in case you could get a message to one of them to get to me."

Harry's heart clenched; yes, it had worked out all too well for them. Dumbledore gone, McGonagall unconscious in the hospital, no other Order members nearby.

As usual, their fatal flaw was underestimating Harry Potter.

"What do we do?" he asked, and Sirius' frown deepened.

"What do you mean? The vision was fake, there's nothing *to* do."

"But they're expecting me," Harry retorted. "They'll be waiting for me. Voldemort will be waiting for me." His brain was working a mile a minute, drawing conclusions that made his blood run cold. "What if they're claiming the Ministry, tonight?" It had been coming for a while, they all knew it. "Killing two birds with one stone. Distracting the Order with the raid, getting me in to take the Prophecy — then they'll kill me, take the Ministry, and they've won."

"All the more reason for you to leave well alone!"

"But I can stop them!" Harry urged. "At least long enough for the Order to show up. Long enough for the Ministry to bring back-up and finally see what's been in front of their faces the whole time!" Unless it was too late, unless the Death Eaters had killed everyone and were

just waiting for Harry, but surely the Order would have heard if such bloodshed had happened.

“You’re fifteen,” Sirius started, but Harry cut him off.

“You’ve been training me for things exactly like this. And I can take back-up of my own.” If any of his friends were willing to go with him, willing to risk their lives like that. “I can feel it, Sirius. He’s so... determined.” The emotions bleeding through Harry’s scar were far too intense to *just* be about the prophecy. “If we don’t go and stop them tonight, they’ll have taken the Ministry by morning.” Fudge was weaker than ever these days, and the auror department wasn’t much better. It was nearly five in the afternoon, the Ministry would soon be empty for the evening, and then the Death Eaters would come.

“Leave it to the Order!”

“The Order is busy, you said it yourself,” Harry protested.

“You better not be doing this just because you want to hear that bloody Prophecy for yourself,” Sirius growled, and Harry glared at him.

“It’s not that. I don’t need the Prophecy, I’m stuck in this mess regardless.” Unless it gave detailed instructions on how to find and destroy all of Voldemort’s horcruxes, Harry didn’t care, and if it did Dumbledore would have gone and done it already himself. “Please, Sirius. We can’t let them take the Ministry. It’ll be all over if they do.” Even if the rest of magical Britain were against the Dark, only a small fraction of them would actually be brave enough to *do* anything, and if Voldemort had the whole legal system behind him he could silence any protesters easily. He had already proven he was happy to Imperius as many people as it took to get the job done.

Harry could see by the look on his godfather’s face that Sirius knew he was right.

“I’ll try and raise the alarm with the Order,” he said eventually. “We’ve got time. Any luck, they’ll be back before you can get to London.”

If the raid was meant to keep the Order distracted and out of the way, Harry wasn’t too sure of that. “Take your mirror with you,” Sirius continued. “I’ll call when backup is on the way. I — are you sure about this, pup?”

“He’s planning something big,” Harry insisted. He could feel it, deep in his chest; Voldemort was far too happy to have just the Prophecy on his mind.

“Right. Fuck.” Sirius’ grey eyes were pained. “Be careful, alright? You know he can’t die yet.”

Harry nodded. “Not looking to kill him. Just to stop him getting the upper hand, and take out as many of his people as possible.”

“Don’t go alone.”

“I won’t.” Harry didn’t know who he would take, but he would try.

“I love you.”

“I love you, too. I’ll see you soon.” Then, before Sirius could try and talk him out of going, Harry cut the connection. He sank down onto his bed, running a hand through his hair. After one long, shaky breath, he squared his jaw and got to his feet.

He had work to do.

. . .

Harry wasn’t expecting to be grabbed by Neville as soon as he stepped out of the portrait hole. “What? Nev, where are we going?” Harry had places to be!

Neville ignored him, dragging him down the corridor and into the Room of Requirement, where Harry’s jaw dropped at the sight of the entire group of heirs, plus Ginny. “What the hell?”

“What did you see, Harry?” Ginny asked, brown eyes intent. Harry was taken-aback.

“I— you know I had a vision?”

Blaise scoffed. “Please, everyone knows what it means when you start screaming and clawing at your scar like it’s trying to murder you,” he pointed out. “What is it? What’s he up to?”

Harry swallowed hard. “He’s planning to take the Ministry. Tonight.” They didn’t need to know about the fake torture of Sirius.

Gasps rang through the room.

“There’s something he wants there, something he needs me for. But I’m just the icing on the cake. He’s been putting his people in place, and with Dumbledore out of the way he thinks he can take the Ministry tonight.”

“So we’re going to stop them, right?” To Harry’s surprise it was Neville who spoke, hand clenched around his wand.

“I don’t expect anyone to come with me. But I wouldn’t say no to some assistance.” Harry saw the uneasy glances passed around several of the heirs; it was one thing to train for some vague ‘future fight’, and another thing entirely to actively seek out Death Eaters. “I should be getting back-up, but I don’t know how long it’ll take them to be notified.”

Neville and Ginny shared a look, then stepped forward. “We’re coming,” Ginny told him, her face daring him to argue.

“I’m coming, too,” Luna agreed, kissing Daphne’s cheek and moving to stand beside Ginny.

When Harry looked to the rest of the group, he saw Draco step forward. “No,” Harry said immediately. “I’m not letting you fight your father.”

For a moment, Draco looked like he might protest, but then his shoulders slumped. “I want to keep you safe, you idiot.”

Harry reached for his hand. “You can do that by staying here, where I won’t be worried about you.” It was far too dangerous for Draco to risk being seen at Harry’s side.

“I’ll keep him safe,” Susan said, stepping forward with determination. “If you’ll have me, Harry.”

He grinned at her — she was fierce with a wand, and he wasn’t going to turn that down.

“If Luna’s going, I suppose I’m coming too,” Daphne sighed. “They’re already after my uncle anyway. Can’t make it much worse.”

“Daphne, you don’t have to.”

“No, but I’m going to,” the blonde girl said before Harry could argue. “Blaise needs to stay here. He needs to be the approachable face for the neutral Slytherins; he can’t be seen rushing into danger at Harry Potter’s side. But I can.” She smirked, and for a brief moment Harry pitied anyone who ended up on the other end of her wand that night.

No one else in the room looked eager to volunteer themselves, and Harry put them out of their misery before they felt pressured into trying. “The rest of you need to stay here and keep Umbridge distracted,” he told them. “She’s going to raise hell once she realises I’m gone, and if there’s trouble at the Ministry things could get messy. Dumbledore and McGonagall are both gone, the school is unprotected.”

“Not with us around it’s not,” Parvati told him, showing her Gryffindor spirit. Harry was glad; between them and the HA, any real damage would surely be mitigated.

He pushed away the small part of him that was worried the Death Eaters were planning a double-hit, Ministry and Hogwarts while they were both unguarded. They surely didn’t have the numbers for that, not yet.

Still holding Draco’s hand, Harry pulled him aside, and everyone pretended not to notice them the same way they didn’t notice Theo with his forehead pressed to Susan’s, whispering to her beseechingly.

“Tell Snape where I’m going, as soon as we’ve gone,” Harry whispered. “The Order is elsewhere, but I’ve spoken to Sirius, and he’s going to try and get in touch so they can follow.”

“That’s relying on an awful lot of hope,” Draco murmured, and Harry just grinned, kissing him.

“I’m Harry Potter; blind hope tends to work out pretty well for me.” Draco was not impressed, but he pulled Harry into a proper kiss, his tongue reaching into Harry’s mouth like he didn’t ever want to be separated. But they had to, eventually, and Harry hugged him tight. “I love you.”

"I love you, too. Don't do anything stupid." Draco's sharp glare cut off any cheeky retort he might have given. "And... if my father is there... hex him for me, will you?"

Harry snorted. "Will do." One last kiss, and he was ready. He looked back at his friends, and they were ready, too.

"Be safe, all of you," Blaise said, dark eyes pausing on Daphne.

"You, too." Harry wasn't so naive to think the castle wouldn't be a dangerous place, once Umbridge got wind of what was happening. "Right, then. Let's go."

The six of them — Harry, Neville, Ginny, Luna, Daphne and Susan — hurried out of the Room and down the corridor.

"How are we getting to London?" Susan asked, and Harry grimaced.

"Hadn't exactly figured that one out, yet." He ducked into a side passage, waiting until everyone was in with him, then; "Dobby." The elf appeared instantly, green eyes as wide as always.

"How can Dobby help Harry Potter sir?"

"Dobby, I don't suppose you can take me and my friends to London, can you?" he asked hopefully. Dobby tugged at his ears, face falling.

"Elves is not able to remove students from within school wards. Dobby is sorry." He looked truly devastated, and Harry put out a placating hand before the elf could punish himself.

"No, no, it's okay! It was a long shot. I suppose even Ceri couldn't either? It's not limited to just school elves?" Again, Dobby shook his head. "Damn." Then he paused. "What if we were already outside the school wards? Say, in Hogsmeade? Could you travel with us then?"

Dobby frowned thoughtfully. "Dobby supposes... it is not in the school rules. And there is no magic to stop it."

Harry grinned, looking up at his friends. "Sounds like that's the way to do it, then." Even if Dobby couldn't break through his bonds as a Hogwarts house elf, Ceri absolutely could if Harry called her from outside the school wards.

"But how are we going to get to Hogsmeade? Umbridge has people crawling all over the school, we'll never get past the gates." Daphne looked skeptical, and Harry's grin widened.

"Oh, that's not as difficult as you'd expect." He looked at his watch; it was now an hour and a half since he'd had the vision in the exam. Voldemort would likely be expecting him to travel by broom or something equally reckless; he'd said they had *hours* before anyone came to find Sirius. "Before we go anywhere, though, we need a plan."

He might be sneaking out of school with his friends to go fight Death Eaters at the Ministry of Magic, but he wasn't going to be quite so reckless as to do so without even a vague idea of what to do when they got there.

“Susan, what time does the Ministry close up for the night?”

“Most people are out by six. Some will stay in their offices til seven or eight, but there’s not many these days. There’s a night-shift guard in the atrium, and I know the aurors have an on-call rotation, but I think they only usually have one or two people manning the emergency floo line and that’s it.”

The Ministry was probably mostly empty by now, then. Harry would bet anything that most of those still in their offices were those planning on aiding the Dark Lord’s attempt however they could, even if that was just with their own silence.

“One thing I want to know, Harry,” Ginny piped up, “is what You-Know-Who wants from you out of this whole thing. Considering how you’re so good at upsetting the cauldron on all his other plans, surely he’d want to keep you out of the way?”

Harry’s smile was a grim line. “Yes, but he also wants to kill me quite a lot,” he replied, and Daphne snorted. “He needs me to get something. From the Department of Mysteries. There’s... there’s this Prophecy, alright? About me and him, supposedly, and he’s heard the first half but not the second, and he thinks it’ll tell him how he can defeat me and live forever, or something.”

“You really are the Chosen One, then?” Daphne remarked dryly.

“A Prophecy is only as strong as those who believe in it,” Luna said. “Often the damage done from hearing them is worse than the prophecy itself.”

“Yeah, well, the damage done from him hearing the first half was going after my parents. And Neville’s,” he added with an apologetic glance to his friend. Neville gaped. “Child born at the end of July. Look, it’s not important.” Harry was getting off topic. “The point is, he expects me to meet him down in the Department of Mysteries. And I will. But not as blindly as he thinks. So. Plan.”

He wasn’t good at this part. Even without the compulsions rotting his brain, his idea of a ‘plan’ was ‘start with good intentions and make the rest up as I go along’. But he had others with him now, people whose safety relied on more than just dumb luck and good timing.

He wouldn’t lose any of them like he lost Cedric.

So, planning it was. Luckily, his friends were much better at that than he was.

....

With a plan in place, Harry and his friends hid themselves under Disillusionment charms and headed for the statue of the one-eyed witch. Harry had considered the Shrieking Shack, but it would be a much harder task to get all six of them across the grounds unnoticed. He had never snuck so many people out of Hogwarts before, but he was fairly confident in his own abilities. Most of the school was finishing up dinner by now; he had to hope the rest of his friends were doing a good job of hiding their absence from Umbridge and anyone else who might care.

Ginny just happened to have stink pellets in her pockets, so she dropped a few of them on the stairwell as a diversion. Then they were sprinting through the corridors, camouflaged by magic, and Harry skidded to a halt at the witch statue. "Dissendium," he murmured, tapping her hump with his wand. "Quickly, in here." He directed all of his friends down the tunnel, waiting until they were all gone before jumping in himself. It felt like it took hours, but the corridor remained undisturbed, and he let out a breath of relief once he was in the cramped tunnel.

"Do I keep going?" Neville asked, apparently the one at the front.

"Yeah, all the way to the end!"

"Where does this thing lead?" Daphne asked as she began crawling. Harry chuckled.

"You'll see in a minute."

They made their way down, and Harry heard Neville's shock the moment his friend poked through the trapdoor into Honeydukes' cellar.

"Did Fred and George show you this?" Ginny asked enviously. "This explains *so much*."

"In a way." Harry forgot she didn't know about the Map. "Okay, let's see if this works. Dobby!"

A beat, and the elf appeared. He looked far too happy to be assisting them in their rule-breaking. "How many of us can you take at a time?"

Dobby eyed them all over. "Dobby is best taking two at a time, and not Harry Potter sir and his tall friend together," he said, gesturing to Neville. Harry nodded.

"Perfect. Okay, if you take Susan and Daphne first, and then Neville and Ginny, and come back for me and Luna after." If anyone found Susan and Daphne alone, they were the most likely pair to be able to talk their way out of any suspicious circumstances; and the two least connected to Harry.

"Okay. Where is Dobby takings them?"

Harry blinked. Their plan had focused more on what to do inside the Ministry, rather than how to get there.

"Um, Dobby, was it?" Susan cut in tentatively. "Do you know where the muggle entrance to the Ministry of Magic is? The phone box?"

Harry blinked incredulously at the fact that there was even a muggle entrance to begin with, but Dobby nodded, ears flapping. "Yes, Miss, Dobby knows it!"

"Perfect. Take us there, then, please." Susan held out one hand to Daphne and the other to Dobby, and the Slytherin girl hesitated only for a moment before doing the same. The three disappeared in an instant, and Harry held his breath until Dobby returned.

“Harry Potter sir’s friends are in London,” he confirmed brightly.

He transported Ginny and Neville, then quickly returned for Harry and Luna. Harry squeezed his eyes shut against the strange sensation of elf travel, and when he opened them he was stood in a dirty side-street somewhere in London, watching Susan walk over to a heavily vandalised telephone box.

“Can Dobby do anything else for Harry Potter and his friends?”

“Don’t tell Professor Umbridge where we are, if she asks. Or anyone else, honestly.” Dobby nodded eagerly, and Harry grinned. “Thanks so much for this, Dobby. I really appreciate it.”

“Dobby is glad to help,” the elf chirped, and then vanished.

“I never realised house elves could transport people,” Daphne said, faintly surprised.

“House elves can do a lot of things people don’t think about,” Harry told her. Then he looked to Susan, eyebrows raised. “Where’s this entrance, then?”

“Right here.” The Hufflepuff patted the phone box. “It’ll be a tight squeeze, so I hope you don’t mind getting cosy.”

It was indeed a tight squeeze, all six of them in the booth, and Susan peered out from her place trapped against the corner of the glass. “Whoever can reach the phone, dial ‘6-2-4-4-2’.”

Harry, whose ribcage was pressed right against the phone, snorted. “Very clever.” He dialled the numbers, and a cool voice spoke over an invisible speaker, asking them to state their name and business. Susan spoke before he could, declaring all six of them ‘John Smith’ with the business of ‘Ministry Evaluation’. The badges were a surprise, clattering into the coin slot, and with a warning about needing to submit their wands for a security check, suddenly the phone box began to move. It sank below the pavement, and before long it was pitch black.

“I hate this bit,” Susan muttered. Harry wasn’t a fan of it either, his brain throwing up memories of being locked in his cupboard. Luckily, it didn’t last long; soon golden light began to spill from the area near their feet, slowly increasing until they were no longer in a dark tunnel but instead lowering into the middle of what Harry could only assume was the Ministry atrium. There was a fountain in the centre with a large gold statue of various magical creatures being presided over by a witch and wizard, and a whole lot of marble elsewhere. It was incredibly pompous, as buildings went.

It was also completely empty.

“This isn’t right,” Susan murmured. “There should be a security team.”

The phone box touched the ground, and they spilled out into the atrium, stretching out their aching limbs from the awkward journey.

“D’you think they’re dead? Or just... gone?” Ginny asked dubiously. Harry frowned.

“Probably Dark supporters. Or just bribed to bugger off for the night.” His experience of the Ministry was not one of moral integrity, for the most part.

“Well, isn’t it good for us, that it’s this quiet?” Daphne reasoned. “Less obstruction.”

She was technically right, but it didn’t make Harry feel any better about it. “Either way, we know something’s certainly not right.”

“Harry,” Susan said suddenly. When he turned to look at her, she was pale. “Do you—I’ve seen the aurors, and some other people Aunt Amelia works with, do this thing with their Patronus where they send messages. Can you—do you know how to do that?” Her voice was hopeful. Harry frowned.

“In theory, yes.” He’d asked Remus to show him in the summer when he’d seen the man summon Snape from his lab that way. “I’ve never done it very far, though. Why?”

“Aunt Amelia should know what’s happening,” Susan told him. “She knows who to trust. If we could get a message to her... maybe she can gather up the Ministry workers who would actually fight back. Or at the very least stop us getting arrested once we’re found here.”

She had a point. Harry palmed his wand, pulling together his magic. “Expecto Patronum.” Prongs appeared, silver light glittering off the shiny marble floor. “Take a message to Amelia Bones. Tell her — Death Eaters are in the Ministry. I am there, so is Susan. Bring whoever you trust.” The stag nodded its enormous head, and then dashed off towards a wall, disappearing from sight. A few seconds passed.

“Did it work?” Neville asked hopefully. Harry shrugged.

“No idea.” Once the Patronus was gone, it was hard to tell.

“We should get moving,” Luna said, voice echoing with an urgency that none of them wanted to argue with. They hurried over to the lifts, and all of them winced at the racket made when the golden grilles slid open.

“Fuck,” Neville whispered, hurrying into the lift. Susan immediately pressed the button for level nine, and with more horrendous clanking, the lift began to move.

“Susan,” Harry said after a beat, “I’m very glad you came with us. Because I didn’t actually know where we were going.”

Susan giggled, a slightly hysterical sound. “I’ve been down there with my auntie before,” she explained. “But I’m glad I came with you, too.”

Harry just hoped she didn’t change her mind about that once the fighting began.

The lift ground to a thunderous halt, the cool female voice declaring that they had reached the Department of Mysteries.

Now things looked familiar.

Harry's chest felt a little tight, finally seeing the dark corridor from his dreams in person, the flickering torches and plain black door that had haunted him for so long.

A shoulder pressed against his arm, and he glanced down to see Luna stood beside him, looking up with a surprisingly determined smile. "We're with you," she said simply.

It was enough.

Harry led the way, unsurprised when the door opened easily for him. And there was the circular room with its many doors and blue-flame torches.

What he wasn't expecting was for the room to start spinning as soon as the door closed behind them.

Instantly, all six of them had their wands out, huddling close to make sure no one was left uncovered. But nothing jumped out at them. The walls spun until the blue flames were just thin neon lines in Harry's vision, and eventually slowed to a halt; all the doors were completely identical, and Harry had no idea where to go. "It didn't do that in my vision," he admitted. Now, they couldn't tell which door they had come from, let alone which door led to the Hall of Prophecies.

"Aunt Amelia says the trick is just to ask," Susan whispered, fear colouring her voice. Harry frowned; it was worth a try.

"Would you show me the way to the Hall of Prophecies? Please," he added, in case the room was a stickler for manners.

Abruptly, a door off to his right flung open, and through it Harry could see the same dancing lights he'd seen in his dream. "That's the one," he confirmed, grinning as he strode towards it. "Brilliant, Susan."

The Hufflepuff blushed happily, following him into the room.

"Oh," Ginny gasped softly, once they were inside. "It's beautiful."

It took a moment for Harry's eyes to adjust to such brightness after the dark antechamber room, but when they did he realised the room was full of timepieces. Clocks in all shapes and sizes, from tiny little pocket watches on stands to a huge grandfather clock against one wall, hundreds of them, all ticking away in near-perfect unison. The light was coming from an enormous crystal bell jar at the far end of the room, and Harry found himself drawn to it curiously.

It sparkled almost painfully bright with some kind of ethereal wind — and in the very centre was a tiny, jewel-bright egg. The students watch the egg drift upwards, beginning to hatch as it moved; soon there was a beautiful hummingbird within the jar, but once it was carried all the way up to the top it began to sink slowly, feathers turning bedraggled, until soon it was an egg once more. The process was mesmerising, and it took several cycles for Harry to tear his eyes away.

Just past the jar was a shelf entirely full of tiny hourglasses. *Timeturners*, Harry realised, recognising the devices from his third year. Some were bigger than others, but all of them would fit neatly in the palm of Harry's hand. Or on a necklace chain.

What sort of time-based magic was within this room? What did Unspeakables even *do* down here? The questions were endless, but there was no time to answer them.

"We need to keep going," Harry said softly. It felt like the kind of room you had to whisper in.

His words startled his friends out of their reverie watching the hummingbird, and while they looked reluctant, they followed Harry to the door.

It was definitely the right room. Shelves towered far above their heads, all full of identical dusty glass orbs, with more blue-flame candles lighting the way. Stepping into the room made a shiver crawl down his spine after the light and warmth of the time room, and they all huddled closer together.

"Where to now, Harry?" Ginny asked. Harry peered at the silver numbers on the end of the nearest row.

"Row ninety-seven." They all pulled their wands out and started walking, grouped tightly together.

This was where the plan would begin. This was the part Harry had worried about.

They reached row ninety-seven, and paused, peering into the darkness. "He's down the end," Harry said, pitching his voice a little louder than before. "He's here, I know it."

He led the way down the row, finding it entirely empty, as expected. "He's got to be here somewhere!"

"No one's here, Harry," Ginny said gently, placing a hand on his arm. Harry tore his gaze away — looking instead at the shelves of orbs, reading the names on the little labels. Most of them were dim and dull inside, but a few still glowed with a faint light. He scanned the labels, looking further down the aisle. It had to be easy to find, or Voldemort wouldn't have sent him down here.

"Harry, come here," Daphne said urgently. Harry whipped around; she was pointing at an orb on an eye-level shelf, and when he met her gaze she gave a short nod. "This one's got your name on it."

"What?" he feigned bewilderment, heading to take a look. Sure enough, the little label read;

S. P. T. to A. P. W. B. D

Dark Lord

and (?)Harry Potter

That was it. Inside that faintly glowing orb was the record of the words that had destroyed his life forever.

The words that had led to the death of his parents, and thirteen years of relative peace for the rest of the wizarding world.

“Harry, don’t touch it,” Neville warned, but it was too late. Harry’s hand was already reaching out, wrapping around the strangely warm glass. As he did, he placed a protective charm around it. Things were going to get messy, and he didn’t want it cracking.

“It’s got my name on it,” Harry argued. “That means it’s mine.”

Suddenly the air shifted. Instantly, all six of them tensed.

“There are two names on that label, Potter,” a cold, familiar voice drawled. Harry turned to face Lucius Malfoy, his pale hair glowing eerily in the blue light. “And the other owner would very much like that Prophecy.”

Harry moved to stand in front of his friends, feeling them gather behind him, their wands out and ready. Malfoy wasn’t alone; a dozen shapes suddenly loomed in the shadows, more Death Eaters surrounding Harry and his friends. Harry glared at his boyfriend’s father, wishing he could hex the snot out of him, show him what he’d learned from Severus Snape. But it wasn’t time yet.

“Where’s Sirius?” he asked, and didn’t flinch when the Death Eaters mocked him. Though when the female voice chimed in, taunting him in an exaggerated baby-voice, he felt Neville’s full-boddy shudder and suddenly knew exactly who the woman was.

“Oh, and you’ve brought your little friends, how sweet,” Malfoy remarked, his eyes trailing over the group behind Harry. “Miss Greengrass, I’m surprised to see you here. Your uncle will be most... disappointed.”

“On the contrary, my uncle will be delighted I got the opportunity to tell you to go fuck yourself in person,” Daphne retorted sweetly. Several Death Eaters growled, and one raised a wand, but a sharp look from Lucius held back any spell they might cast. Harry was quietly surprised; it wasn’t like Death Eaters to show hesitation, even when hurting children.

“Enough of this!”

Bellatrix Lestrange tried to summon the Prophecy, but Harry was faster. It still rolled to the ends of his fingertips, and that was enough to have Malfoy turning on his companion.

“I told you, no!” he reprimanded. “If you smash it—“

Ah, so that was their concern, was it? Harry smirked. “Why does Voldemort want it so bad?” he asked boldly, and was very proud of his friends for not even twitching at the name, while all the Death Eaters shuddered and Bellatrix Lestrange began to screech about his *filthy mouth* defiling her lord’s name.

Harry was almost tempted to inform her that his filthy mouth had also defiled her nephew, but that was a story for another time.

Slowly, he shuffled one foot back. The Death Eaters were watching his hands — one holding his wand, the other holding the prophecy. They didn't notice when the heel of his shoe tapped back against the toe of Ginny's. He felt a quick tap back, and then the faint movement of a hand behind him. Harry continued to taunt Malfoy and his fellows, keeping attention firmly on him.

He kept them talking, let Malfoy do his whole villain exposition thing, let him think he was so clever leading Harry to the conclusions of what happened to Podmore and Bode. Harry had to kill as much time as possible, silently praying that Sirius was able to get hold of the Order soon. He liked his own chances against the Death Eaters — was desperate to put some of Snape's spells into practice — but he didn't want to risk his friends.

Then, faintly, he felt something go warm in his pocket.

His mirror.

Help was on the way.

“NOW!” he yelled, and all at once six wands were raised; five voices sent Reducto curses at the shelves, while the sixth — Harry’s — sent a Cutting curse straight in the direction of Bellatrix Lestrange’s chest. She screeched, managing to move fast enough that it caught her across the arm instead, but it was enough.

Glass orbs shattered everywhere as shelves began to topple, and Harry was running, hot on Susan’s heels as they sped for the exit, destroying as much as physically possible in their wake.

The fight had begun. They just had to last long enough for assistance to arrive.

Chapter End Notes

In the last couple chapters we've passed 5k kudos and 2.5k comments, which is AMAZING and I am so grateful to all of you for sticking with me on this adventure <3 Even if like 500 of those comments are you guys begging me not to kill off Sirius ;) We're getting through it, friends! I just had to build tension for a liiiiittle bit longer~

Chapter 72

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sirius, as soon as he got off the mirror with Harry, scrambled for his wand.

He wasn't sure if this would work, but he was willing to give it a try.

It took a minute to pull together a happy memory enough for a Patronus, but with his heart full of red hair and laughing blue eyes, it came far quicker than expected. And took form, which was something it hadn't done since he was twenty years old. Sirius gaped at the large silver bear in front of him, waiting patiently.

Oh, Charlie, he thought to himself, heart clenching. He couldn't remember what it had been before, but it hadn't been a bear.

He pushed the realisation away, remembering his original intent. "Go to Remus Lupin," he told the bear. "Tell him; end your fight now, a bigger one is coming. It involves our pup."

The bear nodded, then gambolled off through the wall, and Sirius tried to send as much of his love and happiness with it as possible, hoping it would make it to wherever Remus was. Wherever the Order was.

Then he could do nothing but wait. He killed some time, changing out of his muggle clothes and into some duelling robes. He tied his hair back, then loosened it, then re-tied it again. He made a sandwich. He paced up and down the kitchen while eating said sandwich.

The clock on the wall ticked away, and every minute felt like *days*.

More than ever, Sirius hated his criminal status. It was bad enough seeing the Order go out and save lives and having to just stay home, but to know his *pup* was heading into danger with no more than just a few of his school friends to aid him... it was almost enough to send Sirius to the Ministry, with or without assistance. But that wouldn't help Harry. One man against however many Death Eaters, possibly Voldemort himself, would not help Harry.

Sirius took a steady breath, reminding himself that Harry was surprisingly well-trained for a fifteen year old, that his friends had been practicing defensive magic all year.

Just as he was gearing up to send another Patronus, the crack of apparition rang through the hall. Sirius turned, seeing Remus come running into the kitchen, eyes glowing gold. The moon had only been the night before, and the wolf was closer to the surface than ever. "What's happening with Harry?" he asked urgently.

"Where's the rest of the Order?"

Remus shook his head. "Still fighting. There were more Death Eaters than we anticipated, it turned into a bit of a shitshow. Everyone's alright," he added at the alarm on Sirius' face.

“Nothing we can’t heal. And it’s almost over. Kingsley tried to summon the on-call aurors but of course they’re bloody useless. The Death Eaters seem to be clearing out soon enough. Now, Sirius, what was that message about? Frightened the bloody life out of me! Where’s Harry?”

“The raid was a diversion,” Sirius relayed. “Harry had a vision. Voldemort’s going for the Ministry, tonight.”

The colour drained from Remus’ face. “Harry’s going after him, isn’t he?” His voice was knowing.

Sirius nodded grimly. “Yup. So you’d better get back to the Order and tell them to hurry the fuck up if they want to save this damned country.”

He had a lot of faith in his godson, but there was only so much one teenage boy could do. Still, he called Harry’s name into the two-way mirror, hoping to confirm his godson was safe while he waited for back-up.

There was no response.

.-. .

It took far too long in Sirius’ opinion for the Order to gather at Grimmauld Place. It wasn’t even the full contingent; Dumbledore was off farting around somewhere or another, not that Sirius really gave a fuck, but he’d taken Vance and Moody with him.

That turned out to be a pretty good thing, actually; there was far less arguing without the three of them around.

“Harry and some students have gone. I don’t know who,” he added at the look of horror on every Weasley face in the room. “And I don’t know how many. But I promised we’d send back-up as soon as possible.”

“I don’t understand how they got into the Ministry to begin with,” Arthur Weasley murmured, and Kingsley let out a bitter chuckle. He had blood on his robes, betraying his earlier battle; all of them looked a little worse for wear, honestly. Sirius hoped they were up for another.

“They’ve been worming their way in for months, Arthur. Bloody Malfoy greasing palms all over the place. But I’ll admit, I didn’t think they were at quite this stage.”

“They’ve blind-sided us all,” Remus cut in bluntly. “But that doesn’t matter. We need to get to the Ministry, fast.”

“Shouldn’t we have some sort of plan?” Hestia Jones asked. Sirius glared at her.

“Can’t plan for what we don’t know,” he pointed out. “We’ve no idea of numbers, but with Harry involved there’s a high chance Voldemort himself will be there.” Several people flinched.

"Likelihood is, they've disabled the floo and put anti-apparition wards up," Tonks declared, her face more serious than most would expect of her. She closed her eyes and spun slightly, face screwed up in concentration. "Yeah, no dice. Shit." Sirius' stomach sank; if even she, as an auror, couldn't get through the wards...

"How far do the wards extend?" Fred Weasley asked, another unexpectedly serious face in the mix.

"Half-mile radius," Kingsley informed them. "That's our standard wards, at least. No idea if they've raised their own or just triggered the existing."

The twins bent their heads together, discussing it over quickly.

"St James' Park station should do it, right?"

Sirius thought over his mental map of London, trying to poke his ragged memories from the Before times for anything he might have been told about the Ministry wards threshold. Back then they had been warned of it, in case the wards had to be raised in an attack and back-up had to approach from elsewhere.

"Waterloo," Tonks piped up. "I was always taught Waterloo."

"Anyone here never been to Waterloo station before?" Sirius asked, his fingers tapping his thigh impatiently. Several hands rose, Charlie's included. "Right. Buddy up, we need to get moving."

"We can't just rush in there!" Jones started, and Sirius turned on her, glaring.

"Harry is in danger!" he roared. "Every extra second is crucial. It's already gonna take enough time to bloody run from Waterloo to Whitehall."

That shut the woman up, and there was a mild amount of chaos as everyone hurried to find an apparition partner. Sirius wasn't surprised when Charlie grabbed his hand, the redhead winking at him and stepping incredibly close. "I'm with you," he murmured.

"Oh, I'd best stay here — wait for Albus, you know," Molly was fretting off to the side, and Sirius looked up at Charlie, squeezing his hand back. Molly hadn't figured them out yet — Bill hadn't gotten the nerve to propose yet — but every day Sirius cared less and less. After his Patronus revelation, he cared especially little right now.

He wound an arm around Charlie's waist, offering a grin. "Hold on tight."

Then they were squeezing together through space, gone in an instant and back again just as fast. Sirius looked around, quietly delighted that he'd actually remembered Waterloo well enough to apparate there. It had been fifteen years, after all.

They had appeared in a dingy side-street, and a few moments later Bill and Hestia appeared. Before he forgot, Sirius pulled his two-way mirror from his pocket, calling Harry's name again. Part of him hoped for an answer, but the bigger part knew there was not one coming; Harry was not in a position to chat.

Several more cracks sounded, everyone apparating into whichever spot they remembered best, and soon there were eleven of them Disillusioned and running for Westminster Bridge.

Charlie was still holding Sirius' hand.

. . .

Half a mile turned out to be a longer run than most of them expected; wizards were not generally prone to exercise. Considering keeping himself fit was one of the few things Sirius *could* do while confined to the house, he had no trouble keeping up with Charlie; the dragon tamer was hardly even breathing heavy by the time they made it to the Ministry back entrance; a set of dodgy-looking stairs below a fire escape with a door labelled 'Staff Only' at the base.

"I didn't know this was here," Charlie mentioned, and Sirius grinned.

"Most don't. It's for emergencies only. And considering I'm not cramming eleven of us into that bloody phone booth it'll have to do." He hoped the others were keeping track of their non-Ministry companions to guide them over. Sirius honestly had been too focused on Harry to think about it.

Luckily they heard footsteps, and as charms dropped several others came into view, some huffing and puffing more than others. Sirius strode over to Remus, who looked a little pale. "You alright, Moony?"

When he grinned, the wolf was back in his eyes. "Better than ever, old friend," he promised, and Sirius believed him.

Diggle was the last one to show up, and while he was catching his breath Kingsley jogged down the stone steps, tapping his wand on the 'Staff Only' door. It swung open, and the bald-headed auror let out a quiet sigh of relief. "This way," he urged. All of them moved forward, wands raised. Sirius was right up behind him — he was the only one who was coming fresh to this fight. More than fresh; he was *begging* for the chance to finally put his wand to use, do something other than sit around and wait.

The atrium was emptier than Sirius had ever seen it, and the hair on the back of his neck pricked up.

"Where is everyone?" George asked in a low voice.

"Department of Mysteries, I'd bet," came Sirius' grim response. A murmur of understanding swept through the group; they all knew at least a little about what Voldemort was after down there.

They split up to take the lifts, and Sirius ended up with Remus, Charlie, the twins and Arthur Weasley. As the lift rattled along, Charlie leaned his shoulder against Sirius'. "He's going to be fine," he said quietly. Sirius' jaw clenched.

"Bloody better be."

“He’s Harry,” Fred piped up with a weak grin. “He’s always fine.”

“Terrifying in a fight,” George agreed; and he would know, after months of the HA. “And if he’s got our sister with him, those Death Eaters will be wetting themselves already.”

Charlie visibly stiffened at the prospect of Ginny fighting Dark wizards. Sirius put a hand on his arm. “Hey, it’s okay. If she’s here, it’s because Harry thinks she can handle it. He’s protecting her,” he assured, catching all the Weasley men with him in his gaze.

“They’re just kids, Sirius,” Charlie whispered, ragged and heartbroken. Sirius understood; he felt the same way when he watched Harry be taught multiple ways to kill a man, to fight against magic far more complex than he would learn in school. But it was too late to shelter the children, now. The best way to protect them was to teach them to protect themselves.

The lift doors shrieked as they opened, and the six of them stepped into the corridor.

They could hear the sounds of battle already.

Sirius didn’t wait for the rest of the group; he surged forward, heading for the door to the Department of Mysteries. He didn’t get very far, though; Charlie was still holding onto him, and reeled him back in, kissing him before Sirius even knew what was happening. “Don’t do anything stupid,” the redhead growled. “Alright? I’m not telling Harry I let you die on my watch.”

Sirius could only nod, and then blush when Fred let out a quiet wolf-whistle. He’d forgotten other people were around.

“Well, then,” Arthur said quietly, eyes wide behind his glasses. “That’s, uh... that’s a conversation best had later, I think.”

Sirius snorted, sharing an amused look with Charlie. They had that to look forward to, then.

With that in mind, he turned to the door, wrenching it open.

Sirius had been to the Department of Mysteries twice as a young auror, and both times he’d found it utterly creepy. Now, it was just terrifying.

Several of the doors were open, though all the ruckus seemed to be coming from one in particular. There was an unconscious and hog-tied man in a Death Eater robe in the middle of the circular room, a snapped wand at his side. Sirius turned to see Fred and George quietly high-fiving.

“That’s our lot,” Fred confirmed proudly.

Sirius was already looking for his godson, running straight past the Death Eater and into the room where the action was. It was a large coliseum style room, stone steps leading down to a plinth on which an archway stood, a piece of faded black fabric hanging from the stone.

The old execution chamber. Of all the places to end up...

While looking at the Death Veil made Sirius' blood run cold, he wasn't looking for more than a second; the room was utter pandemonium. Duels were happening all over the room, though a fair number of Death Eaters seemed to be disarmed and unconscious like their fellows. It made Sirius grin as he launched himself into a fight with Rodolphus Lestrange, tearing the Death Eater away from a red-haired girl who looked much like Amelia Bones had when they were kids.

"You're Sirius Black," the girl declared, ducking a spell flying her way and sending back an impressive Flame-Whip hex in return.

"I am. I was framed. Harry can tell you all about it," Sirius told her. Above them, the rest of the Order was spilling in and joining the fight, and Sirius could see the relief in the girl's eyes.

Rodolphus let out a shout of rage at the intrusion, sending a particularly nasty hex Sirius' way, but Sirius deflected it with a somewhat obscure Shield spell. While Sirius had Rodolphus distracted, the girl — probably Susan Bones — was watching for an opening, and she sure as hell found one; a Stunner hit Rodolphus in the thigh and he went down like a sack of bricks. Immediately, probably-Susan was darting in, plucking the wand from the Death Eater's hand and snapping it over her knee without a hint of remorse.

"Sirius!"

The voice that called out was familiar, and Sirius whirled around, heart clenching at the sight of his godson duelling Lucius Malfoy worryingly close to the Veil. Bellatrix Lestrange was looming behind them, but Tonks and Kingsley had her under control for now. Sirius hurried down the stone steps, dodging curses and sending his own in return, jumping over another bound and disarmed Death Eater — and really, it was embarrassing for them, how many of them had been taken down by a handful of school children.

"Looks like you hardly needed help, kiddo!" Sirius said once he was at Harry's side, throwing up a shield of his own to block Malfoy's Entrail-Expelling curse. Harry grinned breathlessly at him for a moment.

"Still good to see you." Harry sent a wordless jet of lurid purple magic at Malfoy, missing him by mere centimetres.

Had they not been in such dire straits, Sirius would have sat back and watched in awe as his fifteen year-old godson duelled with Lord Voldemort's right-hand man and *held his ground*. Harry didn't look overwhelmed at all, fighting back with determination in his green eyes. All around them, Death Eaters were realising how drastically out-numbered they were, falling to spells — many of which came from the students.

"The only reason you're not dead is because you still hold that Prophecy, Potter," Malfoy snarled. "But I've no qualms about killing your *dogfather* here." As if to demonstrate, he sent a Killing curse Sirius' way, and Sirius ducked quickly.

"Just fucking try it," Harry dared, and then his Bone-Breaker hit Malfoy square in the shoulder, causing him to groan in pain. Harry pushed forward, trying to press his advantage

— and then over his shoulder, Sirius saw Tonks go down to a bolt of blue light, and Bellatrix turn in Harry's direction. The animagus jumped to cover his godson's back, the pair of them moving together. Malfoy tried to circle around, veering closer to the Veil, trying to find some way to separate the pair of them. The whole room could've been falling to shit around them and Sirius wouldn't have noticed, *couldn't* let himself notice, couldn't stop to think about anything but Harry and their opponents. The only thing that mattered was protecting James' boy. His pup.

Bellatrix cackled and shot some poor quip at him, but Sirius could only laugh and return a spell; she'd been mad before Azkaban and she was even madder now, but Sirius didn't fear her anymore; the only thing he could feel was pity. She was flagging, too, with blood soaking one arm of her robe and the hem charred, and Sirius wondered if she'd had the privilege of duelling Harry Potter yet.

"No!" Harry shouted suddenly, and Sirius whipped around just in time to see Harry *bat a spell away with his bare hand*, sending it ricocheting back at Malfoy. The blond man was so surprised he didn't have time to dodge, getting hit right in the stomach with his own magic. It knocked him backwards — right into the middle of the stone archway.

Sirius felt the instant it happened; the voices behind the Veil — the whispers of the dead — grew louder in his ears for a single horrible moment, and the room's temperature dropped. Then, with a look of astonishment etched on his face, Lucius Malfoy was gone. Another victim of the magic that no one understood.

All of a sudden, an ear-splitting scream rent the air. Bellatrix was staring wide-eyed at the space her brother-in-law had just occupied, fury building on her face. "No!" she screeched, and Sirius moved to protect Harry from her retribution. But she wasn't going after him — she was running up the stairs, skirts flying. She was aiming for the door.

Sirius looked to Harry, who was grey in the face. His scar stood out a livid red on his forehead. "He's coming," Harry rasped, and then he was off.

.-.-.-.

Watching Draco's father fall into the strange, whispering veil seemed to take an age. Harry wasn't worried at first, more concerned with what the hell kind of wandless, wordless shield he'd managed without realising. He was preparing for Malfoy to get up and keep going — but he didn't. As soon as he touched the weird curtain, he was fading, falling through it like a portal to another place. He was gone in a moment, no sign of him on the other side.

Harry didn't have time to think about it too hard — Bellatrix screamed with rage, and then Harry's scar burst to life. He knew immediately what had happened; she had called her Master for back-up.

"He's coming," he warned Sirius, sprinting up the stairs, giving only a cursory glance around the rest of the room. He wasn't worried, not really; they'd been doing pretty well even before the Order had shown up, and Harry just hoped between Tonks and Kingsley the Death Eaters they'd incapacitated would actually stay captured. Of course, some weren't just unconscious; Harry hadn't asked his friends to kill, would never ask that of them, but he himself had no

such qualms at this point. Snape had taught him to be liberal with his Cutting curses, and any other bit of magic that could give him the upper hand.

Whatever dregs were still standing, it all seemed to be well in hand now, so Harry didn't waste time stopping to check on anyone. Bellatrix was headed for the atrium, and he wasn't going to let her get away.

Waiting in the lift was like an out-of-body experience, his heart pounding a mile a minute in his chest, his brain still burning with the image of Lucius Malfoy disappearing behind the veil.

How the hell was he going to tell Draco he'd killed his father?

Would Draco thank him for it?

He shook away the thoughts; he could deal with that later.

Bellatrix was screaming in the atrium when he arrived, and he shot a spell at her, but she blocked it. "How *dare* you!" she yelled. "You jumped-up little *half-blood*, I'll kill you, and pry the Prophecy from your cold, dead hands!"

"It's far too late for that," Harry taunted in reply. "It got smashed, in the fight." He spoke with utter conviction, watching Bellatrix turn white with fury.

"Impossible. *You're lying!*" Her words came out as an inhuman shriek, and she tried to summon the orb, but of course nothing happened.

Harry felt the Dark Lord's arrival before he saw it; a searing pain in his scar, which he had to use all his limited talent in Occlumency to shove away. When his vision stopped blurring around the edges, he saw the snake-like man in front of him, Bellatrix prostrate at his feet.

"You smashed my Prophecy, Potter?" Voldemort asked in that high, cold voice. Harry smirked.

"Yup. My bad."

A cry of rage came from the Dark Lord, while Bellatrix sobbed loudly.

"You worthless little *fool!* I shall make you experience pain so will *long* for death. Months of preparation, and my Death Eaters have let Harry Potter thwart me again!"

"Well, you know what they say," Harry retorted, dodging a Killing curse. "If you want a job done right, you've got to do it yourself."

He was a little glad everyone else was downstairs, not there to see him so recklessly taunting Voldemort himself. Adrenaline was surging through his veins, his plan utterly disintegrated in his mind by now. All he could do was hope that Amelia Bones had received his Patronus, and was working on the wards as they spoke.

Then, out of nowhere, there was a pillar of phoenix fire and a burst of birdsong.

Albus Dumbledore had arrived.

Harry grit his teeth at the man's genial greeting, like he'd bumped into Voldemort while out for an evening stroll. But it was doing its job; the Dark Lord's attention was no longer on Harry.

"It was foolish to come here tonight, Tom," Dumbledore reprimanded, magic flowing from him with such force that Harry felt it like a heatwave. Voldemort conjured a bright silver shield, and the magic hit it with a sound like a gong. "The aurors are on their way."

That was a relief, though Harry had to wonder why Dumbledore had not arrived with the rest of the Order. It didn't matter now. Harry shuffled backwards towards the golden fountain, the only defensible position in the atrium.

The duel between the two most powerful wizards in the world had begun, and Harry was not going to get in the way.

Their magic was flashy. That was all Harry could say for it. They were not fighting to kill, or even necessarily to harm. Dumbledore was fighting to intimidate, and Voldemort was doing whatever he could to show he was not cowed by it.

If it would have counted for anything, Harry would have shot a Sectumsempra right then to cut Voldemort's head clean off. But that would only buy them a little time until the man resurrected himself. Hardly any time, now he had servants who knew how to do it.

All of a sudden, the golden statue beside Harry jumped to life, the metal goblin leaping to take a Killing curse headed straight for Harry. Voldemort was trying to kill him again, clearly fed up with trying to best Dumbledore.

Harry stayed crouched low with his wand in his hand. Then there was a sound like a whip cracking, and the feeling of pressure releasing in the air, so strong and abrupt Harry's ears popped.

The wards had broken.

A flurry of pops sounded, and suddenly there was a crowd in the atrium. Among them was Cornelius Fudge, wearing his pyjamas — and at the front of the group, a woman Harry knew to be Amelia Bones, her wand raised as she stared Voldemort dead in the eye.

Fudge barely had time to gasp, before Voldemort was sweeping across the atrium towards Bellatrix, grabbing her by the arm and disappearing instantly. All around the atrium, fireplaces were flaring green as witches and wizards spilled in, but Harry was focused on Fudge. The Minister looked like he was having some sort of fit, stuttering helplessly.

"That was— he was— You-Know-Who! In the Ministry! Great heavens, how can— I don't
—“

"Mr Potter," Amelia Bones called, and Harry stood up properly, walking straight towards her.

"Well met, Lady Bones," he greeted, making her smile.

“Well met.” Then her gaze sobered. “Thank you, for your swift warning. Very impressive Patronus, by the way.”

Harry smiled halfheartedly. “Thank you. I wasn’t sure it would make it, I’ve never sent a proper message before.”

“We would have arrived sooner, but it took time to get *authorisation* to break the Ministry’s own wards,” Madam Bones replied, sending a scathing look at the still-blabbering Minister. “What happened? Where’s Susan?”

“Department of Mysteries,” Harry responded. “She was alright when I last saw her. They’re all down there, with a bunch of Death Eaters.”

Bones nodded sharply, and with a call to the Aurors she was leading a group to the lifts. Harry hoped Sirius scarpered before any officials arrived.

“I will explain everything, Cornelius, as soon as I have sent Harry back to school,” Dumbledore was saying loudly, reaching out to put a hand on Harry’s shoulder. Harry tensed.

“Harry Potter?” Fudge jolted, as if he’d only just realised Harry was there. “What— what is he doing here? What is the meaning of this?”

“As I have said, I will explain once he is safely back at Hogwarts,” said Dumbledore patiently. Harry glared at him, stepping back.

“I’m not leaving without my friends.” He made sure to raise his voice, cause a scene. Anyone who hadn’t already been staring at him absolutely was now.

“Harry, my boy, you have been through a lot tonight,” Dumbledore placated. “You must get back to school, where Madam Pomfrey can check on you.”

“My friends need to get back, too,” he insisted. “Or do you not want the public to know that six school children defended the entire Ministry from two dozen Death Eaters for almost an hour and a half before anyone showed up?”

That sent a cascade of whispers through the crowd, and Harry saw Dumbledore’s tiny wince.

“I just want you to be safe, my boy.”

“If you wanted me safe then where were you half an hour ago when Lucius Malfoy was trying to kill me?” Harry shouted. Many of the onlookers gasped, and Fudge turned an interesting shade of puce. “He’s dead, by the way. Fell through that weird veil thing. I’m assuming it kills people, at least.” Harry didn’t want Malfoy’s disappearance to be swept under the rug without a body. He wanted as many people as possible to know what had happened.

Dumbledore frowned, and the next thing Harry knew the headmaster was reaching out towards him with what looked like a bottlecap between his fingers. He pressed it into Harry’s hand, then pulled back and muttered a word, and Harry was spinning, the world a riot of colour.

The fucking bastard had forced a portkey on him.

Harry reappeared in the Headmaster's office at Hogwarts, which was fully repaired from the state it had been the last time he'd seen it. The people in the portraits all jumped in surprise, but Harry ignored them, heading straight for the door. It didn't budge. "Let me out," he growled, shoving harder, putting magic into it. Whatever ward Dumbledore was using to keep him in held fast. "Let me out!" The shelves rattled, several of Dumbledore's strange trinkets exploding. But the door did not move.

His fury rose, green eyes bright with rage and magic. "*LET. ME. OUT.*" He reached for the castle, and the castle reached back, and with a feeling like a rubber band snapping the door burst open. Harry jumped onto the revolving staircase, sending a wave of gratitude to the castle's magic.

He stepped out into absolute anarchy.

He'd thought the castle looked bad in the days after Fred and George had left; this was a thousand times worse in comparison. Paint was smeared on the walls, scorch marks studded the floors and walls and even ceilings. As he reached the stairs he saw students floating in giant bubbles, bobbing along merrily. He headed down, ignoring those who waved at him, looking out for any sort of familiar face. Eventually he ran into the Patil twins, who were barricaded behind an overturned desk in the middle of the third floor corridor.

"Harry! You're back!" Parvati greeted brightly. "How did it go?"

"Fine, yeah — Parvati, what the fuck happened here?"

The two sisters exchanged a look.

"We tried to keep Umbridge distracted," Padma told him. "Only, when she finally realised you'd gone, she sort of... pitched a fit. And then she tried to contact the Ministry and I guess that didn't work because she just *lost it*, started screaming about coups and mutiny and how the Minister was going to have everyone jailed. Then Lee Jordan let off some fireworks and she screamed and used the Cruciatus curse on him, and everything went a bit downhill from there."

Harry gaped at her. "I was gone for five hours!"

"A lot can happen in five hours," Parvati said with a sage nod. "Where are you going?"

"I need to find someone. Don't worry. Just... keep doing whatever the hell you're doing." He didn't want to know, at this point. He was far too tired for this shit.

"Just watch out for the Entrance Hall!" Padma called after him. Harry's brow furrowed in trepidation.

He understood the warning when he got there.

The Entrance Hall was now a swimming pool. Someone had turned the whole floor into a pool of water, and students were happily splashing away. There were even beach toys floating

about, and a few rubber ducks — some of which exploded into soap bubbles when touched.

Harry blinked. Then shook his head, turned around, and decided to use a Parseltongue passage instead.

The Chamber of Secrets was blessedly quiet, but Harry didn't stay long, heading straight for the wall that would take him to Snape's office. Thankfully, the man was inside, and he jumped to his feet at Harry's entrance. "Potter!" He rushed forward, gripping Harry by the shoulders. "When did you get here? What happened?"

Suddenly, Harry was hit by a wave of exhaustion, the entire day's events crashing into him at once. He swayed forward, forehead resting on Snape's thin chest. "The Ministry is safe. We captured a bunch of Death Eaters, and Fudge saw Voldemort in the flesh. And Lucius Malfoy is dead." Snape tensed at that last declaration. "Dumbledore's talking to Fudge now, he forced a portkey on me. I don't know where Neville and the others are." With any luck they had been moved to the Hospital Wing, or at least away from the Ministry.

Fingers gently gripped his chin, and Snape tilted his head up, looking him in the eye. "Let me in," he urged, and Harry didn't have the energy to argue. He welcomed the man's Legilimency, shoving the memories of the whole evening his way. He wasn't sure how long they were stood like that, how much real time passed while Harry sent flashes of the last five hours, but eventually Snape pulled away. Then, to Harry's surprise, the dour Potions Master pulled him into a hug.

"You bloody marvel, Potter," he declared, and Harry laughed.

"Wasn't just me. The others helped too." They had been so amazing, so much better than he'd ever imagined.

Snape smirked lightly. "Indeed. I could spend the rest of my life re-watching the memory of Rabastan getting his wand snapped before his own eyes, and I would die a very happy man."

Harry grinned; Ginny had done that, once she'd got the man tied up by his own robes. Then she'd punched him in the face to break his nose before Stunning him unconscious. It was brilliant.

"I don't know what to tell Dumbledore," he blurted.

"He will need to know at least some of the truth. The Heads' paintings will tell him you accessed your family magic to get out."

Harry blushed sheepishly; perhaps that had been a little foolish, yes, but he had just felt so *trapped*.

"He can't find me here," he realised all of a sudden. Snape nodded.

"I have been down here waiting to hear word — and ignoring the rebellion, quite frankly," he added, incredulity touching his voice. "But from what I have heard through the house elves,

your little defence club have gathered in the Great Hall to try and begin putting things to rights. The headmistress is... indisposed."

Harry *definitely* didn't want to know what that meant, but he nodded anyway, turning to the open space in the wall. He paused in the threshold. "Remus was fine, when I left that veil room."

Snape's responding nod was terse. "And I am sure he continued to be fine after you were gone."

That was that, and Harry didn't press further, continuing on his way. This time in the Chamber he followed a passage he had never used, but that he knew would take him up to the Great Hall. No one seemed to notice him stepping out from the wall beside the points hourglasses — all of which were entirely empty, now.

The house elf information network had been correct; Harry could see at least half the HA in the centre of the Great Hall, gathered around the Hufflepuff table. The room was in surprisingly decent shape, considering the state of the rest of the castle. But the signs of recent chaos were there if you knew what to look for.

"I leave you lot alone for five bloody minutes!" he burst out, startling everyone. He had to throw up a quick Shield spell at the number of curses that were sent his way.

"Harry!" Angelina exclaimed, going wide-eyed. "Where have you been?"

"It's complicated. I'll explain later." He could feel the intent eyes of the other heirs burning into him. "What happened here? I got a bit of a run-down from the Patils on the fourth floor, but I'll be honest it didn't make much sense. And then there was the swimming pool."

Several people snorted.

"We've got it under control now," Cho assured. "Mostly. We dealt with the worst of it once Umbridge was unconscious."

Harry's eyebrows rose. "Unconscious?"

A number of hands pointed towards the head table, where there was a large pink blob that Harry was only now beginning to realise contained the High Inquisitor. She was encased in some strange sort of bubblegum-coloured slime, limp and distinctly ruffled.

"She's fine. We think," Justin Finch-Fletchley assured him with an uncaring shrug. "She got hit by about sixty different spells so the mix was... interesting. Took a while to reverse it all. We'll get her up to Pomfrey once we've gotten rid of the swimming pool."

"Do we have to?" Colin Creevey sighed. "I've always wished Hogwarts had a pool."

"Maybe not one in the Entrance Hall, though," Harry pointed out, and Colin huffed.

"Spoilsport."

Harry surveyed the group, counting heads. “Where’s Lee?” he asked, remembering what Padma had said. Angelina scowled.

“With Pomfrey. That *bitch* didn’t have him under for long, luckily, but… it was awful.”

Harry, who had experienced more than his fair share of Cruciatus curses, nodded in sympathy.

“And the professors?”

A sea of sheepish faces. “Most of them are upstairs, dealing with the sixth floor,” Blaise volunteered. “It got… difficult.”

Harry *definitely* did not want to know.

“Right, then.” All he wanted was to curl up in a corner and sleep, but clearly the universe had other things in store for him. “I think stories can wait a bit. Let’s get rid of that pool, yeah?”

The group made for the doors, and Hannah slipped into the space beside Harry. “Where are the others?” she whispered urgently.

“Safe.” Harry hoped that wasn’t a lie.

Groans rang through the hall as the HA came to disrupt the impromptu pool party, and Harry raised his wand, pointing it at a purple rubber duck floating nearby.

And so that was where Dumbledore found him twenty minutes later; fishing second years out of the pool while they begged him to let it stay for just a couple days. The headmaster didn’t look nearly as alarmed as Harry would have anticipated, given the state his school was in. Indeed, he chuckled as one ballsy Gryffindor flung himsel back into the water as soon as Harry’s back was turned.

“Mr Potter, a word, if you don’t mind?” Dumbledore called, and a cheer went up at the sight of him, but all Harry could feel was cold dread. Nonetheless, he levitated himself over the pool, landing by Dumbledore’s side, and followed the man back up the stairs.

“I was surprised not to find you waiting in my office, Harry.”

“Yes, well I was surprised to find myself in there to begin with,” Harry returned evenly. “Involuntary portkey, not a fun experience. Especially not with my history of them.”

“Ah, I do apologise, but was necessary to remove you from that situation. Cornelius is already quite… volatile lately, I did not want to risk your safety,” Dumbledore told him. Harry held back a snort; a likely story. More like Dumbledore didn’t want interruptions when he spun whatever lie suited him best.

“And what about the safety of my friends? Where are they?”

“They have all been removed to the Hospital Wing,” Dumbledore informed him. Immediately, Harry turned down the corridor that would take him in that direction;

Dumbledore had been trying to lead him back to his office. “Harry, I must insist you come with me for a moment,” the headmaster attempted, but Harry kept walking.

“I want to see my friends. I need to make sure they’re okay.”

“You did not seem so concerned for their safety when you led them into danger,” Dumbledore said sagely, and Harry glared at him.

“They volunteered. They knew exactly what they were getting into. I’m still worried about them. Or do you not care about the lives of everyone you send into battle?”

“Those I send into battle are adults.”

“I’m not,” Harry pointed out sharply. “And yet you’ve managed just fine on that front.” He was losing his temper, perhaps, but he’d had a hell of a day, and the last thing he wanted was to hash everything out for Dumbledore so the man could give him some cryptic bullshit and sweep it all under the rug.

“Harry, my boy,” and there was that disappointed voice. “I must confess, I’m worried about you. You have been... different, this last year.”

“Maybe I’m just growing up,” Harry bit out. “Seeing your friend murdered in front of you will do that to a person.”

They reached the Hospital Wing, and Harry’s shoulders loosened at the sight of all five of his friends sat up in hospital beds, no longer covered in blood and dust and splinters of shelf like they had been when Harry had seen them last. They looked relieved to see him, too.

“How are you? Were any of you hurt?”

“Nothing Madam Pomfrey couldn’t fix,” Ginny promised. “She wants us all to stay overnight, but we’ll be fine tomorrow.”

That was excellent news, and Harry beamed at her.

“Ah, Mr Potter,” Madam Pomfrey herself greeted, stepping out of her office. “I was hoping you would arrive soon. Go on, then; on the bed, let me check you over.”

Harry didn’t argue with the mediwitch, perching on the edge of his usual bed and sitting still for her diagnostic spells.

“I have pieced together the vague series of events from various members of the Order,” Dumbledore began, “but I would like to hear your side of things, Harry. I am very intrigued to learn how six of my students made it all the way to London unaided.”

Harry bit his lip, thinking quickly to try not to incriminate Dobby. “We rode the thestrals, sir,” Luna piped up suddenly, in her usual dreamy voice. Dumbledore turned to her.

“Thestrals, Miss Lovegood?”

Luna nodded. “Yes, sir. Professor Hagrid taught us about them. They’re very fast, aren’t they?” Her pale blue eyes blinked owlishly. Dumbledore’s lips pursed, but the rest of them were straight-faced and nodding in agreement, so he could not press further.

“Indeed. Well, then. It is fortunate they carried you safely.”

Madam Pomfrey healed a cut on Harry’s cheek, and tutted. “Nothing but scrapes and bruises, Potter. All six of you are lucky as sin, going up against full grown wizards like that.”

Harry grinned to himself, sharing a look with his friends; luck had nothing to do with it. Those full grown wizards were not nearly as capable as they had made out to be.

“Excellent.” Dumbledore clasped his hands together. “Then, if you please, Harry; come to my office, and we can discuss the events of tonight.”

Harry wasn’t going anywhere with him. “We can do that here, sir. I trust my friends. Shouldn’t they know what they risked their lives for?” He had to play this carefully, and he wished he had one of his guardians there to help him because his brain felt like scrambled egg. “Voldemort wanted me to get a Prophecy, but it smashed in the fight.”

Dumbledore’s eyes darted quickly to the other students, but none of them reacted. Then, he sighed. “It smashed? You are certain?”

Harry nodded. “He was really angry when he found out. I suppose it was important. But it’s gone, now.” He put the appropriate amount of regret in his voice, wondering what the headmaster would say next. Wondering if he would admit that he knew the full words of the Prophecy.

He did not. “Indeed, it is,” Dumbledore sighed. “A shame. But do not fear, Harry; prophecies usually have a way of being fulfilled even when no one has heard them.”

Anger bubbled within Harry — yes, prophecies did get fulfilled, especially when meddling old goats were pulling strings without anyone noticing, cursing babies to use them as weapons when they grew.

“Tell me, my boy. What urged you to go to the Ministry tonight? You knew your godfather was in no danger.”

“Voldemort was going to take the Ministry,” Harry retorted. “The Order was busy. I wasn’t going to sit aside and let that happen. Which turned out to be the correct choice, considering how long we were there before the Order joined. Before *you* showed up.” Late as always, but just in time to take the most glorious part of the fight, and control the narrative of the outcome.

“I apologise that you felt there was no other option,” Dumbledore sighed. “I knew things would get difficult once I was no longer in the school. But throwing yourself into danger is never the answer, Harry.”

“But it worked! Look at us, we’re fine!” Harry gestured at his friends. “The Order is fine!” then he paused, “they are, aren’t they?”

“Nymphadora Tonks may need some time in St Mungo’s, but that is the worst of the damage,” Dumbledore confirmed, to Harry’s relief.

“See — we stopped the Death Eaters, prevented a Ministry coup, and stopped Voldemort from getting his hands on the Prophecy. I don’t think you can be mad at us for that, sir.”

Dumbledore clearly did not like this version of Harry that spoke back to him, though he was trying not to react outwardly in front of Pomfrey and the other students. “Be that as it may,” he said, a hint of frustration seeping in, “it was an enormous risk to take, and to expect your friends to take with you.”

“If I had seen another option, sir, I would have taken it,” Harry retorted evenly. “But I didn’t, and it’s done, and the only person who died is Lucius Malfoy, so I don’t really see that as a loss.”

Something flickered in Dumbledore’s eyes. “Death is always a loss, Harry.”

“Rather him than anyone I care about.”

“I’m sure the people who care about Lucius Malfoy would argue that. His son, perhaps.”

Harry didn’t know whether to laugh or curse the old man; he had *no idea* how Draco felt about his father. Harry would feel plenty of guilt over the situation, but that wouldn’t make him regret it, and he thought — he *hoped* — that Draco would agree.

“It has been a long and difficult evening,” Dumbledore said eventually. “I’m sure once you have had some rest, we can come back to this conversation with a more level head.” His tone was unbearably patronising, but at this point Harry was ready to take any end to the conversation with both hands.

“Great. I’m off to bed, then.”

“I’m sure Poppy would much prefer you spend the night with your friends here,” Dumbledore started, but Harry shook his head.

“Nope, I’m not injured, I’m not staying here.” He wanted to be properly reassured that his friends were alright, but that wasn’t going to happen with Dumbledore lurking around, and there was no way Harry was leaving himself so exposed by staying in the hospital wing overnight.

“Harry, please—“

“I’ll come see you guys in the morning,” Harry promised his friends, ignoring the headmaster.

“Tell Hannah to come visit in the morning, too, will you?” Susan requested. “She’ll be worried about me.”

Harry gave a thumbs up, and was out before anyone could argue, making a bee-line for the Room of Requirements. It took the form of his bedroom at Seren Du, and the sight of it tore a quiet groan from his chest.

“Ceri,” he called, and in an instant the elf had appeared. She looked Harry over with concern in her large brown eyes.

“Master Harry is hurt!”

“I’m fine, Ceri,” he assured. “Can you— would you take a message to Draco for me, please? If he’s alone. Tell him I’m back, and I’m up here.”

Ceri nodded and vanished, then returned a few moments later. “Master Draco is on the way. And Ceri brought Master Harry’s pyjamas.” She held out the bundle of fabric, making Harry grin weakly.

“Thanks, Ceri.”

The elf smiled and disappeared, leaving Harry alone.

The Room could have provided a shower, but Harry was too exhausted to even think about taking one. A weak Cleaning charm rippled sluggishly over his skin once he’d peeled off his school uniform, but the clean pyjamas felt good enough. He sighed in relief as he rolled onto the bed, not even pulling back the duvet.

There were a million and one things floating around his mind — he had to check on Sirius and Remus and the rest of the Order; he had to figure out exactly what the ever-loving fuck had happened in the school while he was gone; he had to deal with Dumbledore and whatever the man had told Fudge had happened.

But all that could wait until the morning. The only thing that couldn’t was Draco. Harry needed to tell him about his father before the rumours started.

The door opened quietly, and Harry looked up to see Draco slip in. The blond was visibly relieved to see Harry, and made straight for the bed, pulling Harry into a tight hug. Finally, the knot in Harry’s chest began to unravel itself — he was safe, he was with Draco. It was over.

But he still had to deliver the bad news.

“Thank fuck you’re safe, I was so worried,” Draco breathed, scattering kisses across Harry’s cheeks. “The school has been madness while you were gone, you’ll never believe some of the shit they pulled, but that hag is never going to come back to this castle after tonight, I swear,” he said with a smirk. Then he paused, took a proper look at Harry’s drawn face, and faltered. “What happened? What’s wrong?”

There was no easy way to say it. “Draco,” Harry sighed, fingers clenching around the Slytherin’s shirt. “It’s... your father died, at the Ministry. It... it was my fault. I’m sorry.”

Draco froze. Harry's heart sank as he watched his boyfriend, looking for any kind of response; sadness, anger, relief. But he was just... blank. "Oh," he said eventually. "I... what happened?"

Harry told him about the fight, and the strange veil, and the spell he'd deflected with his hand. He held Draco the whole while, feeling the tiny shudders rack his body. When he finished, he bowed his head, waiting for judgement. Draco just held him back tightly.

"He was trying to kill you," Draco rasped, and Harry nodded. "Then... it's not your fault. He brought it upon himself. I..." Draco shook his head, lying down. Harry eyed him cautiously, unsure if he should move closer or give the blond some space. "I never thought I'd be rid of him. Not truly. Certainly not before the Dark Lord died." He ran a hand over his pale face. "I'm free. Mother's free. My... my father is dead."

The words seemed to echo through the room. Draco stared at the ceiling for several long, silent moments. Then he looked at Harry, and his face softened. "You look exhausted." He pulled himself into a sitting position. "We can talk about... everything else, once you've had some sleep."

"Stay with me?" Harry asked desperately, wincing when his voice cracked. Draco leaned over, pressing their foreheads together.

"Of course, you daft lion. I'm not going anywhere," he promised. Harry's heart ached — his whole body ached, too, now the adrenaline was fading. But mostly he felt like he was going to cry, just from the sheer *force* of all the emotions from the evening, his love for Draco rising above them all.

Draco kicked off his shoes and stripped down to his boxers, while Harry reluctantly wriggled his way under the duvet properly. He wished that his first time sleeping in a real bed with Draco was under happier circumstances, but there was no way he was letting go now. He pressed himself to Draco's chest as soon as the blond boy joined him, and Draco's lithe arms wrapped tight around him, cocooning him safely.

And Harry fell asleep like that, with Draco whispering soothingly to him, promising that everything would be alright.

Chapter End Notes

You can breathe now, guys ;)

Chapter 73

They had to go to breakfast.

Harry knew this. He had to show his face, see the damage from the night before — both at the school and the Ministry. He had to see what the story was before it started twisting beyond his reach.

But *Merlin*, he didn't want to.

He let out a groan of protest, and felt Draco's chuckle rumble through his chest. "Come on," the blond urged. "Best get it over with now. Go to breakfast, check the paper, visit the Hospital Wing, then you can hide again." A kiss dropped to Harry's shoulder. "You know it's necessary."

He did, but that didn't make him any more eager to do it. Still, he reluctantly uncurled himself from Draco's embrace, and reached for his glasses on the bedside table.

"I suppose." It was already nearly nine. Luckily, it was a Saturday. He couldn't imagine having to face more classes after this. Or worse; *exams*.

The Room provided a bathroom, and the pair of them shared a shower, Draco helping Harry wash all the tiny glass particles and debris from his haphazard nest of hair. When they emerged, there were clean clothes waiting for them on the bed, no doubt thanks to one of the house elves. Once he was dressed, Harry's nerves began to rise. Draco reached for his hand, kissing the back of it. "It's going to be fine. Just keep your head up, and use all of that Gryffindor arrogance," he teased. Harry laughed. Then his green eyes softened with concern.

"Will you be alright?" They would have to go to breakfast separately, and Draco would have to deal with the whole school knowing his father had died — more than that, had died a Death Eater, trying to kill Harry Potter.

Draco nodded, and by the time he let go of Harry's hand the Slytherin Ice Prince mask was firmly in place. "I'll see you later," he promised, and then he was gone.

Harry took five long, steady breaths alone in the room, convincing himself not to just turn around and go right back to bed, and then walked out after him.

The school was still in a state of disarray, but the more pressing matters seemed to have been dealt with. Whatever had been on the sixth floor that required the entire staff to fix, there was no trace of it now, and the Entrance Hall was back to rights again — except for one lonely, half-deflated beach ball in one corner. Students stared wide-eyed at Harry as he passed, whispering to one another, but Harry ignored them.

Breakfast, Hospital Wing, Out, he promised himself, repeating the mantra over and over as he stepped into the Great Hall and sent the whole room into an abrupt silence.

The students were mixed again at the house tables, and Harry saw a small cluster of HA members at the end of the Hufflepuff table, so he joined them. His gaze flicked to the Slytherin table as he passed; Draco was there, looking exactly as stoic as Harry anticipated, with Theo and Pansy and Millie there to keep the busybodies away.

“Susan’s in the Hospital Wing, but she’s fine,” he said by way of greeting as he sat, directing his words to Hannah and Ernie. “She said to tell you to come visit as soon as you can. She should be getting released soon.”

The Hufflepuffs beamed in relief. “Brilliant. Thank you,” Hannah breathed. “I— you’d best take a look at this.” She handed over a copy of the morning’s *Prophet*, and trepidation rose like bile in Harry’s throat.

The headline was as expected; *You-Know-Who alive, attacks Ministry*. Some brave soul had managed to get a picture of Voldemort himself right as he grabbed Bellatrix to flee, and that took up most of the front page. Harry could see himself in the corner of the picture, battle-worn and scowling.

He skimmed the article, lips pursing. It wasn’t as bad as anticipated. Dumbledore had clearly gotten hold of the story, explaining how he had gotten wind of the attack and brought some ‘concerned fellow citizens’ to help, but somehow Harry and his friends had managed to sneak in and take on the Death Eaters themselves. He made it sound like the students had been struggling until the Order showed up, and Harry glared at that particular section of the article.

Further down, Amelia Bones was quoted, crediting Harry for raising the alarm at the Ministry through use of his Patronus message to her. What followed was a long, wheedling section that was ultimately a lot of arse-kissing from the *Prophet*, who were tripping over themselves to go back on everything they’d said about Harry being a liar and a lunatic.

At the end of the article there was mention that ‘a handful’ of Death Eaters had been captured but names would not be released until they had been questioned and processed. And there, practically a footnote; *Lord Lucius Malfoy is known to have perished in the attack*.

As if he had just stumbled across the Death Eaters and been hit by a stray spell.

Harry swallowed back a wave of disgust; of *course*, even now, there were so many people who had been paid off by Lucius Malfoy that they were not willing to so plainly accuse him. But word would get out, regardless.

By the sounds of the whispers in the hall, it already had.

“Monday’s classes have been cancelled,” Anthony informed him. “While the teachers put the school to rights over the weekend.”

“What happened to Umbridge?” Harry asked curiously. The group around him shared smug grins.

“She’s in the Hospital Wing,” Parvati supplied. “But I think the aurors will be coming for her, soon. There’s already been about thirty howlers from parents of kids who sent letters out last

night, since she was too busy to monitor them. Everyone knows about the blood quill.”

That was good. Now that Fudge was in disgrace, she might actually face consequences.

Harry could see that everyone had questions, and he didn’t blame them; the *Prophet* certainly didn’t cover everything.

But Harry was so fucking tired.

“The others should be getting out of the Hospital Wing soon,” he said, piecing together a sausage sandwich and grabbing a hard boiled egg. “I’m going to go up and see how they’re doing, take Nev and Ginny back to Gryffindor.” And then probably spend the rest of the day there.

“Okay. We’re going to help the teachers clean up the school,” Padma declared, gesturing to her fellow prefects. “Any help would be appreciated, if the rest of you aren’t busy.”

Harry left them sorting that out, eating his sandwich as he walked, glaring at anyone who looked like they might try and ask him anything about the night before. He felt one set of eyes burning into him more than any other, and stopped in the doorway to look back at Albus Dumbledore.

The headmaster did *not* look impressed. Harry grinned at him, offering a little wave, and carried on his way. So what if Dumbledore thought he was Voldemort incarnate? Harry was the darling of the Wizarding World again, thanks to Amelia Bones. And now the fight had begun, Harry could work on ruining Dumbledore’s reputation so no one would listen to the old man anyway.

As Harry walked up to the Hospital Wing, he could see teachers and students alike trying to set the school to rights; repairing suits of armour, cleaning stains off of walls, vanishing the remnants of strange and bizarre magic. Most of the students were members of the HA, and it made Harry glow with pride to see them assisting — and to see the teachers clearly impressed with their magic use. Several of them waved at him as he passed, and he waved back, but didn’t stop to chat.

The Hospital Wing was quiet, with one bed curtained off far away from the students; Umbridge, most likely. To Harry’s surprise, despite the chaos of the school the night before, there only seemed to be a handful of students in beds, other than his own friends. Those five were all sat around one bed, dressed in clean clothes and looking none the worse for wear after their excursion. “Harry!” Neville greeted cheerfully. “We were just wondering if you’d show up. Madam Pomfrey says we’re all good to go.”

“Glad to hear it,” Harry replied. He looked at them all, amazement plain on his face. “Listen, guys; last night— that was far more than I should have asked of you, and I’m sorry. But you all did brilliantly. You were fantastic.”

“Those Death Eaters didn’t know what hit them,” Ginny said vindictively, eyes flashing.

“Don’t apologise, Potter; we knew what we were getting into,” Daphne added. “Also, here. You’ll want this back.” And then she slipped him a palm-sized glass orb, winking. Harry grinned, quickly hiding it away in his pocket.

“Wait. Was that—“ Susan gaped at him.

“The Prophecy I told Dumbledore I smashed?” Harry finished, keeping his voice low.
“Maybe.”

It had been easy, to speak with conviction against both Voldemort and Dumbledore. To let them into his mind just enough to see him look on in horror as a glass orb slipped from his hand and shattered on the ground.

But it wasn’t the same orb he’d pulled from the shelf. That he’d passed to Daphne while they’d run, hiding the movement in all the chaos.

Harry wasn’t going to let any advantage in this war pass him by.

“You’ve been hanging out with your boyfriend too much,” Neville teased, making Harry grin wider.

“There are worse influences.” His eyes trailed over the five students; five people he’d hardly known two years ago, yet who had risked their lives for him without hesitation. “Thank you. All of you. I’d be dead if you hadn’t come with me. And there would be a lot more Death Eaters still at large.” He was keen to see an exact list of numbers, to see how many his friends had subdued.

“You don’t need to thank us, Harry,” Neville insisted, clapping him on the shoulder.

“We were just doing what you taught us to do,” Susan agreed.

“Besides, it was fun,” Ginny added, and all of them laughed.

“I’ve created a monster,” Harry declared in mock-horror. Ginny punched him gently on the arm.

“Come on, let’s get out of here before Pomfrey finds some reason to keep us longer,” she said. “I want to see what happened to the school before it’s all cleaned up.”

“I can’t believe the whole school went nuts so quickly,” Daphne mused incredulously. “I know it’s been building up all year, but...”

Harry nodded; he hadn’t expected quite such an explosion either. “I can’t believe Umbridge used an Unforgivable on a student in front of half the school.” Good luck to her trying to worm her way out of that one.

They bumped into Hannah and Ernie at the doors, and Susan left to go with her Hufflepuff friends after hugging Harry quickly. The rest of them split up there, Luna going back to Slytherin with Daphne while the three Gryffindors headed for their common room.

Sadly for Ginny, most of the chaos and destruction had been handled., but there were still some signs of things. Harry was too tired to go searching for the best parts, especially as people were looking even more keenly at him now. He just wanted to go back to bed.

..

Neville bullied him into coming down for lunch, and so Harry found himself accompanying his friend to the Great Hall — Ginny had disappeared hours ago, apparently intent on seeking out some of the more fun pranks before they were returned to normal.

It was a balm on his ire to see the hall as it had been before Umbridge's Decrees; students sitting wherever they pleased, talking and laughing without fear of being put in detention for disruptive behaviour. Hogwarts could actually feel joy again, now.

Harry took a seat at the Gryffindor table, reaching ravenously for a plate of chicken drumsticks.

"Is the *Prophet* telling the truth, Harry?" Colin called from a few seats over, wide-eyed. "Did you really fight You-Know-Who at the Ministry last night?"

"I did. So did Neville and Ginny, and Luna and Susan and Daphne. We all went."

A wave of chatter followed the proclamation. "Wow," Colin breathed. "And Dumbledore duelled him? And you saw it?"

"Dumbledore showed up just as I met Voldemort—" a collective flinch "— in the atrium, after we'd already duelled a load of Death Eaters. Voldemort—" another flinch "— was trying to kill me, so Dumbledore distracted him with a duel. Then the aurors broke the wards and showed up with the Minister, so Voldemort—" less of a flinch, this time "— grabbed Lestrange and scarpered."

"You mean Professor Dumbledore wasn't with you when you fought the Death Eaters?" Katie Bell queried, frowning. Harry hid a grin — it was never too early to start dismantling Dumbledore's lies.

"No, we were alone when we got there," he said.

"It was nearly two hours before anyone showed up," Neville agreed. "And even then, Dumbledore never came down to the Department of Mysteries — that's where we were fighting," he explained. "He didn't make it down there until after all the fighting was over, when he came to take us back to school. All the Death Eaters who were still standing fled as soon as the anti-apparition wards broke."

Wide-eyed gasps, and another explosion of quiet chattering.

"The six of you fought Death Eaters for *two hours* all by yourselves?" There was more awe in Colin's eyes than Harry had ever seen before, which was saying something.

Before Harry could respond, Neville was smiling widely and clapping him on the shoulder. "It's what Harry taught us to do, right?" he reasoned.

Thankfully, those who had overheard seemed much more intent on spreading word to as many of their friends as possible, than on pestering Harry for more details.

Harry saw Dumbledore enter the hall and make a bee-line straight for the Gryffindor table, and he tensed. “Hey, Nev, I’m gonna go for a wander,” he said in a low voice. “Avoid that conversation I *really* don’t want to have.” Hazel eyes flicked to Dumbledore, and Neville tilted his chin in assent. “Cover for me?”

“Yeah, no worries.”

Grinning in thanks, Harry stood up, grabbed an apple, and strode quickly in the opposite direction, heading for the points hourglasses. The Parseltongue passage was well-hidden there, and as it closed quickly behind him Harry cackled to himself, imagining Dumbledore stood in the hall wondering where the fuck Harry had gone.

Once again, he found himself sneaking through the passage to Snape’s office, though this time it was empty. That didn’t bother him; a quick check of the Map had him grinning, heading for the man’s personal quarters.

As the Map had revealed, Remus was there too, and Harry barrelled into the man in a tight hug.

“Oh, cub,” Remus murmured, stroking his hair. “I’m so proud of you. Padfoot is, too. You did brilliantly last night. I’ve been telling Severus all about it.”

Harry turned to the Potions Master, who nodded, a faint smile crossing his lips. “It seems you have been listening in our lessons. May wonders never cease.”

Harry snorted, recognising the compliment for what it was. “How is everyone else? What’s going on with the Order? Dumbledore said Tonks is in hospital.”

“She’s fine. A Compression curse caught her in the chest and broke a couple of ribs — punctured a lung — but they got her all healed up and with a few days rest she’ll be back on duty,” Remus relayed. “The rest of the injuries were minimal. Quite frankly, it was a walk in the park compared to the raid we’d just come from. Your lot took out half the opponents for us.” He ruffled Harry’s hair proudly, and the Gryffindor preened.

With hot chocolate delivered by Ceri, the three of them got comfortable in Snape’s sitting room, and Harry relayed the events of the night before the Order had shown up. Snape explained that Draco had come straight to him with the news as soon as Harry and the others had left, but once Umbridge began her rampage there was little he could do, so he retreated to the safety of his office.

“The students had it covered,” he said dismissively. “Any Slytherin that did not want to be involved had already been escorted to the common room. I decided to leave the rest to their own decisions.”

A round-about way of saying he supported the dissent in the only way he could.

"Well, I can't say much for what happened after the Ministry got involved," Remus said, shrugging. "I got Sirius out of there as soon as we got notice that aurors were on the way. Kingsley took care of the whole situation, from what I've heard. Made sure to send aurors he trusted to sweep the whole department for any stray Death Eaters you lot had left trussed up like turkeys." He gave Harry a teasing glance.

"Hey, you're the ones who taught me to disarm and incapacitate as quickly as possible," Harry defended. "I just passed that information along."

"There's going to be an Order meeting this evening," Snape cut in. "To discuss the impact of last night, and how to move forward. Already we are hearing reports of neutral families fleeing the country, now that the Dark Lord's return is public."

Harry's amusement died quickly. "We need to get the sanctuary plan in motion," he said, and Remus nodded.

"Sirius is going to come here in the morning and take you to the Pottery," he relayed. "It shouldn't take long for you to claim the blood wards. We can go from there."

"Will it be safe, for me to leave?"

"Have you seen the state of the school, Potter?" Snape pointed out. "Albus will have far more important things on his mind."

"He wants to talk to me, alone," Harry said with a grim look. "Avoiding him for the rest of the week is going to be a pain in the arse." If he could manage it, if he could just make it to summer, he would be in the clear.

"You're no longer hiding your magic," Remus said, "or your knowledge. Do whatever you can; he won't want to risk making a move in front of the rest of the school."

"You have the staff singing your praises, that should help keep him out of your hair," Snape added, eyeing Harry shrewdly. "Apparently since you burned the secrecy contract, members of your little club have been quite proudly telling their teachers who taught them the advanced magic they've been using to help clean up Umbridge's mess."

Harry's cheeks went hot. "Oh."

"You're beginning to gain a reputation," the Slytherin informed him. "I'm sure Albus is *thrilled*."

That made both Remus and Harry snort. "Well, as long as I'm allowed to piss him off, now; might as well do it properly," Harry remarked dryly. "Oh, that reminds me." He reached into his pocket and pulled out the Prophecy orb. Both men froze.

"You said that was smashed," Remus breathed.

"Did I?" Harry's expression was entirely Slytherin. "How silly of me."

“You managed to fool the two greatest Legilimens in the country?” Snape asked, looking both proud and horrified. Harry shrugged.

“The two most *arrogant* Legilimens in the country,” he corrected. “I told them what they expected to hear, showed them basic proof, and they didn’t question it. I did smash *a* Prophecy. But this one was safe in Daphne’s pocket the whole time.”

There was a beat of silence. Then, Remus poked Snape in the shoulder. “And you thought Sirius and I were all the influence he had. *Not my responsibility* my arse; you’ve made him as sneaky as you are!”

Snape’s pale cheeks went vaguely pink. Harry wasn’t quite sure what that was about, but he laughed regardless. “Anyway, shall we see what it says?”

“I... are you sure you wish us to be the ones to hear it?” Snape asked, surprisingly cautious. Harry nodded without hesitation.

“I wish Sirius could be here too, but you can always tell him later. I trust you both.” No matter what he’d thought when he’d learned of Snape’s involvement with the Prophecy and the murder of his parents, the man had proven himself a hundred times over by now. He deserved to know.

Harry leaned forward, removed the Unbreakable charm he’d put on the orb, and slammed it down firmly on the coffee table.

Immediately, the pearlescent ghostly form of Sybil Trelawney rose from the shattered glass.

“The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not... and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives... the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies...”

Then, she faded, leaving silence in her wake.

Harry stared at the small pile of glass shards, the words echoing through his head. “Well, then,” he croaked, and coughed. “That, uh... fair bit to unpack, there.” He looked up at the two men. “What do you think that power refers to? Just my family magics, or...?” He waved a hand up at his scar, to encompass the whole *horcrux* situation.

“It could mean the Slytherin magics in particular,” Snape suggested. “That is quite a heavy boost to your magic, and one he would be anticipating within himself rather than you. I believe the horcrux is covered in the later part; *neither can live while the other survives.*”

That was certainly true; Harry could not truly live safely with the shard of soul in his head — and the Dark Lord trying to kill him regularly — and Voldemort would always have a half-life while part of his soul existed within Harry.

“And Dumbledore put the block on my power, no doubt thinking that the explosion of its release could be the *power the Dark Lord knows not*,” Harry realised bitterly.

“Indeed.” Snape was solemn, thoughtful. “This knowledge changes very little of our plans, in all honesty. It does not suggest the number of horcruxes, or where they might be hidden. It is as vague and useless as most Divination.”

He was right, except the Prophecy wasn’t useless at all; it was worse than that, because so much damage had come from it.

“Business as usual, then?” Harry said, injecting false cheer into his voice. Remus and Snape both nodded.

“Business as usual.”

.

As instructed, first thing after breakfast the next morning Harry headed down to Snape’s quarters — once again neatly dodging Dumbledore’s attempt to talk to him. Sirius was waiting there, and the animagus pulled Harry into a rib-crushing hug.

“I know we’re on a tight schedule here, and we can talk properly in the summer, but I am *so* enormously proud of you, pup,” he murmured, making Harry’s heart clench. Then, Sirius looked up at Snape. “If we’re not back in an hour, you know what to do.”

The Slytherin nodded, and then they were gone.

For the second time in three days Harry found himself unexpectedly travelling by portkey. This time was easier, though, as he had Sirius’ arms securely around him. They landed in Sirius’ bedroom at Grimmauld Place.

“I thought we were going to the Pottery?” Harry queried, and Sirius nodded.

“We are, but this is just in case anyone traces the portkey. We’re going to apparate the rest of the way, alright?”

Harry, whose eyes had caught on t-shirt draped on the end of the bed that he was fairly certain belonged to Charlie, snapped back to attention and nodded. Sirius held him tight again, and then they were spinning.

“Here we are, Harry,” Sirius said, his voice soft and oddly choked. “The Pottery. Your ancestral home.”

Harry looked up at the huge wrought iron gates in front of them. They held the Potter crest, and the magic emanating from them felt so *familiar* Harry thought for a moment he might cry. Sirius nudged him forward gently. “Go on. They’re blood-warded, they’ll know you.”

Harry did as bid, stepping up to the gates and placing a hand on the lock. Instantly something pricked his finger, and then warmth flooded his body. The Potter magic searching him, twining with the family magic of his own core. It felt *happy*.

It felt like it was welcoming him home.

There was a click, and then the gates swung open, revealing the house ahead.

It wasn't as big as Seren Du, but it was just as beautiful. A large stone manor, like the old listed houses Aunt Petunia used to sigh over on the telly. The front lawn was a sea of wildflowers, and ivy crept up the front facing wall. To Harry's surprise, it didn't look as dilapidated as he expected after fifteen years of neglect.

That was quickly answered by two quiet pops, and the appearance of a pair of house elves in front of him. They were almost identical, wearing neat white toga-like uniforms, and they stared up at him with tears in their huge brown eyes.

"Master Harry has arrived," the elf on the left breathed in awe. "We has been hoping for many years this day would come."

"Essie? Tinker? Is that you?" Sirius moved to Harry's side, and the elves wailed loudly.

"Master Sirius!" the elf on the right screeched, throwing itself at Sirius' knees and hugging tightly.

"Bloody hell, I didn't realise you two were still around!"

"We is waiting, Master Sirius!" the elf wrapped around Sirius' legs cried. "We is keeping house and we is waiting, hoping we will have family again!"

It took a few minutes to calm their sobs, and Sirius looked up at Harry, beaming. "Pup, this is Essie and Tinker. They've been Potter elves since before your dad was born."

"Oh. It's nice to meet you." Harry hadn't been expecting elves. They both beamed up at him, still crying silently.

"Master Harry is looking so much like his parents!" Tinker crowed delightedly.

"Missy Lily's pretty eyes, just like Master James wanted," Essie agreed. Harry's breath caught in his throat. Beside him, Sirius laughed.

"Even as kids, James would go on forever about how he wanted his and Evans' future kids to have her eyes," he explained fondly. "Creepy little weirdo that he was."

Snorting, Harry looked back at the elves. "I... I can't stay very long. I'm supposed to be at school." Both elves drooped sadly. "But there will be people here again soon. Having you two here is brilliant, actually." With two elves running the place, the sanctuary would go that much smoother — and better protected. "Would you show me to the wardstone, please?"

"Yes, Master Harry, sir!" Tinker chirped, and then they were off.

As they walked up the driveway, Harry explained to the elves what he was planning — they seemed a bit sad that he was planning on living elsewhere for now, but eager to welcome new guests to the manor.

If they'd had more time, Harry would have loved a full tour. As it was, he promised to come back for one as soon as summer began, though he wasn't sure if he was emotionally ready for it; the elves said they had kept everything as it was, including James' childhood bedroom. And Sirius' room, from after he'd run away from home.

But for now, all he saw was the entrance hall, the basement stairwell, and the ward room. Sirius had to wait outside, as he was not technically a member of the Potter family, not by blood or marriage.

But he had already instructed Harry on what to do, so Harry stepped forward and placed both hands on the glowing red wardstone; a perfectly smooth crystal about the size of a dragon egg. Immediately magic washed over him, a hundred times more intense than the magic of the gates. His knees almost buckled with the force of it, but Harry pushed his Potter magic to the forefront, making his intentions clear. He was not there to cause harm, only to claim his birthright.

The battle of wills took several minutes, but eventually Harry felt the pressure ease as the wards accepted him. They lingered, a presence in the back of his mind. It was... odd; he could feel the two elves, feel Sirius in the house. His godfather had explained what it was like to hold house wards, especially *old* house wards, but it was still strange.

Sirius was grinning when Harry rejoined him in the stairwell. "Done it?" the animagus asked, beaming when Harry nodded. "Brilliant. Well done, pup." He bit his lip, hesitating. "There is one more thing I considered. But I'm not sure if you'll want it. And I completely understand if you don't." Harry raised an eyebrow. "I thought we could do a Fidelius charm on the property."

Harry went wide-eyed, and Sirius misunderstood the reaction, face flashing with hurt. "Yeah, no, of course not — not after the last one, that's just—"

"No, Sirius, I didn't say that," Harry protested. "I was just surprised." It made sense; an extra layer of protection for those who needed it. "Can we do a Fidelius charm?"

"I mean, I know how, if that's what you're asking. I can make you the Secret Keeper. If you want to. Then at least you won't have to worry about the people you welcome here sneaking in anyone unsavoury."

"Let's do it," Harry said decisively. It certainly couldn't hurt.

The spell was surprisingly less complicated than Harry had expected. "It's not all that difficult, but it takes power," Sirius explained. "And it relies so heavily on trust that a lot of people are too scared to use it." With a Fidelius, there was no consequence to the Secret Keeper sharing the secret, no monitor of how many or who they shared it with.

But Harry wasn't going to tell anyone who didn't need it, and so when he portkeyed back from Grimmauld to Snape's rooms after hugging Sirius goodbye, it was with the location of Potter Manor sitting safe and sound in the back of his head, along with his new awareness of the wards. He looked at Snape, and smiled briefly. "The Pottery can be found on the northeast

edge of Thetford Forest,” he declared, feeling the spark of magic pass from himself to the Potions Master. Snape raised an eyebrow.

“Fidelius, on top of the Unplottable wards?” Harry nodded. “Good. Now get somewhere public before someone comes looking for you.”

Harry wasn’t bothered by the abrupt ejection from Snape’s rooms. He had other places to be, after all; he used the Map to seek out Theo, finding him out on the grounds by himself.

“Hey,” Harry greeted quietly, warding the area as soon as he approached the Slytherin. Theo was sat on a bench not far from the greenhouses. “I have news for you.”

Harry sat beside him and leaned in, whispering the secret into Theo’s ear. Moss-green eyes widened. “It’s still Unplottable,” Harry warned him, “I’ll give you a portkey on the train.”

“Thank you, Harry.” Theo’s quiet whisper was hoarse, and Harry looked closer and realised the boy’s eyes were red-rimmed. A sudden realisation hit him.

“Theo, I— your dad wasn’t at the Ministry, was he?”

Theo’s mouth twisted in a sneer. “No. He was one of the Death Eaters torturing muggles up outside Manchester,” he revealed hatefully. Harry winced. “Along with Cassius’ uncles and cousins.”

“Fuck.” Harry wished Cassius would accept the offer of sanctuary.

“You’ve saved my life doing this, you know,” Theo told him matter-of-factly. Harry clasped his shoulder.

“I’m glad I could help. And I’m glad you made the choice to let me.” It couldn’t be easy, going against a father like Theo’s. He’d seen a similar struggle in Draco over the years, and that was with the support of his mother. Theo had no one, until recently.

Harry left the Slytherin boy to his solitude — or perhaps not quite that, for he passed Susan on his way back into the castle — and spent a pleasant afternoon avoiding Dumbledore by lazing in front of the fire in the Gryffindor common room. Everyone seemed to have recognised that the interesting bits of the story of the Ministry had already been said; now people just wanted to know what the fall-out would be. And that was nothing Harry could control.

He did, however, use Dobby to get a message to Blaise, telling him to get any kids whose families needed sanctuary to the Room of Requirement at seven.

Blaise didn’t disappoint. He met Harry at the Room at six fifty-five, and within ten minutes there were eight Slytherin kids of various ages in there with them. Harry vaguely recognised some, but most were students he’d never interacted with in his life.

“Okay, here’s the plan,” he began without delay. “I have an Unplottable, Fidelius-protected building that I will be setting up as a sanctuary for anyone who needs to avoid persecution from either side of this war. I won’t question yours or your family’s right to use it, but only

ask that you do nothing to jeopardise anyone else living there. You treat your fellows with respect, regardless of what you think of them. Remember, everyone else is there for the same reason you are. If you or your family cannot hold to these rules, this isn't the place for you."

One of the older Slytherins put his hand up. "What will we owe you for use of this building?" he asked expectantly. Harry resisted the urge to roll his eyes; bloody Slytherins!

"Nothing but the things I've already said. You keep the others in the sanctuary safe, and you behave while you're there. If anyone wants to get more involved in the war, that's something we can discuss later, but it's not in any way expected." Harry ran a hand through his hair. "All I'm asking is that you keep my secrets, the same way I'm keeping yours."

Several of the kids sent Blaise a look as if to say '*is this guy for real?*', and Blaise smirked. "Harry isn't the type to collect debts," he assured. "*Gryffindors*," he then added wryly, which seemed to placate the skeptics among them.

"So how do we get our families there before He can come for us?" the youngest, a timid-looking second year girl, asked tentatively. Harry grinned.

"I'm glad you asked."

It was a somewhat convoluted plan, but Harry was confident it would work.

Chapter 74

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Classes resumed on Tuesday, but the teachers' hearts weren't really in it. Flitwick spent the whole of the double period talking to them about the charms involved in various wizarding sweets — while letting them sample said sweets, naturally. Then, because McGonagall was still gone from the castle, their double Transfiguration was a free period. It was a glorious day outside, so Harry was happy to accompany Neville out towards the edge of the forest so the boy could look at some plant that had recently bloomed. Harry wandered his way over to Hagrid's hut; he'd hardly seen his half-giant friend all school year, he thought guiltily.

"Good to have you back, Hagrid," he said as they sat on the front step of Hagrid's hut in the sunshine, and Hagrid grinned.

"Aye, good to be back. I hear you got into quite the adventure while I was away!" Harry shrugged, holding out his arms in a '*these things happen*' sort of gesture, and Hagrid laughed. "Least you came out the end alright."

"I always do."

"An' everyone knows you been tellin' the truth, now," Hagrid added supportively. "You an' Professor Dumbledore." The bearded man's face grew concerned. "'E's worried about you, y'know."

"I know. But he doesn't need to be." Harry's stomach squirmed; one of these days, he was going to have to ask Hagrid to make a big decision about their friendship, and he wasn't sure which way it would turn out. "Hagrid... we're friends, right? And you trust me?"

"O' course!" Hagrid replied immediately.

"Good. Then... when it comes to Professor Dumbledore, and the way things go between me and him... just remember that, yeah?"

Hagrid frowned at him. "What d'you mean?"

"Nothing, just... I really hope we keep being friends, Hagrid. Even as I get older and things change."

A large hand came down heavy on his back. "Yer not gettin' rid 'o me any time soon, 'Arry, don't you worry!" Hagrid's grin turned a little sad. "Even though I know yer gonna tell me yer not takin' my class for NEWTs."

Harry winced; he hadn't even thought about how to bring that up, yet. "Hagrid, I—"

"Nah, nah, it's fine. S'not for everyone," Hagrid assured. "I reckon you've got classes a bit more important than mine to take."

"You've been a great teacher, Hagrid," Harry said earnestly. "And it's a fun subject." It just wasn't the career path for Harry. "I'll still come visit, when I can."

"That's alright, then," Hagrid declared, the matter settled. "We were friends before I started teaching yeh, and we'll be friends long after, I 'ope."

Harry hoped desperately that was true.

. . .

He stayed with Hagrid for a little while longer, remaining evasive about what he meant about Dumbledore — the same way Hagrid remained evasive regarding all the injuries he'd been getting all year, just insisting he 'had it handled'. As lunch drew closer, Harry decided to head back towards the castle. Neville seemed to have disappeared, either back to the castle or off to the greenhouses, so Harry was alone on his way back up.

In the entrance hall, he froze; Draco, Crabbe and Goyle had just emerged from a door to the side, coming up from their common room. They stopped at the sight of him. Harry's heart clenched.

He hadn't had the chance to spend time with Draco since he'd got back from the Ministry; both of them were under far too much scrutiny to risk trying to meet up. There were only a few more days of term; they could wait. But it still hurt Harry to see his boyfriend drifting around the school like a ghost in the wake of his father's death.

It hurt not to know how much of that was just a performance.

Draco sneered at him, clearly gearing up to say something, and Harry prepared himself for a performance — and then the door opened behind him, and Draco's face went even paler.

"Everything alright, gentlemen?"

Harry wheeled around at the voice, face lighting up. "Professor McGonagall!"

The Gryffindor housemistress looked more frail than Harry was used to seeing her, leaning heavily on a walking stick, but her eyes were as sharp as ever.

When Harry glanced back, the three Slytherins were gone.

"Oh— let me help you with that, Professor," Harry insisted, stepping forward to reach for her bag. He waited for the nod of permission, then took it from her hand, along with her travelling cloak. "It's good to see you back."

"I hear there was quite the ruckus in my absence," she replied, and even though he hadn't been involved in the mutiny against Umbridge, Harry still blushed. "Walk with me, Potter."

He did as bid, keeping pace with her slow, limping walk. She refused assistance on the stairs, but Harry remained a step behind her, just in case. "I have been in touch with the rest of the staff while I was away, Mr Potter. And, of course, I read the *Prophet*."

Harry winced.

"My colleagues have told me quite a bit about you," McGonagall continued. "Particularly, the feedback they have gotten from those students who claim to have been under your tutelage all year."

"I... Umbridge wasn't wrong about the secret defence club," Harry admitted, and McGonagall's lips twitched.

"We all knew that from the start, Potter," she informed him dryly. "What we didn't know was quite how... comprehensive your curriculum appears to be."

"There are more useful spells in a fight than just curses and jinxes, Professor."

"Indeed. And the healing charms? The conjuration? Professor Flitwick tells me some of his students say you taught them some rather advanced concealment spells."

"I asked everyone what spells they wanted to learn," Harry dismissed, "so really, it was a group effort."

McGonagall's shrewd gaze made him want to squirm. "Indeed," she said flatly. "And the five students who accompanied you to the Ministry, and by all reports aided you in the capture of no less than fourteen Death Eaters?" Harry had not yet heard that official number, but it sounded about right, and it made him grin.

"They asked to learn how to fight. So we learned together." It sounded a lot better than admitting Remus and Sirius had been training him in secret. "I had a bit of help from some Order members. But it's easy enough to teach people how to manage a solid Stunner, Disarming charm and Incarcerous charm. Those are the important ones."

"I hear you also taught your friends to snap their opponent's wand." He couldn't tell if McGonagall sounded impressed or dismayed.

"Only in a serious fight," he insisted. "But if their wand is snapped, they can't get it back and hex you with it."

There was silence once more as McGonagall focused on making it up the last few stairs. Then she eyed him carefully. "Professor Dumbledore believes there to be outside influences at work on you."

Harry held in a snort; the only outside influence was Dumbledore himself, and Harry had shed those! "I have learnt over the last few years that Professor Dumbledore is not as omnipotent as he seems. Nor as trustworthy."

McGonagall's eyebrows jumped up her forehead, but Harry held her gaze patiently. He wanted so badly for her to be on his side, to be willing to see Dumbledore for the man he truly was. "I believe Albus likes to think himself infallible," she said eventually, "and that can often lead to less than ideal results."

It wasn't much, but it was enough. Harry's shoulders relaxed, ever so slightly, and he shot a quick smile at his housemistress.

"You know, Mr Potter," she said, coming to a stop outside her office, "from everything I've heard, you would make an excellent teacher," and then she smiled — not wide, but bigger than anything he'd seen from the reserved woman. "Once you're done taking the quidditch league by storm, of course."

Harry grinned at her. "I'll certainly think about it, Professor." He'd heard worse ideas.

"You do that." She accepted her bag and cloak back, opening her office door. "I look forward to seeing your OWL results, Potter."

"I hope they're worth the anticipation," he joked. To his surprise, McGonagall placed a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"I can guarantee, Mr Potter, that whatever is in those results will be something you should be proud of. Something your godfather and Professor Lupin will be proud of. Your parents certainly would be, were they here to see it." A quick squeeze. "I am proud, to have you as my student. Both for what you have done at the Ministry, and everything you have done for your fellow students during the course of this last year." She narrowed her eyes knowingly. "Don't think I don't know where those care spells for those wretched Blood Quill wounds began circulating."

Ducking his head to hide his blush, Harry had to swallow against the lump in his throat. "I— thank you, Professor. That means a lot to hear."

She pat his shoulder once more, then stepped into her office. "Oh, and do try and stay out of trouble for the rest of the week, Potter," she added wryly. "I may be back on my feet, but that is an extra stress I do not need."

Harry laughed, offering his most innocent smile. "I'll try my best, Professor."

Yes, there was definitely hope for Minerva McGonagall yet.

. . .

Harry still didn't have his own subscription to the *Prophet*, but he was thinking about getting one, and when Wednesday's headline stared him in the face across the breakfast table that morning, he almost spit out his tea.

'Not As Black As He Seems? Death Eater Captured At Ministry Is Confirmed Peter Pettigrew: Sirius Black Case To Be Re-Opened'

"Hey, can I borrow that?" Harry requested. Alicia shrugged, handing the paper over.

He read the article quickly — evidently one of the still-masked Death Eaters they had subdued during the battle in the DoM had been Pettigrew all along, and he was now in Ministry custody awaiting questioning by Veritaserum. They were asking members of the

public to come forward if they had any information on the incarceration or whereabouts of Sirius Black.

Harry's heart pounded in his chest, and his gaze sought Susan out at the Hufflepuff table. Luckily, she was in her usual seat, and Harry hurried over to her. "Susan!"

"Harry," she greeted, scooting over to make room for him. "You've seen the paper?"

"Susan, I— you saw him, right? Fighting with us, at the Ministry?" he asked quietly, and she nodded. They both knew he wasn't talking about Pettigrew.

"He was on our side, for sure," she confirmed.

"Will you write to your aunt?" he begged. "Tell her I'm willing to testify to whatever jury I need to. And—and tell her to look into my parents' wills, if they had any." It always seemed suspicious to Harry that his parents wouldn't write something in their wills to clarify the Secret Keeper in case of their deaths.

"I will. But you can write to her yourself, if you'd like," Susan pointed out. "I know after what happened the other night, she wants to meet you properly." The red-haired girl grinned. "She told me to invite you over for dinner sometime this summer, if you're willing. Seems she wants to thank the boy who turned her niece into such a '*ruthless little warrior*'."

"I'd be happy to," Harry agreed brightly. "I, uh, don't know what I'm doing this summer, though. I'll get back to you."

"Once your godfather is free, we'll invite you both over," Susan said, and there was so much confidence in her voice Harry couldn't help but hug her.

Sirius could be *free*.

.-. .

At Grimmauld Place, Sirius Black was staring at the same newspaper headline, hands clenched tight around the paper, heartbeat a furious drum in his otherwise empty head.

"Sirius, what's the matter?" Charlie asked, yawning. He had stayed the night, and was over at the stove cooking omelettes. He hadn't seen the post arrive.

Sirius made a noise that was halfway between a yelp and a groan, and Charlie looked over. And then dropped the frying pan with a clatter. "Holy fuck." He hurried over, one warm hand on Sirius' shoulder as he leant over him to read the headline. Sirius still couldn't think, not really, but he focused on that hand, that grounding pressure, until finally he could breathe normally again.

"They got Pettigrew," he breathed, wide-eyed in astonishment. He craned his neck, meeting Charlie's gaze. "They've caught Pettigrew. They... they're looking into my trial."

"And Kingsley's on it, so you know he won't let the rat escape," Charlie added. His thumb began to stroke the curve of Sirius' neck, his dimples out in full force as he smiled brightly.

“You’re going to be free, sweetheart.”

Sirius surged up, dropping the paper in order to get a hand in Charlie’s fiery hair, his other bracing himself on the man’s shoulder. Charlie kissed him furiously, both of them pouring their relief and delight wholeheartedly into the embrace.

They were so engrossed in each other that they didn’t notice the fire in the grate flare green. But they did hear the scream.

Molly Weasley stood in front of the hearth, staring at the pair of them in utter shock. “You... but... Charlie.” She snapped out of the daze, face rapidly turning red. “Sirius Black, what in *Merlin’s name* do you think you’re doing to my son? Charlie, get away from him,” she urged in a high-pitched, alarmed voice.

“He wasn’t doing anything I didn’t want, Mum,” Charlie insisted, making Molly’s eyes bulge.

“But—he’s so much older! And a criminal!”

“Wrongly convicted, as you well know,” Sirius said, getting to his feet, glaring at the woman. Whether it was the news of his impending freedom or the surety of Charlie’s hand on his shoulder, Sirius felt suddenly like he could do absolutely anything — including tell Molly Weasley where she could shove her judgement. “Charlie is a grown man, Molly. He doesn’t need you making his decisions for him.”

“He is my son!” Molly argued. “I won’t have you *manipulating* him into some kind of relationship he thinks he wants! He’s barely older than Harry!”

“He’s eight years older than Harry, and how *dare* you accuse me of manipulating him!” Something in Sirius snapped, and an entire year’s worth of anger came spilling out. “I don’t care that you don’t think I’m good enough for him — hell, I agree with you! — But you will not do him the disservice of thinking he isn’t capable of making his own bloody choices about who he wants to be with! And more than that, you will not accuse me of *forcing* him into anything, *in my own house!* Or have you forgotten that, Molly?” he pressed, and over on the counter the plates began to rattle. “This is *my* house, where I have allowed you and your family to live for weeks, completely for free, eating food that *I* paid for, enjoying the safety of wards that *I* hold, and not once have I heard a single word of gratitude! All you’ve done is act like you own the place, talk down to me, belittle me in front of my godson and the Order and your own children, treat me like I’m some filthy criminal when we all know I never deserved to be in Azkaban! You’ve treated my house like it’s some den of Dark magic and iniquity, too good for your *precious* babies, trying to throw out my family heirlooms without so much as *asking* if I might want to keep them! And now you come in here — entirely uninvited, might I add — and try and convince the man I love that he shouldn’t be with me? Well *I have had enough!*”

Abruptly, Molly turned chalk-white, and Sirius snarled at her. “I am barring you from the house wards, Molly. You’re no longer welcome here.”

“But—but the Order!”

“Not my problem,” Sirius snapped. “You don’t like it, take it up with Dumbledore.” They could all bugger off, as far as he was concerned. “Now get out of my house!”

“Charlie. Charlie, please. Come with me. Can’t you see this man is dangerous?” Molly turned imploring eyes on her son, but Charlie’s hand remained firmly on Sirius’ shoulder.

“No, Mum, he’s not. I’m staying here.”

Molly looked at him, tears in her eyes, but when he didn’t move she huffed. “*Fine.*” She turned to the fire, grabbed a handful of floo powder from the tin, and was gone.

Immediately, the anger drained from Sirius like someone had pulled the plug. He was breathing like he’d run a marathon, and leaned back against Charlie’s broad chest. “I’m sorry,” he said hoarsely, belatedly realising that may not have been the best way of handling things. “Charlie, I—“

But anything he might have said was swallowed by Charlie’s tongue pressing furiously into his mouth, the redhead spinning Sirius around and pinning him to the table by his hips.

“Watching you stand up for yourself was *so fucking sexy*,” the redhead rasped, lips trailing down Sirius’ stubbled jaw. “Merlin, sweetheart. Don’t apologise. Mum’s had that coming for months.”

Sirius was lightheaded with relief and euphoria and a dozen other things, and he gripped the back of Charlie’s t-shirt. “I need to write to Amelia Bones,” he said dazedly. Charlie stroked his shoulder.

“Not yet. You’re still shaking,” he pointed out, and Sirius realised he was right. His body was trembling, he was going to *fall apart*. So many emotions bouncing around him, so many *positive* emotions he could hardly breathe from it all. The table digging into the back of his thighs was helping a little, but he needed more, he needed grounding.

“Upstairs,” he gasped, and Charlie pulled back to look him over properly. Those beautiful sapphire eyes lit up with arousal. “I need you.”

“Now that sounds like a much better plan,” the dragon tamer drawled, the sound caressing Sirius’ bones. “I’ll take you upstairs, and fuck you into the mattress so hard you’ll see stars. Then you can write whatever letters you want.” He kissed Sirius hot and hard, and when he pulled back this time his face was softer, something else burning in his gaze. “And *then* we can talk about how you told my mum you love me.”

Sirius’ heart stuttered. He had said that, hadn’t he?

But Charlie was smiling, and he was still there, so maybe it was okay.

.-.-.

The end of term arrived, not with a bang, but with a whimper. Or, more accurately, with an enormous sigh of relief.

Dumbledore's end-of-year speech had been as vague and useless as always, reminding people to trust in the power of love and always find the light in the darkness and other such platitudes. The house cup had been awarded to Ravenclaw for their grand total of sixty-seven points, which was still an impressive amount to have been gained in the week since *The Umbridge Incident* as it was now being referred to. Cornelius Fudge had officially been sacked, and the hunt was on for an interim Minister — it seemed no one wanted to risk a proper vote with the country so fraught. Harry quietly hoped Amelia Bones got the job.

But at last the students had packed, the seventh years had cried, and Harry was finally heading down to the train station at the end of another year at Hogwarts.

“Harry, my boy.” The call sent a burst of annoyance through him. He’d managed to avoid Dumbledore successfully for the last week, needing more and more blatant methods of escape. He’d thought he was free.

Evidently not.

“Headmaster, I really must get to the station,” Harry said, still walking through the Entrance Hall. Dumbledore moved closer towards him, frowning faintly.

“I only need a moment of your time,” he insisted. Harry snorted — he doubted that.

“Sir, I don’t want to miss the train. Can’t it wait until next year?” By which point, the stage would be set and likely Dumbledore wouldn’t want to talk to Harry at all.

“I suppose I can come and see you at your godfather’s house,” the headmaster remarked, and Harry forced a smile on his face to cover his laughing eyes. If Dumbledore thought he could find Harry at Grimmauld, he had another thing coming. “Very well, then. I shall see you soon, Harry.”

“Goodbye, sir.”

Harry jogged to catch up with Neville, who eyed him warily. “What did he want?” the blond asked, and Harry shrugged.

“The usual. He says he’ll stop by Sirius’ place for a chat in the summer.” He rolled his eyes, and Neville snorted.

“Good luck to him on that.”

They joined the crowd of students heading for the station, and soon the pair of them were tucked away in a compartment with Ginny, Luna, Daphne and Blaise. The two Slytherins had been adopted quite neatly into the group, thanks to their partners, even though Blaise’s was no longer at school. Harry had been ferrying letters between them with Remus and Ceri since the twins had left, and their relationship seemed to be going strong.

“You should come visit this summer,” Ginny said to the two Slytherins. “Luna only lives over the fields from me. And I’m sure George would come home if you were around,” she added to Blaise, who smirked.

"Considering I plan to spend at least three weeks of summer at his flat, I don't need to come visit you to see my boyfriend," he said, "but I'll keep it in mind."

"Please, someone come visit," Ginny begged. "Otherwise it'll just be me and Ron."

Harry grimaced in sympathy, and he wasn't the only one.

"You can come stay with me," Neville offered, and then went bright pink. "I mean, Gran wants to meet you properly, and I'm sure she wouldn't mind if you wanted to come over for a week or two. Or more. Or less. Whatever, really."

Ginny laughed, pecking her babbling boyfriend on the cheek. "I'd love to," she assured. "Talk to your gran and let me know."

"I'm gonna be a bit all over the place, but you're always welcome at Sirius' place," Harry assured her. He hadn't said a thing about Charlie yet, even though Sirius told him Bill proposed to Fleur the day after the battle at the Ministry. Neither of those things were his news to share.

Harry looked out the window as the conversation turned to miscellaneous other summer plans, watching the green hills of the highlands roll by. "I'm gonna have a wander," he said, getting to his feet. "I'll be back in a bit."

They waved him off, unconcerned, and Harry stepped out into the train corridor. He glanced into compartments as he passed them, looking for familiar faces; he found one full of Gryffindor seventh years fresh from their graduation ceremony, and was dragged inside so Angelina and Alicia could hug him and make him promise to replace them with good chasers, but not *too* good, because they wanted him to miss them. Another compartment held a bunch of Hufflepuffs in his year, and while Megan Jones and Oliver Rivers eyed him coolly, Susan and the rest were happy to chat.

It was still a surprise to Harry, how many people he knew in the school — it was even more now, he realised, since he'd done the HA. Now he had all sorts of people waving at him, exchanging friendly words, wishing him a good summer. Loads of his friends promising to keep in touch.

He'd come a long way from the boy who only had Ron and Hermione.

Speaking of whom, he found them in a compartment with Dean and Seamus; Hermione reading a book while the three boys played exploding snap. Harry didn't stop to chat, but as he looked in the door Hermione caught his eye, giving him an unreadable look that made him vaguely uncomfortable.

He carried on quickly, and was relieved to find Cho with the Hufflepuff seventh year boys a few compartments down. All of them showed signs of crying, and Cho was holding the picture of Cedric that had been up in the Room of Requirement for so long.

"Don't be a stranger, eh, Potter?" Patrick said, reaching out to shake Harry's hand. "If you need us, we'll be there. Cho knows where to find us."

"I'll keep that in mind," Harry promised seriously. All of the boys were skilled duellists after their time in the HA, and Harry would be happy to fight with them any time.

Cho hugged him, kissing his cheek. "Write me this summer, if you can?"

"I will, yeah." He wouldn't have any restrictions on his mail this time, and he was very much looking forward to that.

Harry carried on his way, stopping briefly to look in to a compartment full of Slytherins — namely Draco, Theo, Pansy, Millicent, and Cassius. Checking the corridor, Harry slipped in quickly, warding the door so no one could see through it.

"Oh, it's you," Pansy sighed, and Harry snorted.

"Nice to see you, too," he said dryly. He turned to Draco. "Where are Dumb and Dumber?"

"Bathroom," Draco explained. "So you've got a bit of time." He reached for Harry, unceremoniously pulling the Gryffindor into his lap and kissing him firmly.

"Draco, must you?" Millicent sighed. Harry felt Draco raise a hand, and was certain his boyfriend had just flipped her off.

Reluctantly, Harry pulled back. "I didn't actually come here for that," he said, though he certainly wasn't complaining. "Just wanted to check you're all okay going home." He knew Pansy's father was one of the Death Eaters arrested at the ministry, though unfortunately Theo's father was not. But all of them still had active Death Eaters in the family.

"We'll be fine, Potter," Pansy assured. "And if we're not, we know where to go." Harry had told all of them the floo address for Remus' cottage that he hardly ever used, just in case they needed a fast escape.

"Cassius?" Harry checked, still feeling uneasy about letting the now-graduated Slytherin go back to his uncle and brother.

"I'll stay as long as I can last," the dark-haired boy said. "I told my uncle I got a flat, so I shouldn't need to put up with them too much. I'll be able to be at Ollie's." He looked relieved at the prospect of seeing his boyfriend again.

"Good. But if they start talking about Marking..." Harry trailed off, and Cassius nodded sharply.

After the fiasco at the Ministry, Voldemort was likely to be looking to refill his ranks. Cassius might not be able to think up excuses for long enough.

"Theo, got your portkey?"

Theo nodded, patting his pocket. He would be heading to meet Charlie straight off the train, who would take him to the Pottery. He wouldn't be alone for too long.

"Good." Harry looked to Draco, frowning. "And you're sure I can't convince you to come home with me?" He wanted Draco and his mother in Seren Du, where they would be safe.

"Mother is now the Lady of Malfoy Manor," Draco pointed out quietly, smirking. "Somehow I don't think she will be chased out of her own home quite so easily."

From what Harry knew, Narcissa was playing the dutiful mourning wife and Death Eater, and would continue to do so until her son was home. She was being remarkably evasive about what her plans were past that point.

"Just be careful," Harry fretted, pushing Draco's hair out of his eyes. Draco's gaze softened.

"We're Slytherins, remember? Not reckless Gryffindor fools. We will be just fine, and I'll see you soon."

Soon was too vague, in Harry's opinion. "You lot, close your eyes," he warned, then pressed his lips to Draco's, breathing in the scent of him, wanting to make the most of their kiss before they were separated for Merlin knew how long.

The kiss went on for a while, until eventually one of the others got fed up and drenched them with an Aguamenti. Harry spluttered, breaking away from Draco, and turned to glare at an unrepentant Pansy.

A quick spell had them dried off, and Harry gave Draco one last kiss before getting to his feet. "Fine, fine, I'm going," he mock-grumbled. "Stay in touch, all of you."

He Disillusioned himself, removed the ward from the door, and left the compartment, finally heading back to his own. He was satisfied, for now.

. . .

By the time the train was pulling into the platform, Harry was half asleep sprawled over the bench seat with his head in Ginny's lap and his legs in Neville's. He groaned as the train rocked to a halt, dragging himself into a sitting position. "Oh, I can't wait to finally be able to *relax*," he declared vehemently, getting several noises of agreement. Between Dumbledore, Umbridge, and everything else, Harry didn't feel like he'd truly relaxed since Christmas.

"I'll write soon," Daphne promised, leaning over to kiss both him and Neville on the cheek before tugging Luna's hand. "Come on, honey, I want to introduce you to my uncle."

Luna hugged them all, and then she and Daphne left. Harry helped Ginny get her trunk down from the rack, and the four of them shuffled their way off the train. Harry looked around the platform, eyes lingering on several Slytherins, all approaching family members who looked a little too panicked to be comfortable. All of them held portkeys — they just had to last until the morning.

Mrs Weasley and the twins were easy to spot, the twins dressed in identical lurid purple dragonhide suits. Beside them were Remus and Tonks, the latter with bright Gryffindor-red-and-gold chin length hair.

George broke away from his family as soon as he spotted them, barrelling over and immediately sweeping Blaise into a kiss that wouldn't have been out of place in a muggle romance film. Ginny made an exaggerated noise of disgust.

"Caro mio, it warms my heart to see you have found a man so expressive." Immediately the two boys pulled apart, Blaise breaking out into a wide smile while George went a little paler.

"Mama," Blaise greeted, holding out a hand to an incredibly gorgeous woman who could only be his mother. Her skin was a few shades lighter but she had the same nose and mouth as Blaise, her green eyes almost as bright as Harry's. "This is George; I told you about him."

"It's nice to meet you Lady Zabini," George croaked, offering a somewhat clumsy bow. Blaise's mother laughed, the sound like a chorus of bells.

"He is charming, Blaise," she declared, patting George's hand. "You must join us in Italy for a while, if you can. My son tells me you are quite the young entrepreneur." Her smile was warm and welcoming. Nothing like Blaise's cold Slytherin facade. "Come, caro, say goodbye to your friends. You will see them soon, I'm sure."

Her gaze drifted briefly over to Harry, and she nodded ever so slightly, understanding passing between them. She would do whatever she could to protect Blaise, and Harry would do what he could to help her.

Blaise shook Harry and Neville's hands, kissed Ginny's cheek, then gave George a sweet kiss and murmured something in Italian, before heading off with his mother.

At last, Harry made it over to Remus and Tonks, laughing as Tonks hugged him so hard his feet left the ground. "Wotcher, Harry!" she greeted brightly, ruffling his hair.

"Hi, Tonks. You're obviously feeling better." He was glad to see it. Remus hugged him next, much more gently.

"Hello, cub. You ready?"

"One moment." Harry turned to the Weasleys, where Neville was being greeted a little frostily by Mrs Weasley. Harry had heard about her explosion over Sirius and Charlie, which had apparently been made worse by the news of Bill's engagement; it seemed she was less than impressed by all her children's choices in partner, now.

Ginny just glared at her mum, pulling Neville into a kiss and promising to write soon. Then Neville looked to Harry, and the two boys shared a tight hug. "Let me know how your plans go," Neville urged, hazel eyes meeting green. "If I can help, I want to."

"I know." It was a little overwhelming, sometimes, the depth of Neville's loyalty to Harry, but it was something he would never take for granted.

With a little wave to the rest of the group, Neville disappeared to find his gran. Mrs Weasley turned to Harry, kissing both his cheeks with a slight frown still on her lips. "Are you sure you don't want to come with us, Harry, dear? There's plenty of room, these days."

Harry offered her a tight smile. “I’m good, thanks, Mrs Weasley.”

Letting himself be bundled in a hug by Ginny and the twins all at once, Harry was laughing when he escaped, reaching out to Remus. Just in time, too; Ron and Hermione were on their way over.

“Okay, Moony,” he declared, beaming. “Let’s go home.”

Chapter End Notes

Buckle up, kiddos. It's gonna get a little wild from here on out~

Chapter 75

It was a novel thing, not even needing to pretend to go to the Dursleys' at the start of summer. But Harry didn't have the chance to properly enjoy it; he was up early the first morning of the holidays, anticipation buzzing through his veins. They had a big day ahead, and he needed everything to go smoothly.

Ceri had breakfast ready for all of them, and Harry gave a sleepy half-smile. "When's the first one due?" Remus asked, and Harry checked his watch.

"Eight." They had twenty-five minutes to get there. Remus nodded, and the pair of them ate quickly. On their way out, Remus briefly laid a hand on Snape's shoulder, and the pair made intense eye contact that Harry politely looked away from. Remus walked with him across the lawn, both of them shivering in the early morning air.

"You ready, cub?" Remus wrapped an arm securely around Harry's shoulders, and the dark-haired boy nodded.

"Can't wait til I can do this myself," he grumbled, making Remus laugh.

"It'll be sooner than you think," he promised, and then Harry was being squeezed tightly through a tube, and when he opened his eyes he was stood on the front step of the Pottery. He opened the front door with a grin, which widened at the sight of Theo Nott in the entrance hall.

"Hey, Theo. Settled in alright?"

The tall Slytherin smiled back, the relief in his eyes making Harry's heart clench.

"Everything's perfect. Thank you, Harry."

"Glad I can help." Harry couldn't let anyone suffer that sort of fate, let alone a friend of his. "We should have others arriving soon. I'll be at the property line to give the secret when they get here, and then I'll send them in your way, if that's alright? I assume you've met Essie and Tinker by now?"

On cue, the two elves appeared in the hallway, beaming at Harry. "Yeah, they're great. Essie makes a mean omelette," Theo added, watching the elf blush.

"I'll have to stay for breakfast sometime," Harry said, watching the elves wiggle eagerly. "You two have all the rooms and everything figured out, right?"

"Yes, Master Harry!" Tinker confirmed, nodding quickly. "We is ready to show Master's guests to their rooms as they arrive."

"Leave it all to us, Harry," Remus assured, squeezing Harry's shoulder. "Mr Nott and I will help with any questions and such. You just worry about getting them in here safely."

Harry nodded, checked his watch again, then turned back to the front door. “Great. I’ll, uh, leave you to it, then.”

He hurried down the driveway, headed for the gates. All the portkeys were set to land there, and he needed to be ready for the first.

It was a bit of a convoluted plan, but it had to be, for safety purposes. Snape had enchanted a collection of portkeys to random locations, where the families would then find someone who had their own portkey to the Pottery. If things were safe, they would come to Harry, who would tell them the secret and send them inside. No one wanted to risk accidentally portkeying a Death Eater directly into the sanctuary house, so the multiple steps were necessary.

Charlie was the first to arrive. With him he had a family of four; the youngest daughter wasn’t even Hogwarts age yet, while the elder was a third year Slytherin. All four of them looked warily at Harry, who smiled. “No trouble?” he asked, directing the question to the redhead, who gave him a thumbs up.

“All clear,” he promised. “I’m off to pick up my next lot, then.” And then he stepped back, and apparated away.

With Charlie’s assurance that the family had no tracers, glamours or other suspicious magic on them, Harry beckoned them forward, and quietly told them the location of the Pottery. As one, they gasped, the large house suddenly revealing itself to them. “If you go inside, Remus Lupin and Theo Nott are in there with the house elves, they’ll show you around,” Harry relayed. Both parents flinched at the name Nott, and Harry gave what he hoped was a reassuring look. “Theo’s here for the same reason you are. I trust him.”

“We can trust Harry, Mum,” the third year girl — Juliette, Harry was sure her name was — said firmly, tugging on her mum’s robe. “Come on.”

Warily, the family started up the driveway, and Harry felt the warmth of their magic in his awareness of the wards. It was a strange feeling, knowing instinctually where on the property everyone was. But he didn’t have much time to think about it, as Tonks appeared with the next family. This was a smaller group; just a father and son, who both looked exhausted. “They’re clear,” Tonks reported. “Been hiding all night, poor sods.”

The father took a step forward, clasping Harry’s hands. “Thank you, Mr Potter,” he gasped earnestly. “I— I can never repay this kindness you’ve shown me, or my family.”

“You don’t have to, Mr Whiddon,” Harry assured him. “Head on inside, there are people who will get you both settled.”

With a wink, Tonks disappeared again, and Harry shared the secret so the pair could go in and get some rest and food. Right on schedule, Fred showed up with the next family; a group of four kids and five adults, all squeezed around a length of rope.

And so it went on like that through the morning, families arriving one by one. Truly, there weren’t that many; a lot of neutral or Dark-leaning families had put failsafes and escape plans

in place since the first whispers of Voldemort's return, not wanting to be put in a difficult position. But not everyone had that capability, and soon there were eight new family groups in residence at the Pottery, plus Theo. Harry was glad to be saving even that many, though he knew as time went on it was likely to be more. Voldemort would go looking further afield for both victims and soldiers, once his first attempts were through.

Once everyone had arrived safely, Harry went back in the house, smiling at the sounds of life coming from within. Most people were up settling into their new rooms, but some of the earlier arrivals were out exploring. Harry wandered through to the dining room, where the table was laden with food — and Remus was waiting, nibbling on a chocolate biscuit. "All good on this end?" Harry checked, raising an eyebrow. Just because these people were here for sanctuary didn't mean they were all excellent people, and part of him was worried about how they might treat the elves. But Essie and Tinker knew to stand up for themselves, and Harry trusted Theo to help keep the peace.

"So far," Remus replied. "I think they're all just glad to be out of the firing line, for now. Trouble will come once they're comfortable." He grimaced slightly, and Harry mirrored the expression.

"We'll deal with that when it comes to it. Essie, Tinker," he called, and both elves appeared, "would you please ask our guests to come down here? Thanks."

It took a few minutes for everyone to arrive, and Harry noticed several of the adults eyeing each other suspiciously. "Okay, then. Welcome to the Pottery," Harry said loudly, grabbing their attention. "I'm glad you all made it here safely, and I hope everything is to your liking. I'm sure Remus and Theo went over things, but just to make sure everyone's on the same page, I wanted to go over the rules." He made sure to look everyone in the eye for at least a second, to check they were paying attention. They were, even the young children — they knew how serious their situation was. "First off, no fighting. I don't care what grievances you may have had with each other in the past. Everyone is here for the same reason, and that's what matters. Secondly, please respect both my property and my elves. This is my ancestral home, and I'm sure you can understand what that means to me, considering my family history." Several people winced. "The elves are here to assist you, but they are not your slaves. They know what they are and aren't expected to do, and if they refuse a request it's because they know I won't allow it, so take it up with me, not them. Three meals a day will be provided, and I'm sure snacks will be available if you ask nicely. As far as the rest of your time, it is your own — I'm not going to force you to stay within the property, it's up to each of you what you feel safe doing. You may write letters, which the elves will take to the owl-post office, but I don't need to warn you to be careful what you put in those letters." Serious-eyed nods from many of the adults, and even more from the students. Of course, they'd just survived a year with Umbridge; they knew all about mail interception. "You obviously can't bring anyone else onto the property. If you know someone who is in danger and in need of sanctuary, tell one of the elves and they'll come to me or someone I trust."

Harry glanced to Remus, shrugging slightly. "I think that's about everything." The werewolf nodded, so Harry looked back to the crowd. "Just... we're all trying to keep each other safe, here, guys. Help me out with that."

“Don’t worry, Mr Potter,” one of the adults with the large family said, her brown eyes sharp. “We all know what you’re sacrificing to help us.”

“What about school?” Mrs Scalby piped up, her hands on her son’s shoulders. “What happens when the kids go back?”

“Again, I’m not going to force anyone,” Harry said. “We don’t know what things will look like by the end of the summer. If you don’t feel it’s safe for your children to go to Hogwarts, they’re welcome to stay here with you.” He couldn’t promise the school would be a safe haven. He wasn’t too thrilled about having to return himself. “Your welcome here lasts until Voldemort is dead; until things are safe for you outside these wards. Provided you don’t test my hospitality,” he added pointedly. “If circumstances change, we’ll figure it out when we get there, but... I’m offering what safety I can. Between us, we should manage to preserve it.”

He hoped he could trust these people in his home. They were all hiding from the same evil, and they were too Slytherin to risk angering someone with as much power over them as Harry currently had. “I’ll have friends coming by every now and then just to make sure everything is going fine,” he said anyway, just to make it clear they would have more supervision than two house elves. “Also the *Prophet* should be delivered daily, so you can keep up with the outside world. Other than that... help yourselves to food, and you have the run of the house. Though — if you try a door and it’s locked, there’s a reason for that, so leave it be.” There were some rooms that were for family only, and Harry had the wards locked tight on those ones.

At his cue, the gathered crowd tentatively approached the table, and soon everyone had full plates and was chatting away — not *happily*, but comfortably enough. Harry could tell it would take a few days for it to settle in that they were safe there. He slunk back to the corner where Theo was stood, a plate of his own in hand. “You think you can handle them?” he asked quietly, gaze on the room at large. Theo hummed thoughtfully.

“I know most of them at least in passing. They’re not the troublemaking type,” he said. “But we’ll see how it goes after a few weeks in close quarters. Might have to duke it out with a duel or two, some of them, but I’ll keep it non-lethal,” he added with a small grin. Harry snorted.

“That’s all I can ask.” He paused, chewing on his ham and cheese sandwich. “I’m sorry I can’t share the secret with Susan. I just... necessary people only, y’know?” It had been difficult enough deciding whether he could trust the Weasley boys and Tonks, but ultimately he had no choice if he wanted to get people there safely.

“I understand. I can still go see her,” Theo replied. “I, uh, haven’t met her aunt yet. But she knows about me.” His cheeks coloured slightly. Harry grinned.

“Good luck with that.” The relationship between the Slytherin and the Hufflepuff still baffled him a little, as even amongst the heirs they were fairly reserved. But he could see how strongly they cared about each other.

It was no stranger a pairing than him and Draco, really.

"Do you, ah, know how your father is taking... everything?" Harry breached uncertainly, watching pain flash across Theo's face for a brief moment.

"I haven't felt the family magic rip from my body, if that's what you mean," he replied dryly. "He can't disinherit me; I'm the last of both lines. He'd still rather see the magic live on in a blood traitor than let it die entirely. But past that, I've no idea. If I never see him again, I'll be content."

Considering the war ahead of them, that was an entirely likely possibility.

"Cub." Remus approached, brows furrowed. "We should get going. Unless there's more you need to do here?" He glanced briefly to Theo. Harry shook his head.

"No, no, we're fine." He turned, shaking Theo's hand. "I'll be in touch soon. And I'll let Susan know you're safe."

"Thanks, Harry." A brief, devious smile. "And thanks for giving me a room to myself."

Harry laughed, winking. "Friendship privileges," he joked. Then, bidding goodbye to the rest of the group, Harry let Remus apparate him back home.

That was one burden off his shoulders, at least.

.-.-.-.

At around the same time Harry was welcoming his first guest to the Pottery, Draco was being shaken awake unexpectedly.

Considering the type of people currently in his house, Draco jolted upright immediately, wand in hand. But familiar fingers brushed over his forehead, and his bleary gaze met his mother's keen grey eyes. His heart stopped. "Mum? What's wrong?" Was it the Dark Lord? Were they in trouble?

Narcissa's gaze softened, and she leaned in to kiss his forehead. "Get dressed, darling. Quickly, now. The others will be up soon."

Pulse still racing even as confusion swam in his rapidly-awakening brain, Draco did as bid, not asking any questions until he was shoving his feet into his boots. "Do we need to run?" Already he had a packing list in his head, prioritised by how much time he might have to grab what he needed.

A cold, vindictive smile slid onto his mother's regal face. "Draco, darling, this is our home. We will never run from this place."

She held out her hand, and Draco took it.

Silently, they crept through the halls. Draco wasn't sure where she was taking him — still didn't know what they were doing, in all honesty. But he followed her down the stairs and through the dining room, until she was stood in front of a bookshelf. To his astonishment, she reached out and tapped a book with her finger, and the shelf swung open.

The room it revealed was small, but stepping inside Draco quickly realised what they were there for. Sat on a pedestal in front of him was a large, smooth crystal, swirling like it held mercury inside it.

The Malfoy wardstone.

For some reason, Draco had always expected the wardstone to be somewhere... grander. He'd gone searching for it, in his youth; determined to uncover all the family secrets. His father had told him he would only learn of it when it was time for him to become lord of the manor.

That time was now, Draco supposed.

"Mother, what are we doing here?" he asked, when his mother had shut the door behind them, both squeezed in the small room. The magic radiating from the wardstone was palpable, dragging at Draco's own core like treacle.

"We are here to reclaim what is ours," Narcissa replied primly, rolling up her sleeves. "Your father invited that *filth* into the manor. But he is gone now, and we no longer need to put up with his guests. His *influence*."

Draco's eyes widened. "Are— are you sure?" Anything they did now, it would be a statement. It would reveal to the Dark Lord that the Malfoys were no longer securely under his thumb. "What about your Mark?" He'd heard Severus mention more than once that the Dark Lord has ways of reaching him through his Mark, tangling with his magic, bringing him to heel.

"Quite certain," Narcissa assured. "My Mark is not like Severus' — he is valuable enough for the Dark Lord to keep a close connection; I am just a wife," her lips curled in a smirk. "He did not believe me worth the effort of controlling, and that shall be his error." She softened, reaching out to squeeze Draco's hand. "We made our choices long ago, little Dragon. I made mine the moment I saw you look at Harry Potter like he was the greatest treasure in the universe." Draco couldn't help but blush. "While Lucius was around we had a part to play, but that is past, now. I am Lady Malfoy, head of the family until you come of age. And I refuse to cower in my own manor. Between the two of us, I believe we'll have enough power to lock down the wards, and eject our unwanted visitors."

She spoke so casually about booting the Dark Lord himself out from their house, it made Draco gape. "I— is that possible?" He was underage, and his mother was only a Malfoy by marriage.

"This manor has war-wards, and it is understood that war does not always wait for the head of the family to reach majority," Narcissa said. "I have faith that this will work. And if it doesn't... we have other options."

Draco wondered if he perhaps should've packed a bag, after all.

But it was too late now. Squaring his jaw determinedly, he nodded, and together they turned to the wardstone. "Let me do the asking," Narcissa instructed quietly. "You just put the power

into it.”

They put their hands on the wardstone as one, and Draco gasped faintly, feeling the wards rush through him; echoes of centuries of Malfoys past, tangling with his own magic, judging his worth. He pushed forward everything he had — his strength, his power, even his love for Harry. Anything that might aid his mother in securing their home, proving to the wards that those within were not worthy of the sanctuary of Malfoy magic.

For several long minutes, nothing happened. Then, slowly, he felt it. A rushing in his blood, a vibration in the stones below his feet. His heartbeat pulsing in time with his mother’s, in time with the wardstone, all of their magic combining to flood through the house and out all the way to the boundary line. It felt solid, like a shield surrounding the whole property. But the magic felt... expectant.

It needed more than just his magic, to hold such powerful wards.

Instinctively, Draco pulled his wand, keeping one hand on the wardstone. With a spell, that hand cut open from the base of his thumb to the curve of his wrist, and the wardstone flashed bright white as his blood touched the warm surface. The wards gave an extra firm pulse, and then it released him.

He and his mother stood, breathing hard, Draco’s hand still dripping blood onto the floor.

“Well done, darling,” Narcissa murmured, carefully healing his wound. “I think we did it.”

Draco could see the tremble in her arm as she reached to push the door open. If they hadn’t succeeded, they would soon be dead.

But it looked like their gamble had paid off. Walking through the dining room, everything was silent. In the hallway, Narcissa cleared her throat. “Dippy,” she called out, and a house elf appeared. “Have our visitors gone?”

Watching the elf nod made Draco’s shoulders crumple in relief. “Missy Cissa and Master Draco is the only peoples in the house, Miss,” Dippy confirmed. A satisfied smile took over the Lady Malfoy’s face.

“Wonderful. Clean up any rooms that were previously occupied, would you? I want no trace of them left. Put their belongings in the Lord’s office, I’ll deal with them later.”

The elf vanished, and only then did Narcissa relax. “They’re going to kill you,” Draco said fearfully, reaching for her hand. “The moment you step foot outside, they’ll kill you.”

Far from alarmed, that just made her smirk wider. “Have a little faith, darling. I know how to play this game.” She brought his hand up to her lips, kissing his knuckles. “This has been long overdue. But it’s a start. There is much more work to be done.” She met his gaze unflinching. “Your Harry is making good progress, but there are certain moves that can only be made by someone rather more experienced in the ways of these things. And we will aid him however we can. He is family, after all.”

Draco's heart squeezed painfully, tight with the strength of his love for this woman. His awe of her strength. "Thank you," he rasped, and her eyes softened lovingly.

"Do not thank me, my darling; I'm only doing what a mother should. And quite frankly, it's about time the name Malfoy had someone truly *worthy* to uphold it. Really, with the amount of influence your father held, it's quite ridiculous how little he really did with it." That devious smirk returned. "His loss."

Draco blinked at her, not entirely sure he wanted to know what else his mother was planning. Sirius was right; Black women were *terrifying*.

.-. .

Seren Du was empty when Harry and Remus returned — Ceri reported that Snape had been summoned to a Death Eater meeting not more than half an hour ago. Remus cursed quietly, and Harry squeezed his shoulder. "Come on. Let's go work on my schedule for the summer; Snape can go over it with us when he gets back."

Eager for the distraction, Remus agreed, and soon the pair of them were holed up in the living room with tea and scones, a piece of parchment on the table between them.

"We're adding apparition lessons," Remus said first, writing that at the top of the page. Harry brightened up.

"Really?"

"It shouldn't take too long. I imagine you'll get the hang of it quite quickly — you certainly seem to with everything else," Remus added, making Harry blush.

Duelling was of course added to the list, though Remus admitted that would mostly rely on when other people would be around to help. "After watching you at the Ministry, it's clear you can hold your own. We just need to make sure you're ready to face Him as well as his minions." The werewolf's eyes crinkled as he smiled proudly. "You really were marvellous, you know. Your friends too, of course, but seeing how well you fought against Malfoy and the Lestranges, and Death Eaters that have brought down experienced aurors... you're remarkable, Harry."

Harry's cheeks burned hot, and he ducked his head. "Only because of what you've all taught me," he insisted.

"Teaching conditions can only go so far in preparation for the real thing," Remus retorted. "Be proud of yourself, Harry. You're doing incredible things for your age."

Harry cleared his throat awkwardly. "So what else do we need to work on this summer?" He couldn't sit there and just let Remus compliment him. Besides, there had to be plenty more for him to learn.

"Honestly, a lot of it will just depend on how the summer plays out. Between the Pottery and everything else, you may be busier than usual."

‘Everything else’ was a very broad way of referring to the absolute shitshow that was the Ministry currently. There was no sign of a new Minister yet, and everyone was reeling from the discovery of just how many influential Ministry employees were actually Death Eaters and now either dead or in Azkaban thanks to Harry and his friends. The whole thing was a mess, and it infuriated Harry watching known Dumbledore sycophants try and fill the gaps, praising the headmaster for seeing off Voldemort’s attack like he’d been in any way useful for more than about five minutes.

“You say that, but *everything else* will just have me sat here waiting for the rest of you to get home,” Harry pointed out mulishly. He knew it made sense, but that didn’t mean he had to like being kept out of the fight when he’d been training so hard for just that. Remus sighed.

“Considering you’re still underage, yes, it will. I don’t know who the new Minister will be, but if it’s another Fudge, you’ll have to be even more careful than before,” he warned, making Harry scowl.

“So what else *can* I do this summer?” he asked, not wanting to upset himself with the prospect of another incompetent Minister.

“You can rest,” came Remus’ immediate response. “Harry, cub, you’ve had a hell of a year. You need to take some time to relax and recover from it, while you’re safe.”

“Voldemort isn’t *relaxing*,” Harry snapped.

“Perhaps not, but he certainly isn’t trying to do everything himself,” Remus retorted without missing a beat. “He’s got his minions for that.”

A pause, then Harry snorted. “Are you saying you lot are my minions?”

Remus’ lips twitched amusedly. “I’m saying that you need to give yourself a break. But honestly, minion isn’t far off,” he teased, and Harry aimed a half-hearted scowl his way.

It wasn’t that he didn’t want to relax. He did, *desperately*, after Umbridge and OWLs and the battle at the Ministry. But he couldn’t shake that feeling that as soon as he let himself rest for ten minutes, the whole world would fall to shit.

“Summer is the only time I can actually learn useful things without having to sneak around to learn them, Moony,” he insisted. “I need to take advantage of it while I can.”

“Oh, it’s that time of year again, is it?” The voice had Harry scrambling out of his chair, beaming at the dark-haired figure in the doorway.

“Sirius!” He hurried forward, wrapping his godfather in a tight hug. He’d been at Grimmauld since Harry had left school.

Sirius hugged him, kissing his hair. “Good to see you, pup.”

When Harry stepped back, he saw the shock of red hair just past Sirius’ shoulder. “Hi, Charlie.”

The dragon tamer grinned. “Hey, kid.” Then he turned to Sirius with raised eyebrows. “That time of year?”

“The time of year where Moony and I have to persuade Harry here that he can’t spend all summer turning himself into a duelling machine,” Sirius explained, ruffling Harry’s hair pointedly. “We aren’t letting Dumbledore turn you into a weapon, and we’re not letting you do that to yourself, either. Take breaks. Do fun things. Get some fucking sleep, Merlin knows you’ve not had enough this last year with all your after-curfew adventures,” he added, rolling his eyes.

Harry could do nothing but sigh and let himself be herded back to the sofa. “I slept,” he defended, though it was feeble. Admittedly, his sleep schedule had not been brilliant lately. “I just—things are getting worse out there. I need to be ready.”

“We both know damn well that your preparedness is not the thing holding us back,” Remus pointed out. “These things take time, Harry. Time you can’t control. It’s better for you to pace yourself while we wait than burn out before you get there.”

Harry huffed. “I hate it when you’re *reasonable*,” he muttered, making Sirius snicker.

“Moony’s always reasonable,” he teased. He and Charlie made themselves comfortable on the opposite sofa, and Harry eyed them curiously.

It was... strange, having Charlie around like this. Every other time Harry had interacted with him, it was as the second-oldest Weasley brother; now, with no other Weasleys around, he was definitely here in the capacity of Sirius’ boyfriend. He had an arm around Sirius’ shoulders, the animagus leaning against him slightly. He looked a bit bewildered, too, Harry realised.

“Is this Charlie’s first visit here?” he asked, and Sirius nodded. Harry smirked, unable to help himself. “So he’s *family*, is he?” he drawled. “He knows what this place means?”

While Charlie’s confusion grew, Sirius blushed brightly. “He’s got the gist of it,” Sirius insisted. “He also knows he’s got full permission to hex you if you’re being a little git,” he added in a playful growl. Harry’s green eyes turned wide and innocent.

“Me? Never.” Even he couldn’t hold that straight face for too long.

“I grew up with Fred and George, you know I won’t hold back,” Charlie joked with a wink. “But don’t worry, if Harry starts teasing me about you, I’ll just give him *all* the gory details about how we got together.” His eyebrows wiggled salaciously, and Harry made a face.

“Gross.” Once again, Sirius was blushing. Harry marvelled at the sight; his godfather hardly ever blushed before now! Merlin, he was smitten. “Well, the more the merrier, as far as I’m concerned. Even better if it means Sirius doesn’t have to pretend to live at Grimmauld anymore.”

“You having this place does explain a lot,” Charlie agreed. “I, uh, I know it’s a big deal for me to know where it is and everything. So... thanks.” His expression melted into a sappy grin

as he looked at Sirius, and Sirius beamed back, kissing him quickly.

“Ugh, are they always like this?” Harry joked, glancing at Remus.

“Like you can talk,” Sirius retorted pointedly. “Don’t be jealous because your boyfriend isn’t moving in yet.”

Harry glared at him, while Charlie’s blue eyes sharpened in intrigue. “Boyfriend? Tell me more,” he drawled lightly. Sirius smirked.

“Our Harry,” he declared dramatically, “is in love with a *snake!*” This was said with an exaggerated gasp and wide eyes. Charlie shook his head mock-sympathetically, patting Sirius’ thigh.

“It’s okay,” he assured. “There’s one in every family. You just have to learn to accept it.”

Harry snickered. “I’m telling George you said that,” he joked. “But I suppose, since you’re learning all the family secrets — I’ve been dating Draco Malfoy since fourth year.”

Charlie’s eyebrows show up in genuine surprise. “Really? Even after...” He waved a vague hand gesture, and it took Harry a moment to get his meaning. His stomach squirmed uncomfortably.

“After what happened with his dad?” *when I accidentally killed him*, he didn’t say, though they were all thinking it. “He, uh, didn’t get along with Lucius. Neither did his mum. We’re still good.”

“They’re worse than good, they’re disgustingly adorable,” Sirius grumbled. “And speaking of snakes in the family, where’s...?” He trailed off expectantly, looking towards Remus. The humour melted from the werewolf’s face.

“Death Eater meeting,” he replied, and Sirius cursed quietly.

“How long’s he been gone?”

Remus checked his watch. “Little over two hours, now.” He ran a weary hand through his hair. “Any luck, he’ll be home for dinner. Not that he’ll be in any mood to eat.”

“Who are we talking about now?” Charlie cut in, looking confused.

Harry bit his lip to stop himself smirking. “You didn’t tell him that family secret yet, either?” he asked Sirius, brows raised. That secret was really the kind that deserved prior warning.

Sirius flushed. “I was going to, but there was never a good time,” he muttered. He turned back to Charlie, trepidation flickering through his eyes. “So, someone else lives here. Moony’s partner.”

“I didn’t know you were seeing anyone, Remus.” Charlie paused, frowning. “And... he’s a Death Eater?”

“A spy.” There was a small smile on Remus’ lips; he was enjoying drawing this out far too much. “You know him, actually.”

Harry watched the clues slowly come together, and Charlie’s eyes go comically wide. “You... you don’t mean Snape, do you?” There was a hint of nervousness to his tone. Remus’ smile widened, and he nodded. “Oh.” Charlie’s voice came out a bit strangled.

“He’s not as bad as you think he is,” Harry offered supportively. “I mean. Well. He *is*. He’s not a totally different person when he’s in private.” A quiet snort was all Remus had to say about that. “But it’s less mean and more funny. Sort-of.” It was hard, trying to explain Severus Snape.

“I thought the two of you hated each other?” Charlie asked Sirius, who shrugged.

“Oh, we absolutely did. But Moony stopped giving a fuck about that about the time we graduated school, so we learned to get along. Eventually. For the most part.” He froze suddenly, head cocked slightly. “Speak of the devil.”

Remus jumped to his feet. “He’s back?” Sirius nodded, and the werewolf was gone.

“Well, we won’t see those two for a few hours,” Sirius mused, squeezing Charlie’s knee. “Don’t worry, love; Severus really isn’t terrible to live with. You’ll get used to him.” He glanced to Harry. “What are you up to for the rest of the evening, pup?”

“I should probably finish unpacking,” Harry admitted with a shrug. He had been too tired to bother by the time he and Remus and Tonks finished dinner the night before, and hadn’t had time this morning.

“Solid plan. I’m gonna give Charlie the tour of the place.” The dog animagus got to his feet, tugging Charlie up by the hand. “See you at dinner, kiddo.”

Harry watched them go, faintly bemused. There was a spring in Sirius’ step that he’d never seen before, a light in his eyes he only recognised from pictures of him before Azkaban.

If Charlie was the one bringing that out, then Harry was glad he was around.

But that wouldn’t stop him teasing the pair of them as much as possible.

.-.-.-.

Harry was in bed early, that night; Remus and Snape missed dinner, and Sirius and Charlie were making eyes at each other that Harry did not want to contemplate too closely. Besides, he’d had a long day, and he was exhausted.

The exhaustion fled the instant his head hit the pillow.

A stone room, torches sending long shadows across the small crowd gathered in front of him. Harry sat in his throne, sneering down at the man kneeling at his feet. “You are certain of the address, Rookwood?” he said softly, voice cold. The man nodded.

"Yes, my Lord. It is Amelia Bones' flat, for certain. I—I Imperiused the floo guard for that area, her entry wards should be down."

"Should?" Harry hissed pointedly, fingering his wand.

"Will! Will be down, my Lord," Rookwood corrected.

*Satisfaction bloomed in Harry's chest, but he cast a Cruciatus curse anyway; Rookwood would learn to deal in certainties around Lord Voldemort. "Then we strike tonight," he declared. "I will handle this one myself." Rage burned within him. "That insolent **blood traitor** will regret attempting to stand up to Lord Voldemort!"*

Cheers erupted from the small crowd, and Harry got to his feet, eager for bloodshed. Yes, Amelia Bones would learn that those who supported the Potter brat got exactly what they deserved.

Harry awoke with a gasp, skin crawling from the feel of being inside Voldemort's mind. Panic gripped his heart — immediately, his wand was in his hand. "Expecto Patronum!"

The room lit up with an eerie silver glow as Prongs burst from his wand. "Go to Amelia Bones. Tell her; he's coming for you. Your wards are down. Run, now."

Prongs set off immediately, seemingly sending the urgency in Harry's voice. Harry checked the clock; it was almost midnight. Hopefully Amelia wouldn't sleep through his warning.

Harry launched himself out of bed — there was no way he was getting back to sleep after that. He paced his room, thinking over every second of the vision, trying to see if he'd missed anything; was the *strike* Voldemort referred to just on the Bones', or were they going after others, too? Did he just mean that he was taking back-up with him?

There was a knock on the door, and Harry whirled around to see Sirius nudge it open, stood there in a dressing gown, concern in his sleep-hazed eyes. "Ceri said you had a nightmare."

"Vision," Harry corrected, watching Sirius perk up in alarm. "He's going after Amelia Bones. I sent her a Patronus, but..." His stomach lurched; what if his warning didn't make it to her? What if he was too late?

Sirius swore, hurrying to wrap Harry in a hug. "You did what you could, pup."

"He's going himself, Sirius," Harry said, voice cracking. "Susan's a great fighter, and I'm sure her aunt is too, but... against Voldemort himself?" Those were not good odds.

Sirius held him tighter, smoothing down his hair. "Don't write them off yet," he insisted soothingly. "Come on. Let's go get you a drink, yeah?"

Harry suddenly felt his cheeks heat, embarrassment rising. "You don't need to stay up with me, Padfoot," he muttered. "I'll be fine. Go back to bed. Charlie'll be worried."

Sirius just rolled his eyes. "Charlie knows where I am, I told him to go back to sleep," he said. "I'm not leaving you to yourself when you've just come out of his head, not until you

know the Bones' are okay." He pulled back, though one long arm stayed around Harry's shoulders, guiding him towards the door. "You're still my first priority, pup. Charlie doesn't change that. Hell, he'd leave me in a heartbeat if he thought I was putting him over you," he added with a flicker of a smile. "I know we didn't really talk about what it means, me and him, not concerning us. And right now isn't really the best time for it. But you're still my kid, yeah? So let me take care of you."

And that made Harry lose the fight against tears, his heart lurching as Sirius' grey eyes fixed on him. "You silly bugger," he sighed, kissing Harry's forehead. "You didn't think I'd stop being an overbearing fusspot just because I've got a hot redhead waiting up for me, did you?"

The noise Harry made was a cross between a laugh and a sound of disgust, wet with tears, and it made Sirius grin. "You're top of the list, kiddo. For me and Moony both. Only reason he's not up with us is I told Ceri not to wake him; sounded like Snape had a rough meeting. But I can get both of them, if you want?"

"No, no, it's fine," Harry insisted, wiping at his cheeks. "Like you said, nothing we can do. I — should we get a message to Kingsley?" Amelia might need back-up.

Before Sirius could answer, the corridor filled with pale light; a silver badger bounded towards them, stopping in front of Harry and raising its head. "We are safe," it said, in Amelia's voice. "It was a close call. Letter to follow shortly. Thank you, Harry."

Then it dissolved, and with it went the tension in Harry's shoulders.

"Thank Merlin," Sirius breathed. "That's... that's good to hear." Harry nodded emphatically. "Let's go put some tea on. I know neither of us is going to be able to relax until that letter arrives."

As they headed for the stairs, the door to Sirius' room creaked open, and Charlie stuck his head out. "Everything alright?" He was shirtless, but his wand was in his hand, clearly prepared for the worst.

"We're fine, love," Sirius assured. "Just waiting on a letter. Going downstairs for a bit." He stepped away from Harry, cupping Charlie's cheek. "Go back to sleep, you've got work in the morning."

Charlie leaned into the touch, eyes falling half shut. "You sure? Don't need to muster the cavalry?"

A fond chuckle escaped Sirius' lips. "No cavalry necessary," he assured, pressing a kiss to Charlie's mouth. "Go to bed. It'll do you no good to be half-asleep dealing with that new Welsh Green arriving."

Charlie didn't take any more convincing than that, and Sirius shut the door behind him, turning back to Harry. In the dim light, Harry could see him blush faintly, realising they'd had an audience for the whole exchange.

"You really care about him, don't you?" he asked quietly, continuing towards the stairs.

“More than I thought possible, after... everything,” Sirius admitted in a whisper. “He’s far too good for me. But he made it very clear he’s made his mind up, and at this point I’m in too deep to let him go.”

Harry bumped their shoulders together gently, smiling. “I’m happy for you, Padfoot,” he said earnestly. “Y’know, you promised you’d tell me the full story. And... I think we could both use the distraction, right now.”

“Alright, then, you nosy sod,” Sirius teased. When they reached the kitchen, two cups of steaming peppermint tea were already waiting at the table, though Ceri was nowhere to be seen. “Sit down, I’ll start from the beginning.”

So he did, telling Harry all about Charlie’s harmless flirting, which had gotten gradually less harmless as time went on, both of them falling for each other even though Sirius was determined not to. To Harry’s relief, his godfather glossed over the more... *intimate details*, but it warmed his heart to hear how insistent Charlie was that Sirius deserved love in his life.

He knew he liked Charlie Weasley for a reason.

So captivated in the story, Harry almost forgot what they’d been waiting for — until the window opened suddenly, and a small brown owl he recognised as Susan’s careened into the kitchen, dropping a letter on the table in front of him. Harry reached for it, tearing it open.

Harry,

You saved our lives. Your Patronus arrived a minute before the ward alarm went off — enough time for Aunt Amelia to grab some essentials and summon the emergency portkey. You-Know-Who showed up, but he was too late.

We’re with the Longbottoms, now. Neville’s gran has said we can stay for the summer; their wards are the strongest we know that aren’t under a Fidelius or anything complicated. Aunt Amelia isn’t going to let this force her out of the public eye. The flat is probably trashed, though. We’ll go back and check it tomorrow with some aurors.

I don’t know what kind of vision you had, but thank you. If you hadn’t warned us, I know Aunt Amelia would have stayed behind to fight so I could escape. I can’t lose her, Harry. She’s all I’ve got left.

Talk soon,

Susan

Harry let the tension bleed out of him, reading the letter over a few times just to reassure himself everyone was fine.

“That’s alright, then,” Sirius declared, reading over his shoulder. “Augusta won’t let them come to any harm. Terrifying woman, she is.”

Harry snorted; that was certainly one way of describing Neville’s grandmother.

“That was far too close,” he breathed, and Sirius squeezed the back of his neck gently.

“Always is. But it’s close enough; they’re safe.” The pair were silent for a few moments, eyes still fixed on the letter. “Want to stay up longer, or are you good to go back to sleep?”

Harry glanced at the clock on the wall; it was almost four in the morning, now. His exhaustion had returned in full force, now the adrenaline was fading.

“Sleep sounds good,” he agreed. Sirius looked like he could use it, too.

So much for a nice, relaxing start to the summer.

Chapter 76

Chapter Notes

Fully forgot it was Friday for a while there, my bad :P Here we are, though! Exciting things afoot~

No one was particularly energetic over breakfast. Sirius had obviously told the rest of the household about Harry's vision, as by the time the Gryffindor made it downstairs they were chatting quietly, and stopped as soon as Harry walked in. "Morning," Harry greeted wearily. Remus stood immediately, holding his arms out for a hug.

"Are you alright, cub?"

"Fine, now. Might go for a swim later. I'm a bit sore."

"Cruciatus?" Snape checked, and Harry nodded.

"On Rookwood. But just the once, so I didn't take a potion. I thought he was one of the ones we caught?"

"You did. He claimed to be a Ministry spy, and got himself released," Snape replied, sneering. Harry scowled.

"Spy, my arse," he muttered, sinking into his usual seat at the table. Opposite him, Charlie blinked, clearly still getting used to the whole 'Snape' situation. "Anything useful happen at your meeting?"

"Nothing of alarm," Snape replied, sipping at his coffee. Ceri floated a plate of pancakes in front of Harry, and he offered her a brief smile. "It seems Narcissa grew tired of hosting — she put the Manor on lockdown, ejected everyone except herself and Draco. As you can imagine, the Dark Lord is... not pleased. Bellatrix suffered most severely for not noticing her sister's *disloyalty*."

Harry went wide-eyed, though he couldn't bring himself to feel bad about Bellatrix being punished. "Narcissa can do that? And it'll keep them all out?"

"It appears so. Likely she had Draco assist her; he is the new Lord of the Manor, after all, even though he is a year shy of majority."

"That's my girl," Sirius cheered, grinning. "Turned them all out on their arses."

It was a relief, knowing that Draco no longer had Voldemort in his house, but such a bold move made Harry uneasy. "He won't take that lying down," he murmured grimly. Snape's

dark eyes met his, surprisingly confident.

"Trust that Narcissa has been planning her actions for a long time, now. She will not take unnecessary risks."

Harry hoped he was right.

"Cheer up, pup," Sirius crowed, "if it gets dire, they'll just move in here; old Snake-Face would never find them then." He winked playfully. "You'll get your boyfriend back earlier than you thought."

Rolling his eyes, Harry threw a blueberry at him. It would be nice to have Draco around, sure, but not at the expense of Voldemort wanting him dead!

"I suppose no one's going to duel with me today, then?" he sighed, reaching for the jug of orange juice. "Since you all seem to think I need *rest* or something." As if to reinforce the point, a huge yawn escaped him, and Remus snorted. "Shut up, Moony," Harry grumbled weakly.

"You're taking it easy today, kid. We've got an Order meeting back at Grimmauld this evening, anyway."

Harry smirked at Sirius' words. "You're leaving me behind for that, yeah? Dumbledore wants to talk to me; he was trying to get hold of me at school but I dodged him, and before I got the train home he said he'd see me at headquarters."

"Then you're definitely not going," Sirius agreed.

"On that note, I've got dragons to see," Charlie declared, pushing back from the table. As he stood, he ducked to kiss Sirius' cheek. "I'll see you all at the meeting. And you after, I suppose," he added to Harry. His gaze swept the table, pausing awkwardly on Snape, who stared back impassively. Then Charlie coughed, and headed for the door.

"Have fun," Sirius called after him. When they heard the front door shut, Remus elbowed Snape gently.

"You could at least *try* and be less intimidating."

"Why bother?" Snape drawled in reply.

Harry ducked his head to hide his smile in a mouthful of pancake.

It was good to be home.

.-. .

Sirius was the first to arrive at Grimmauld Place ahead of the Order meeting; Remus was reading, and promised to follow shortly. The animagus half expected to find Molly Weasley banging around his kitchen, until he remembered delightedly that he'd banned her from the wards. His brain drifted happily back to the events of that morning — or, more specifically,

what had happened after Molly had left — but he was snapped out of his thoughts by the sound of apparition in the hallway.

“It’s only me!” Tonks called brightly, then appeared in the kitchen doorway. She seemed to delight in being as loud as possible, now there was no painting of Walburga Black to yell at her for it. “Blimey, I’m that early?”

“Looks like,” Sirius agreed, snorting when she went straight to the pantry and returned with a bottle of butterbeer and a small pork pie. “Skipped lunch?”

“Had to,” she said with a scowl. “Ministry’s a bloody disaster. We’ve got too many Death Eaters to process — they’re trying to delay Pettigrew’s interrogation, like we might just *forget* and leave you on the run, or something.”

Sirius scowled back at her. “Fucking aurors.”

“Tell me about it.”

They were interrupted by the fire flaring green, and Bill Weasley stepped out, closely followed by Fleur Delacour. She was a recent addition to the Order, but Sirius liked her already. Namely because she too held Harry’s opinions much higher than Dumbledore’s.

One after another, the members of the Order of the Phoenix arrived, filling the kitchen. Charlie slipped in behind Mundungus Fletcher, and Sirius waved him over, a seat saved beside him. It garnered some looks — especially when Charlie kissed him on the cheek — but Sirius didn’t give a fuck; everyone he cared about knew, they weren’t hiding their relationship anymore.

Only after the room was full did Albus Dumbledore arrive through the fire, and the quiet whispers stopped immediately like a bunch of naughty school children. “Good, you’re all here,” he greeted, then frowned slightly. “Sirius, must you continue to hold this grudge against Molly? She should be able to attend meetings at the very least.”

“Not until she learns to respect me in my own damn house, Albus,” Sirius replied evenly. That earned him a disappointed frown, but nothing further was said.

Dumbledore launched into an update on Ministry proceedings, stating that a new Minister would be chosen by the end of the week. “It is a relief that Lucius Malfoy is not there to throw his own hat in the ring, but that does not mean Voldemort’s men are absent from the process. I am trying to guide it the best I can.”

Sirius hid a scowl; oh, he bet that was true. Dumbledore would be guiding them towards whichever puppet he could control the easiest.

The only good part of the headmaster’s report was the confirmation that Dolores Umbridge was going to Azkaban for her crimes against the students of Hogwarts.

“Good riddance,” Moody snarled, and for once Sirius agreed with him.

“Quite,” Dumbledore said. “Though it does leave me once again on the search for a new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher.”

“Do you have anyone in mind?” Hestia Jones asked. An infuriating smile crossed Dumbledore’s lips.

“I believe I have an idea,” he assured. “I merely need to make some inquiries.”

He continued droning on, and the longer he spoke the less patience Sirius had for it. “I’m surprised you’ve not mentioned anything about the attack on Amelia Bones, Albus,” he cut in. Several people gasped.

“Attack? What attack?” Arthur Weasley asked, wide-eyed.

“Voldemort himself decided to go after her,” Sirius revealed. “Last night. Luckily, Harry had a vision, and we managed to get word out just in time. Amelia and Susan are both fine.”

“Amelia did mention getting early warning,” Kingsley said, approval in his eyes. “Said she was damned lucky for it, too. Much later and things would have been... disastrous.”

Several people around the table looked uneasy; a Ministry without Amelia Bones was a much weaker institution indeed.

“Harry is still having visions, then?” Dumbledore pressed, blue eyes curious. Sirius felt the faintest pressure on his Occlumency shields, and scowled.

“He is. Not every night, but far more often than I’d like,” he remarked.

“I’ll be honest, I quite expected to find him down here,” Dumbledore said. “Last summer I understand he was quite insistent on being involved with the Order. I can’t see that having changed, after the events of last month. I would like to speak to him after the meeting, actually.”

“You can’t, I left him at home,” Sirius said blandly. Dumbledore froze.

“...He is not living here?”

“What do you mean, home?” Hestia Jones piped up.

“He’s not back with those awful muggles, is he?” Arthur asked in alarm.

“Of course not!” Sirius protested, offended that anyone would even *consider* he might have left Harry with them. “He’s at home. Our home. Which is the safest place he could possibly be.”

“Sirius...” And there was Dumbledore’s disapproving frown once again. “I must insist you bring him here at once; Voldemort will be looking for him, and it is imperative Harry be safe.”

“He is safe,” Sirius repeated. “Much safer with only a small handful of people knowing where he is. Forgive me, Albus, but after everything that happened last summer, I’m not going to let you just toss Harry around wherever is most *convenient* for you. He’s at home, and he’ll be staying there all summer.”

“Do you mean you’re not living here, either, Black?” Moody barked. “You’re supposed to be our point of contact. Keeping Headquarters protected.”

“Which goes to prove my point exactly; if I need to be here at all times to *protect* this place, I wouldn’t consider that safe, would you?” Sirius retorted. “As long as the Fidelius holds here, it’ll be safe for meetings. But there’s far too many people coming and going for me to be sure Harry will be alright. And quite frankly, it’s none of your damn business where I house my godson.”

“You are not his legal guardian, Sirius,” Dumbledore reminded.

“Not yet, but I will be as soon as I’m free.” And Sirius wondered how much of the stalling around Pettigrew was secretly Dumbledore’s doing, trying to avoid Sirius getting free and reclaiming his proper place in society.

“I need to speak with Harry,” Dumbledore said again. Sirius stared him down coolly.

“I’ll let him know, and if he wants to meet with you, we can arrange something,” he replied. “Until then, I thought the whole point of the Order was that Harry doesn’t need to be involved. You lot all spent last year telling me he was too young and had to be protected, now you’re angry at me for doing exactly that!”

“If you show me this home of yours, so I can see those protections for myself—“

“No,” Sirius cut the headmaster off bluntly. “I’m allowing you the use of my family house for the Order, Albus, but you’ve got no right to my private home.”

Across the table, he caught the look of warning in Remus’ eyes — they didn’t want to show their hand too early. But there was no way Sirius was allowing Dumbledore anywhere near Seren Du.

“Harry is fine where he is, Albus,” Remus said calmly. “I can attest to that myself. Perhaps we should get back to the matter at hand? Is there anything we can do to help secure the Ministry?”

Kingsley took the topic and ran with it, launching into his own report on the traitors within the auror department, and how things were going in the muggle Prime Minister’s office where he was currently stationed. Sirius leaned back in his chair, knee pressed against Charlie’s under the table. When he looked up, Dumbledore was still frowning at him. Sirius resisted the urge to smirk.

There were more members of the Order on Harry’s side than Dumbledore’s, at this point. The headmaster had best watch his step.

....

“*What!*?” The outraged yelp that burst from Harry’s lips startled Remus into spilling his tea, and Charlie’s egg fell off his fork.

“What’s the matter?” the redhead asked worriedly. Harry scowled, turning the front page of the morning paper for the rest of the table to see.

Rufus Scrimgeour Named Minister For Magic

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Sirius groaned, shaking his head. “They chose that prick?”

“Who is he?”

“He was the Head Auror,” Snape drawled, voice distinctly unimpressed. “He is cut much from the same cloth as Alastor Moody. A... traditional approach to eradicating Dark magic.”

Harry looked down at the article, reading quickly; indeed, there were lots of references to Scrimgeour being the ‘*firm hand*’ the country needed in these dangerous times. “So he’ll curse first and ask questions later, basically?”

“And anything worse than a Tickling charm will have him calling someone a Death Eater,” Remus agreed, frowning. “I understand people are looking for someone a bit more... proactive, after Fudge. But really, with how corrupt the Auror Office is already, putting the head of it in charge of the whole bloody Ministry hardly seems like a good idea.”

“That would require them to admit the Auror Office is corrupt,” Snape pointed out.

“What’s all this stuff about Scrimgeour having a *rift* with Dumbledore?” Harry asked, gesturing back at the paper. Sirius snorted.

“Oh, that’s a load of codswallop. Scrimgeour’s too prideful a man to bow to Dumbledore’s whims, so he pretends they hate each other but sucks up every scrap of advice the man hands out regardless.”

“Mentioning there’s bad blood between them is probably to placate all those people who have decided they hate Dumbledore because the *Prophet*’s spent the last year telling them to hate Dumbledore,” Charlie agreed. “They’re just covering their own arses.”

Well, Harry was all for people hating Dumbledore, but this Scrimgeour bloke didn’t look any better. “I thought for sure Amelia would get it,” he sighed. Remus pat him on the shoulder.

“She’s the most qualified for the position,” he agreed. “But she’s far too progressive. And competent. There’s a reason Voldemort tried to kill her himself. Between him and Dumbledore sticking their wands in, there was no way she’d get the job.”

He was right, but it didn’t make the news any easier to swallow. Susan was going to be *furious*.

"We'll just have to make sure Amelia lives to the end of the war, when we can have an actual, proper vote," he muttered to himself.

"That's the spirit, pup," Sirius enthused. "And here, this'll cheer you up." He waved a letter in his hand, grinning broadly. "It's from Amelia. My trial is set for three days time; the first Wizengamot meeting of the summer."

Harry's head snapped up, a beaming smile stretching across his face. Soon, Sirius would be free!

.-. .

With the trial in the books, it felt like the whole house had been hit with a sense of urgency. Sirius could hardly sit still, bouncing wildly between exuberant joy at his impending freedom and intense melancholy at the prospect of Dumbledore interfering and getting him locked up again. The rest of them tried their best to ease him out of those down swings, though Charlie seemed to be the only one with any real success.

Harry, meanwhile, was writing frantically back and forth with Susan and her aunt, making sure their case for the trial was as air-tight as possible.

Anything to stop him from worrying about Draco.

He hadn't heard anything from the Malfoys since Snape had told them Narcissa locked down the Manor; any letters with Hedwig came back unanswered, and Harry hadn't had the chance to give Draco the other mirror before they left school. The uncertainty gnawed at his gut, filling his head with all sorts of horrible scenarios whenever he took a moment to breathe.

It would have been in the papers if they were dead, he kept telling himself, but it wasn't as reassuring as he'd hoped.

But with Sirius so stressed about his upcoming trial, Harry didn't want to add more of a burden to his shoulders, or anyone else's. So, when the worry became too much, Harry grabbed his Firebolt and headed outside.

It felt glorious to be back in the air. Umbridge might have only banned him from quidditch for a couple of months, but he'd still missed flying intensely. He let his practice snitch go, doing laps of the half-pitch while it fluttered around. But even flying couldn't entirely rid him of the anxiety bubbling in his gut, the tiny voice in the back of his head insisting that Draco was in danger.

He turned, intending to dive for the snitch, only to come up short at the sight of a redhead zooming towards it.

Charlie plucked the snitch from the air, offering Harry a gentle smile. There was worry in his eyes nonetheless. "Best two out of three?" he suggested lightly.

"That one doesn't count," Harry insisted, and Charlie laughed.

"Yeah, okay, fair."

He released the snitch, and the pair of them circled for a count of fifteen, then shot off.

It was easier to focus, with the distraction of playing against another person. By the time they'd played five rounds — four of which had gone to Harry — he had something of a smile on his face.

"Feel better?" Charlie asked, drifting up beside him. Harry let out a long breath, pocketing the snitch once it was securely in its box.

"A little." Harry tipped his face into the breeze, wishing it would blow away his troubles along with it. "I just... I had another letter come back from Draco, this morning. Unanswered."

"Malfoy Manor's war wards are likely to deflect any form of contact," Charlie pointed out. "Just in case. I'm sure he's fine."

"But what if he's not," Harry argued. "What if the wards failed and Voldemort got him!"

"Snape's been Called twice since Mrs Malfoy kicked the Death Eaters out." Charlie's voice was frustratingly calm. "You really think You-Know-Who wouldn't brag to all of them if he'd captured the Malfoys?"

He had a point, and it eased Harry's worry just a little. "I just need to know he's okay." It had been hard enough saying goodbye on the train, knowing the death of his father still weighed heavily on Draco's mind.

"I'm sure you'll hear from him soon," Charlie assured. "Once it's safe. From what Sirius tells me, he's probably just as worried about you in return."

"What *has* Sirius told you?" Harry asked with raised eyebrows, wondering how much his godfather had been gossiping about him. Charlie blushed faintly.

"Not much," he said quickly. "Just that Draco's a good kid, considering his father. And that Narcissa's probably got the wedding colours picked out already," he added teasingly, and it was Harry's turn to blush.

He couldn't even deny that. Narcissa had probably picked them out *months* ago.

"Have you tried sending a letter with Ceri?" Charlie asked. Harry nodded morosely; the Malfoy wards even kept elves out. "Damn. Well. Have you asked Sirius for ideas? Narcissa's his cousin, he might know something."

"He's got enough to worry about, with the trial," Harry insisted, shaking his head. For some reason, that made Charlie smile.

"Like he wouldn't drop it all for you in a heartbeat," the redhead retorted. "He's worried about you, Harry. He... I've tried telling him there's too much evidence to have him locked away again. And even if the worse does happen, we won't let Dumbledore get his hands on you. But in all his fears about the trial, none of it is about going back to Azkaban for himself. He's just terrified of leaving you."

Harry's heart twisted painfully. "He still doesn't need to be worrying about Draco on top of all that. After the trial, I'll ask him." There was little point doing anything now, anyway; the trial was tomorrow.

"If you're sure," Charlie said, shrugging.

They drifted together, doing lazy loops around the pitch. "He's scared of leaving you, too, y'know," Harry said abruptly. Charlie raised an eyebrow.

"Pardon?"

"Sirius. He might not say it to you, but I've seen the way he watches you lately." Like Charlie might disappear if he looked away. The same way he watched Harry. "He's scared he might lose you, through this trial."

"He'll have to try harder than that, to shake me," Charlie challenged, smirking. "I'm not worried, Harry, and you shouldn't be either. The evidence is solid. Amelia's got it all under control. Sirius will get free."

Harry wished he could have that sort of confidence.

"The twins have asked me to bring you both round to the shop, after the trial," Charlie continued. "Said something about you needing to inspect your investment." He raised an amused eyebrow. "Care to elaborate?"

Harry told him about giving the twins his Triwizard winnings, and Charlie burst out laughing.

"Merlin, Harry! Never tell Mum, she'll kill you." His smile faltered at that, turning sad.

"Have you... spoken to her, since, y'know?" Harry didn't know the exact details, but he knew Mrs Weasley had blown up when she found out about Charlie and Sirius.

"I tried," Charlie said. "Went over to the house, tried to chat with her. Just ended in an argument. Mum... I know George has told you she's never really agreed with our sexuality. And I know she's gotten at you for it a few times." Harry scowled, nodding. "I think maybe she might've come round if it had been anyone other than Sirius. Some nice Romanian bloke, or maybe a good Gryffindor lad my own age. But... she never liked Sirius, regardless. I think because he was a threat to her — with him around, her and Dad were no longer the only parental figures in your life. And he was just so unashamedly *himself*, unapologetic about everything, she couldn't bear to see it." He grinned, winking at Harry. "I'll confess that's half the reason I started flirting with him, to start with. Just to piss Mum off, if she ever noticed it." He ran a hand through his hair. "Didn't expect to fall arse over teakettle for the bloke."

"He grows on you," Harry agreed fondly. Charlie laughed.

"Doesn't he just." He shook his head, affectionate smile still curling his lips. "Mum will either come around, or she won't. But Dad and the rest of the family don't care. And I've got the approval of you and Remus, so that's the only opinions Sirius gives a shit about. Far as the rest are concerned, he'll probably enjoy the outrage of it all."

Harry snorted; that sounded like Sirius. “I hope you know what you’re getting in for, once he’s free,” he mock-warned. “He’ll be dragging you out all over the place, wanting to show off his pretty bit of arm candy.”

Charlie laughed again, smirking deviously. “Fine by me,” he drawled. “I can do arm candy. It’s likely to be more seedy bars than fancy restaurants, anyway; he knows it takes persuasion to get me into formalwear.”

“Ew,” Harry mock-groaned, making Charlie snicker.

“Get used to it, little brother; I live here now,” Charlie teased, swooping in close to ruffle Harry’s hair. Harry ducked away, scowling.

“Can you really call me little brother when you’re dating my godfather?” he joked, wiggling his eyebrows. “I think it’s closer to step-son, if you look at it like that.”

“Only when we’re married,” Charlie shot back automatically, then blushed at the intent look Harry gave him.

“*When*, is it?” he asked pointedly.

“Don’t be a brat, *son*,” Charlie retorted. Then he paused, making a face of disgust and shaking his head. “Nope, that’s weird. I’m too young for that.”

Harry snickered. “Get used to it, *Dad*, you live here now,” he taunted, quickly dodging as Charlie started to chase him.

“You don’t need another dad, you’ve got two of them in that house,” the redhead pointed out dryly. “Three if you count Snape.” He slowed down, and a shudder ran through him. “That’s *still* the weirdest part of this whole situation.”

“You get used to it eventually,” Harry assured. “Give it enough time and you’ll catch him having a genuine emotion. After that it’s a bit hard to take all the scowling seriously. Not to mention the *flirting*, ugh, they’re awful when they get going.”

“Too weird,” Charlie insisted. “You’ve just been living here too long. Can’t believe they hid you right under Dumbledore’s nose.”

“He’s not as omniscient as he thinks,” Harry said, a little smug.

“I’m starting to realise that,” Charlie agreed.

They were pulled out of their half-hearted chasing when the bell rang to summon them for lunch, and the pair landed quickly, shouldering their brooms. “Hey,” Charlie called, reaching out one huge arm to wrap around Harry’s shoulders. “I’m sure Draco’s doing fine, yeah? Once Sirius is free, we’ll figure out a way for you to write to him. Or bring him here.” He grinned, cheeks dimpling. “I’ve got a lot of brotherly teasing to catch up on, after all.”

“We’ve heard it all from the twins already,” Harry told him, unbothered. “And Ginny.”

"The twins have got nothing on me," Charlie insisted, seemingly delighted by the challenge.
"You'll see."

Harry wondered if he should be nervous, but the feeling didn't last; he was too swept up in Charlie's unbridled optimism.

.-.-.

Harry sat with his hands on his knees, green eyes carefully surveying the group of wizard and witches sat opposite him.

The trial of Sirius Black was about to begin.

The Wizengamot looked incredibly imposing, sat in their identical deep plum robes. Even the familiar faces within the mix couldn't calm Harry's nerves. Not when Albus Dumbledore sat there, looking entirely too happy for Harry's liking.

"The Wizengamot calls the defendant; Sirius Orion Black."

The side door to the courtroom opened, and Sirius was marched in between two aurors. Unfortunately, they weren't aurors Harry knew — Tonks had been recused due to familial connections, and Kingsley was on Wizengamot duty. Still, Sirius kept his head high, and offered Harry a reassuring smile that didn't quite meet his eyes. He was forced into a chair in the centre of the room, and when one of the aurors tapped it with her wand, chains sprung up and wrapped around his arms and legs. Sirius didn't flinch.

Minister Scrimgeour cleared his throat, but before he could speak again, the main door slammed open. Harry's breath caught in his throat.

Narcissa Malfoy strolled in, looking for all the world like she owned the place, wearing perfectly tailored charcoal robes. "Humble Wizengamot," she called in greeting, grey eyes flashing. "Following the death of my husband, Lord Lucius Malfoy — I, Lady Narcissa Malfoy, claim his right of proxy guardianship over the houses of Malfoy, Burke, Lestrange, Rosier, Rowle, Travers, Yaxley and Mulciber, until such time as their rightful heir can claim them."

Before Scrimgeour or anyone else could say anything, there was a hum of magic, and the empty seats of the eight houses she'd listed glowed briefly.

The Wizengamot magic had confirmed her position. To show it, her robes transfigured immediately into the same plum robes that the rest wore.

Scrimgeour cleared his throat. "Very well, then, Lady Malfoy. Please, take your seat so we may begin."

Narcissa gracefully swept towards the Malfoy seat, catching Harry's eye on the way. She looked incredibly pleased.

Dumbledore, too, looked quietly delighted by the proceedings; likely he thought Narcissa would vote against her cousin's freedom out of spite.

He had another thing coming.

Scrimgeour paused, as if expecting some other surprise, and then slammed his gavel down, bringing the court to order. Beside him, Percy Weasley was poised to make notes.

“We are gathered here on this day, July seventh, nineteen ninety-six, to conduct the trial of Sirius Orion Black,” he announced. “Black, who was previously sentenced to life in Azkaban for the crime of fourteen counts of murder, and breaking the statute of secrecy, and who escaped Azkaban in July of nineteen ninety-three.” Scrimgeour turned to Sirius, staring at him coldly. “Mr Black, how do you plead?”

“Not guilty,” Sirius replied without hesitation. “Not of murder. I will admit I escaped prison, but I was there unlawfully to begin with.”

Scrimgeour sneered. “So you claim. Madam Bones,” he called, turning to the woman. Harry was glad to see her there, unharmed and keen-eyed. “I believe you have evidence for the defence.”

“I do, Minister.” Amelia stood, gathering a stack of parchments. “May I call the prisoner Peter Pettigrew in for questioning?”

There was a flurry of whispers through the crowd. Then Scrimgeour cleared his throat. Harry was starting to get Umbridge flashbacks. “I’m afraid, Madam Bones, that will not be possible. The man claiming to be Peter Pettigrew was found dead in his cell this morning.”

The chains rattled as Sirius visibly flinched. Harry’s heart sank — how could that be?

His eyes turned to Dumbledore, whose eyes were smug behind his twinkle. Harry scowled; had the headmaster done this?

Luckily, Amelia was unperturbed. “That is unfortunate,” she replied. “But it is a good thing Auror Shacklebolt already provided me with a Veritaserum-confirmed transcript of Pettigrew’s interrogation. If the Wizengamot would please read.” She waved her wand, and parchment appeared on the desk of each member. “In the interrogation, Mr Pettigrew admits to having been the Secret Keeper for the Potter family, and also a servant of the Dark Lord. He confesses to framing Mr Black for his murder, and using his unregistered animagus form to escape, seeking refuge with a wizarding family in the guise of a pet rat.”

Amelia gave everyone time to read, while Scrimgeour sat and scowled, not even looking at his papers. It was clear he’d already made his mind up.

“A fanciful story, to say the least. But as there was no magical confirmation that the man was indeed Mr Pettigrew, it cannot be taken as evidence for Mr Black’s innocence.”

“Not alone, which is why Mr Black has agreed to his own Veritaserum testimony in front of the Wizengamot today.”

“Impossible,” Scrimgeour snapped. “Black has already been found guilty once of this crime; a defendant cannot be placed under Veritaserum twice for the same confession.”

"That's where you're wrong, Minister," Amelia replied, smiling pleasantly. "Mr Black has never given any form of Veritaserum testimony in front of a Wizengamot court. Indeed, Mr Black was never given any trial of any kind." A few gasps rang out from the Wizengamot crowd.

"What?" Scrimgeour's eyes narrowed. A wave of Amelia's wand, and more parchment appeared.

"You will see the arrest record for Mr Black, and his Azkaban registration," Amelia explained. "Eleven hours apart. Mr Black was never given the chance to defend himself in court, nor was the evidence ever processed. With the late Barty Crouch Sr's signature on the papers, Mr Black was taken to Azkaban without trial or due process." Her smile was dagger-sharp. "So you see, Minister, Mr Black is long overdue his testimony."

Scrimgeour was pale, now. "Indeed," he growled. "Very well; bring forward the Veritaserum."

Harry tried not to smile too widely, watching one of the aurors appear with a bottle of potion, which was tested for legitimacy with a complicated-looking spell, and then three drops were placed on Sirius' tongue. Amelia stepped forward, beginning the interrogation.

"What is your name?"

"Sirius Orion Black," Sirius responded, in that vacant tone of one under the influence of the truth-telling potion.

"What is your date of birth?"

"November 3rd, 1959."

"Are you, or have you ever been, a servant of the Dark Lord Voldemort?"

"No."

Gasps echoed through the room. Amelia continued. "Were you the Secret Keeper for Lily and James Potter?"

"No."

"Who was their Secret Keeper?"

"Peter Pettigrew."

Harry's hands curled in the fabric of his robes as he leant forward in his seat slightly.

"Please recount the events of the night of October 31st 1981, beginning with your arrival at the Potters' home."

"I arrived on my motorbike, at around nine in the evening," Sirius stated blankly. "The house was half-destroyed, and I could hear a baby crying. So I went inside, to try and find Harry.

He was in his cot, with a cut on his head. I picked him up. I knew Voldemort would be after him, I had to keep him safe. When I left the house, Hagrid was there. He said that Dumbledore had sent him to retrieve Harry, to take him somewhere safe. We argued — I didn't want him taking Harry anywhere. He accused me of betraying Lily and James, and I knew that until Peter was caught, everyone would think I did. So I let him take Harry, and my motorbike, and I went to go find Peter. I caught up with him at his house, where he was packing, trying to run. I chased him out onto the street. He yelled for everyone to hear that I was the Secret Keeper, that I was the reason Lily and James were dead. Then he blew up the street, cut off his own finger and transformed into a rat. I tried to find him, but the aurors showed up."

It broke Harry's heart, hearing his godfather recount such a traumatic night in that empty, emotionless voice.

"No further questions, Minister." Amelia declared.

"I have a question," Scrimgeour growled. "You were laughing, Black; when the aurors came for you. Why?"

"It was the first time Peter had shown any sort of cunning," Sirius responded. "I was laughing because I couldn't believe he had the brains to do it. And laughing was easier than crying."

The response just made Scrimgeour scowl harder. But he waved his hand, and the antidote was given to Sirius, who blinked away the vacant stare.

"If Black was innocent the whole time, why did he break out of Azkaban to go after Potter?" Scrimgeour pointed out. That made Amelia smile.

"For that, I would like to bring Mr Harry Potter to the stand."

Harry stood up, approaching the chair Amelia gestured to.

"Objection!" Dumbledore cut in. "Mr Potter is a minor; he cannot be subject to Veritaserum."

"No potions," Amelia promised. "Just questions. Mr Potter, do you consent?"

"I consent," Harry confirmed.

"Excellent. Have a seat." Harry sat. "Mr Potter, please recount to the court the events of the night of June 27th, 1993, to the best of your knowledge."

Harry had prepared for this. He was ready. In a clear, steady voice, he explained what had happened the night Sirius dragged Hermione to the Shrieking Shack.

He glossed over some of the details; the Marauder's Map, some of the exact things said, the extent of Snape's involvement. But the important parts were there; namely, Sirius' confession of innocence, and Pettigrew's admission of guilt.

"In all the chaos of Professor Lupin transforming, Pettigrew got away," Harry explained. "Professor Snape got knocked out trying to protect us. Sirius and I ran to the lake, for safety,

but the dementors came. I cast a Patronus to keep them at bay, and then I passed out.”

“A Patronus, able to keep a hundred dementors at bay, at the age of thirteen?” Scrimgeour blustered. “Preposterous!”

“Minister, if I may.” It was Madam Marchbanks, raising her hand. “I saw Mr Potter perform a Patronus myself, in his recent OWL examinations. It certainly had the strength for such a task, and I fully believe his story.”

Scrimgeour didn’t like that, as an impressed wave of whispers scattered through the room.

“I can perform the spell right now, if you’d like,” Harry offered, but Scrimgeour scowled at him

“Underage magic will not be necessary,” he snapped.

“I have a few further questions for Mr Potter, if I may?” Amelia continued, making Harry tense. What else could she possibly have to ask him? “Mr Potter; would you please describe, to the best of your knowledge, the events of your arrival at the home of Mr and Mrs Dursley, on the night of October 31st, 1981?”

“Objection!” Dumbledore cut in. “This questioning is irrelevant to the case, and a breach of Mr Potter’s privacy.”

“It is relevant, Minister, I promise,” Amelia assured.

“I’m happy to answer,” Harry added. Scrimgeour gave a curt nod. “I only know what I’ve been told, since, y’know, I was a baby,” Harry admitted, and a few people snickered. “My aunt found me on the doorstep on the morning of November 1st when she went to get the milk delivery. I was left with a letter, explaining that my parents had been killed, and for my own safety my aunt and uncle had to take me in.”

“Do you know who wrote this letter?” Amelia pressed.

“Albus Dumbledore, Ma’am.”

“So Albus Dumbledore instructed Rubeus Hagrid to bring you to your muggle relatives immediately after the murder of your parents, where he left you on a doorstep overnight in freezing cold weather, with nothing but a letter as explanation.” Amelia’s tone was even, but her eyes were bright.

“Yes, as far as I know.”

“Albus Dumbledore is not the one on trial,” Scrimgeour cut in. Amelia’s smile widened.

“One more question, Minister.” She turned back to Harry. “Mr Potter, are you aware that both the wills of Lily and James Potter expressly forbid your guardianship being turned over to Mrs Potter’s muggle sister?”

Harry gaped at her. “I—I didn’t know they had wills.” When she hadn’t mentioned anything, he’d assumed that had come up empty.

“Let the Wizengamot see,” Amelia waved her wand, “that according to the records at Gringotts bank, the wills of Lily and James Potter were both sealed by Professor Albus Dumbledore — four hours after the arrest of Mr Sirius Black, but prior to his Azkaban admittance. While Professor Dumbledore was, by technicality, Mr Potter’s legal head of house, due to proxy offered by James Potter in the event of his death and Mr Black’s inability to claim the position. Approximately seven hours later — around the same time Mr Black was being taken to Azkaban prison without trial — Mrs Petunia Dursley found an infant Harry Potter on her doorstep, after the child had waited there for an unspecified amount of time.”

Amelia looked up at the Wizengamot, coolly staring down Scrimgeour, not even acknowledging Dumbledore. “It is travesty enough that the heir to the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black could be imprisoned for life without trial. It would be much, much worse to consider that it was done to secure the unlawful placement of Harry Potter with his muggle relatives.”

Harry stared at her, incredulous. That was a *balls*y move. Indeed, Dumbledore looked like he’d choked on one of his lemon drops. “Objection!” the headmaster called after he collected himself. “As Minister Scrimgeour said, I am not the one on trial here, and the matter of the safety of Harry Potter is more complicated than you could begin to understand, Amelia, dear.”

“I’m sure you believe that, Professor,” Amelia replied blandly. “The point of the matter is, Mr Black was arrested, sentenced and convicted without trial — while his godson, Mr Potter, was claimed and removed from the wizarding world, against the request of his deceased parents, while Mr Black was not present and able to advocate for him. I would not be so bold as to suggest Mr Black was intentionally framed for his crimes, but it is clear that a grave miscarriage of justice was conducted that night, and we are obligated to correct what we can. Sirius Black is an innocent man, and I move for all charges against him to be dropped, and his freedoms — and guardianship of Harry James Potter — to be returned to him immediately.”

“All against the motion?” Scrimgeour droned, raising his own wand. Harry craned his neck, counting the number of wands that went up. Hope rose in his chest; it wasn’t nearly enough, surely!

When he turned to Dumbledore, the man was staring intently at Narcissa. He looked very surprised that her wand was not raised.

“All in favour of the motion?” Dumbledore raised his wand; as did Amelia, and both Weasley brothers, and Kingsley, and a smattering of others.

And then Narcissa Malfoy raised her wand high in the air.

There was a long, tense silence. Until Percy Weasley cleared his throat. “The motion is passed,” he declared somewhat nervously.

Scrimgeour had no choice but to slam down his gavel. “Sirius Black is cleared of all charges,” he announced, scowling. Immediately, the chains around Sirius’ limbs dropped. Harry jumped to his feet, throwing himself into his godfather’s arms.

“We did it!” he breathed, his chest so full of joy and relief he could hardly breathe. Sirius smacked a kiss on his head, then straightened up, arm still around Harry’s shoulders.

“Before the Wizengamot is dismissed; I, Sirius Orion Black, do hereby claim the Black seat of my birthright.” The seat glowed brightly, and a lordship ring formed on Sirius’ hand. “I also claim, with permission, proxy guardianship of both the Potter and Peverell seats, until such time that my godson, Harry Potter, comes of age and desires them himself.”

Two seats glowed softly, and Harry felt a warmth in his own chest. “I give my permission,” he said aloud, not sure if he needed to but not wanting any hint of doubt.

The glow brightened, and then there was a hum of magic in the chamber. It was done.

Dumbledore looked *furious*.

“Wizengamot dismissed!” Scrimgeour barked, before any other changes could be made. At once, everyone’s purple robes transformed back into the outfits they had arrived in. The group began to disperse, and Dumbledore — now wearing a blindingly bright lemon-yellow robe — came towards them. Sirius’ hand tightened on Harry’s shoulder.

“Congratulations, my boy,” the headmaster said, smiling. His eyes were devoid of their twinkle, and it made Harry grin. “You understand, of course, that Amelia’s evidence regarding the wills is circumstantial at best? Of course I would have done everything I could to keep you out of prison, but my priority had to be Harry’s safety, and by the time that was secured it was too late for me to interfere.”

“Oh, I understand completely, Headmaster,” Sirius assured evenly. Dumbledore’s smile widened.

“Glad to hear it. Harry, it is good to see you looking so well,” he added, finally addressing his student. “Might I have a word, if you are not too busy?”

“Sorry, Professor, but Remus is waiting for us at home,” Harry said with the best apologetic smile he could muster. “They wouldn’t let him in because of the whole werewolf thing, y’know. But he’ll be really pleased to hear the good news. Another time, perhaps?”

“I— of course, of course. Enjoy your celebrations.”

Harry and Sirius didn’t wait for the man to apparate away, already headed to the doors where Bill and Charlie were waiting. They stopped at the approach of a blonde head of hair. “Congratulations, cousin,” Narcissa drawled, and Sirius grinned.

“Thank you, Cissa, dear. My condolences for the loss of your husband,” he added drolly. “Though I hear you have been doing some... spring cleaning, to work through your grief.”

“Quite.” Narcissa’s lips twitched in the barest of smiles. She held out an envelope to Harry, who immediately recognised the handwriting on the outside, his heart lurching. “My son sends his regards, Mr Potter,” Narcissa said, watching Harry carefully tuck the letter away. “Good afternoon, gentlemen.”

Then she swept away, apparating from the chamber at the threshold. Harry was practically skipping by the time they reached their two redheaded companions.

“Lord Prewett, Lord Weasley,” Sirius greeted with an unnecessarily pompous bow. Charlie smirked.

“Lord Black,” he returned, offering his arm with a flourish. “Shall we?”

And so with Charlie on one side and Harry on the other, Sirius Black walked out of the Wizengamot chamber, a free man at last.

Chapter 77

In the morning, the *Prophet* was full of stories of Sirius' freedom. The ex-convict delighted in reading them aloud over breakfast, gleefully repeating the parts that shed suspicion on Dumbledore's involvement in the Potters' wills.

"I want to marry Amelia Bones," Sirius declared, and Charlie kicked his shin halfheartedly.

"Oi!" he protested. Sirius just laughed, dancing out of kicking range.

"Come on, can you blame me? The way she just brought out those facts, right in front of the old goat, and managed to make it all part of my own case! Fucking masterful."

"It was brilliant," Charlie agreed. Then he reached out, grabbing Sirius by the wrist and yanking him down into his lap. "But you're not marrying her."

"Make me a better offer," Sirius challenged. Charlie just winked.

"Maybe I will."

"I'm going to leave before I vomit," Snape declared, getting to his feet. Remus laughed.

"Don't forget to come up for lunch," he teased, bidding his partner goodbye.

"So what do you want to do with your first day as a free man, then?" Harry asked, beaming at his godfather.

"Well, now it's all over the paper, I suppose we should see what the public reaction will be," Sirius suggested, still grinning. "Anyone up for a trip to Diagon?"

"You mean we have to be seen in public with you?" Charlie mock-complained. Sirius just laughed, kissing him firmly.

"Get used to it, Weasley," he drawled. "I can go anywhere I want, now! I've got fifteen years of catching up to do!"

"I'll come with you, as long as you stop doing *that*," Harry said, gesturing to the pair of them, and Sirius barked a laugh.

"I suppose it has been a very long time since I witnessed the Public Spectacle of Sirius Black," Remus mused, shaking his head. "But I can't be out too long; I promised Severus I'd go over some adjustments he's making to the Wolfsbane this afternoon."

"You're going to leave me with the lovebirds?" Harry yelped in dismay. Charlie snorted, reaching out to ruffle his hair.

"I'll drop Bill a line, see if he wants to join us," he assured. That perked Harry up, and he finished his breakfast quickly, heading upstairs to get changed for the day.

On his desk, the letter from Draco was open, having been re-read a dozen times the evening before; the Slytherin boy was absolutely fine, but they were just laying low while Narcissa sorted out some legal business leftover from Lucius' death. He promised Harry he'd visit soon, and Harry could hardly wait.

When he returned to the entrance hall, the three adults were dressed in robes. Sirius was in fine form, his hair silky and tied back in a low ponytail, looking every bit the Pureblood Lord he was. His eyes were shining in a way that made Harry's heart swell with happiness for him.

"Let's go!" he declared brightly, practically dragging Charlie towards the door. Remus and Harry followed at a much more sedate pace, though Harry could see mischief hiding in Remus' amber gaze; he was looking forward to shocking the public just as much as the rest of them.

Indeed, when Sirius apparated into Diagon Alley, there was a small burst of screams. Then people remembered the *Prophet* headline, and just stared at the four of them, wide-eyed.

Sirius didn't falter for a second at the scrutiny, and to his credit, neither did Charlie. The redhead tangled his fingers with Sirius', offering his partner a sunny smile. "Where to first, sweetheart?"

"Gringotts, I think," Sirius declared. "Make sure the accounts are all in order."

They were given a wide berth up the alley, people stopping to stare and whisper as soon as they saw them. It was weird, for Harry, being the centre of attention due to someone else's presence. Was this what his friends felt like?

They all paused at the sight of the lurid purple building declaring itself to be Weasley's Wizard Wheezes. "Fucking brilliant," Sirius declared proudly. "Oh, we're definitely going there next. But I need money first."

They hurried to the white marble building at the end of the alley, and Harry spotted a familiar head of red hair waiting outside. Bill waved at them, reaching out to clap Sirius on the shoulder. "How does it feel?"

"Incredible," Sirius declared vehemently, beaming. "I need to check my accounts."

"I thought you might; I set up a meeting for you," Bill told him. "With Farlig; he's the goblin Harry put in charge of all his accounts, which included the Black accounts at the time. He wants to know if you'd prefer to switch back to your old account manager."

"Nah; if Harry likes him, that's good enough for me," Sirius assured, to Harry's quiet relief. They passed by the goblins guarding the bank and into the main entrance hall. Bill led them straight through to one of the offices, flashing a Gringotts pass as he walked.

Harry was only partially surprised to see Gorrik in the office as well as Farlig; both goblins bowed, and Harry bowed back, offering the customary greetings.

"The Nation's congratulations on your freedom, Lord Black," Farlig said. "I understand you wish to review the Black accounts?"

Harry left him to it, shuffling over with Bill and Gorrak. "How is progress going?" he asked. To his shock, the Weasley and the goblin shared a toothy grin.

"That's one of the reasons I asked Gorrak here, actually," Bill started. "I don't know where Snape got that book, but it's exactly what we needed. We know how to get the horcrux out of you."

Harry stared at him, the words echoing in his brain. "I— really?"

"We can perform the ritual as soon as you are ready, Mr Potter," Gorrak confirmed.

Harry's heart soared — and quickly fell, once a thought occurred to him. "I can't, yet," he realised, feeling sick. "The visions... I can't stop having them. I've already saved lives with them, I can't risk that going away." Without the horcrux, he would no longer have the connection to Voldemort's mind. There would be no early warning if anything should happen again like it had almost happened to the Bones', or to Mr Weasley last Christmas.

Bill's brow furrowed. "It's dangerous to keep it, Harry. He could send you false visions to trap you; he's already tried it once. The longer he knows about the connection, the higher the chance he might figure out what it really is."

"I know, but I just... I need a little more time." He just needed to see how bad things were going to get. How many other people he could save. "How long does the ritual take to prepare?"

"Half an hour," Gorrak responded. "We could even do it right now, if you wished."

"I can't," Harry insisted sadly.

"I don't like this, Harry." Bill was frowning. "Having that thing inside you... it's not good for you."

"It's been there fifteen years almost, what's a few more months going to make?" Harry retorted. "I promise, as soon as it looks like things need to change — if it gets dangerous, or he becomes too aware — I'll have it removed. But... I can do good things with it, right now." His lips twisted bitterly. "It's not like I can kill him even if we do destroy it. We still don't know where the rest are, if he has any more."

"The cursebreaking team have been doing some research on that front, as well," Gorrak supplied. "We believe with confidence that it is impossible for any more than nine horcruxes to be made without the soul dissolving entirely. So at the very least, there is an upper limit."

That wasn't nearly as comforting as Harry would like it to be. "Is there a way of tracking them?"

Gorrak and Bill shook their heads. "We've been trying to figure out where the rest might be," Bill assured. "But considering where the ones we know about were, we don't have much to

go on.”

Harry bit his lip in thought. The diary had been with Lucius Malfoy, and the locket... either Voldemort had left it in Grimmauld Place, or he'd given it to Regulus Black.

“What about with his other followers?” he suggested. “That seems to be what he did with them; giving them to other people to look after.” He was struck with a thought, and frowned. “Is there a way to search the vaults of his Death Eaters? I know the contents is private and everything,” he added quickly. “But if you’re, like, cataloguing or whatever. Surely you could take a look?”

The pair frowned, Bill glancing at Gorrak for authority on the matter. Slowly, a sharklike grin crossed the goblin’s face. “It is true that what wizards choose to store in their vaults is at their discretion,” he began. “However, the Nation has laws. Including the law that no living being is to be contained within a vault.” His dark eyes flashed viciously. “I believe a horcrux could be considered a living being, of a sort. It would be entirely within Gringotts policy to remove such an object from its vault for violation of goblin law.” He turned to Harry, nodding decisively. “We shall see it done. If there is a horcrux within this bank, we will find it.”

“Brilliant.” Harry’s stomach clenched, hardly daring to hope it might be that simple.

When he looked back to Sirius, his godfather was bent over the desk, wielding a sharp grey quill over an ancient looking piece of parchment. Considering Gorrak and Bill were already deep in discussion over which vaults to check, Harry sidled over to the desk, peering at it curiously. “What are you up to?”

“Oh, y’know,” Sirius replied airily. “Just a little family tree maintenance.”

Harry’s eyes widened, and he looked closer. Sirius’ name on the tree now glowed bright gold, showing him to be the current head of the family. A few rows over, in fresh black ink, was Andromeda Black Tonks.

Sirius had only needed to write her name; as the magic accepted her reintroduction to the family, ink sprawled out, creating lines to link her to her husband Edward Tonks, and her child Nymphadora Tonks. Sirius nodded in satisfaction, then put the quill down, reaching for a blood red one lying next to the family tree.

Without hesitation, he struck a line through the name of Bellatrix Black Lestrange, murmuring something in Latin that Harry didn’t quite catch. There was a flare of magic, a tug within Harry’s core, and then Bellatrix’s name faded on the paper until it was little more than a scar of faded ink, her connections to her family dissolved.

“Merlin, that felt good,” Sirius declared, smirking. Farlig grinned, rolling up the family tree at Sirius’ order.

“I will have the full accounts of the Black holdings sent to Curse-breaker Weasley to bring to you,” he declared.

"Would you send him the Potter and Peverell holdings, too?" Harry requested. "He can look at them, right? Since he's my guardian?" If Sirius could get the deed to the Pottery, that would make their sanctuary even more secure.

"It will be done," Farlig assured. "Is there anything else we can do for you, Lord Black?"

"There should be a pensieve, in the Potter vaults," Sirius said. "Would you have it brought up, please? With Harry's permission."

"Yes," Harry blurted immediately. "Please." He flushed, but Farlig just smiled and nodded, writing a note which vanished immediately.

"I know I said we'd go through the whole vault together, pup," Sirius said, squeezing his shoulder. "But I don't think today's the day for it, yeah? We'll come back another time."

Harry wasn't about to make Sirius spend his first day of freedom holed up in a Gringotts vault underground. They had plenty of time for that, in future.

"Sounds good," he agreed.

While they waited for the pensieve to be delivered, Sirius got set up with a new bank card and money purse, and was able to authorise them for Harry, too. "Don't spend it all in one place," he said teasingly when Harry pocketed his card, as if it would be possible to spend the whole Potter fortune in one *lifetime*, let alone one place.

The pensieve brought up from the vaults was a beautiful piece of carved obsidian, and Harry was surprised when a small wooden box was placed beside it. "The note on the pensieve instructed these to be used together," the goblin messenger who had brought them up explained. Sirius reached for the box, and he sucked in a sharp breath when he opened it.

"Oh, Monty," he breathed. Remus froze.

"Monty?"

"He left memories," Sirius explained quietly. "For James and Lily. For us."

"...Oh." The two Marauders stared at each other for a long moment, and no one else spoke; there was nothing they could say. Then Remus cleared his throat, wiping hastily at his eyes. "Well, then. We can look through those later. Thank you," he added to the messenger, who bowed and retreated at Farlig's hand gesture.

"I think that's everything, then," Sirius said, voice a little hoarse. "Thank you, Farlig. You've been a friend to my godson, and I hope our relationship is long and prosperous."

"I am glad to guard your family's wealth, Lord Black," Farlig replied firmly.

Harry bid both goblins goodbye and the five of them left the bank, Sirius getting goggled at once more.

"I think that's about enough staring for one day, for me," Remus decided. "Pass me the pensieve, Padfoot. I'll take it home safely." He ruffled Harry's hair. "Be safe, cub." Then he looked at Bill, and smirked. "Keep these three out of trouble, will you? I don't trust either of them to be able to say no to Sirius today."

Bill laughed, while Charlie blushed. "I'll do my best," he promised. "See you, Remus."

The werewolf went to find a quiet spot to apparate from, and when Harry turned back, he was unsurprised to see Sirius' gaze set on the twins' shop.

"Looks like we're off to visit Fred and George," Charlie mused, sighing. Sirius just grabbed him by the hand and set off.

Harry and Bill kept up easily; Harry was keen to see the shop, too. There was a huge crowd outside it, though it parted with a sort of terrified awe at the sight of Sirius Black.

"At last!" the call came from nowhere, and suddenly Harry felt hands on his shoulders; he would've jumped, had it not been so familiar.

"We were starting to think you didn't love us anymore," Fred sniffed, tweaking Harry's ear.

"And *you*!" George said, rounding on Charlie. "Here I thought *I* was going to be the disgrace to the family with my pureblood Slytherin boyfriend. But you just had to go and one-up me with bloody Sirius Black!" He looked quite put-out, and Charlie laughed.

"Have to take the opportunities when they come, little brother," he replied, slamming a hand over George's mouth before the younger Weasley could make some inappropriate joke out of it. Charlie made a disgusted face, pulling his hand away and wiping slobber on George's robe. "Don't lick me, you don't know where that hand has been."

"I can make a few solid guesses," George retorted dryly.

"This place is *amazing*," Sirius declared in awe, looking round-eyed at everything the joke shop had to offer. Indeed, it was a riot of colour; Harry could see several things he recognised from the past year at school — including a whole display full of Skiving Snackboxes — but there were even more brand new items; the twins had been incredibly busy in the last few months.

"I can show you around if you like," Fred offered, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

"Marauder discount on whatever strikes your fancy."

"Except Charlie, you're paying full price for him," George joked, and Sirius snorted.

"Happy to," he replied with a wink.

"And you can just grab what you like, Harrikins," Fred added. "Your money's no good in here."

"Don't argue with us," George insisted, placing a finger over Harry's lips. Harry took a leaf out of his book, and licked it. George just laughed. "Now you *definitely* don't know where

that's been lately."

Thinking over the possibilities, Harry mock-gagged.

"I'll try not to take offence at that, Potter." It was Blaise, approaching from the direction of the till. Harry stared at him.

"I thought you were in Italy!"

"Decided to stay and help the twins with the initial summer rush," the Slytherin explained. "Angie's here, too." He gestured back at the till, where Angelina was ringing up a cluster of kids for an incredible stack of prank goods. "Bit cosy in the flat with the four of us, but it could be worse. It's good to see you, though; I was starting to feel outnumbered by lions."

Harry blinked at him. "Blaise, I'm also a lion," he pointed out, amused. Blaise waved a dismissive hand.

"Barely."

That drew a laugh from Bill, and Blaise eyed him over. "You must be the eldest brother. Well met, Lord Prewett."

"Well met, Heir Zabini," Bill replied in turn, then offered a hand to shake. "Welcome to the madhouse, I suppose. Seems a bit late to warn you away from it."

Blaise chuckled, casting fond eyes towards George, who was eagerly demonstrating something to Sirius. "Quite," he agreed. "I hope we'll soon have a chance to get to know each other somewhere... quieter." As if on cue, an explosion of bright green smoke went up from somewhere in the back of the room. Blaise sighed. "Excuse me a moment." He started to squeeze through the crowd, headed in the direction of the mess.

"Looks like he fits right in," Bill joked. "Come on, let's see what they're selling Sirius on."

Harry and Bill shuffled their way over to where the twins were regaling Sirius and Charlie with the story of the Fireworks Extravaganza at Hogwarts. "I'll show you the memory when we get home," Harry promised the pair, grinning. "We just picked up a pensieve from my family vault," he added to the twins in explanation.

"Wicked," they replied, beaming.

"You'll have to show us all the stuff that went on after we left," Fred begged. "See if we can get some inspiration."

"And those origami eggs you did," George added, eyes bright. "Blaise told me about it. You've been holding out on us, Potter."

"We'll sort dinner at Grimmauld one night," Harry assured. "Memories and brainstorming. You can give me some ideas to keep the legacy alive now you're gone, too."

The twins nodded eagerly.

Sirius was off investigating again, and Harry was quite happy to leave Charlie to chase him around. Aware of Bill keeping close, Harry did some exploring of his own. The twins really were geniuses, with some of their stuff.

“This section is cool,” Bill said, gesturing to a smaller section off to the side. “It’s all defensive stuff. Pre-charged shield spells, stunners, that sort of stuff. Noise decoys — and this Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder, it’s really incredible.” He pointed at the little jet black rocks. “Do I want to know what you did that the twins won’t take your money? Or are you really just the favourite brother?” Bill asked, looking amused. Harry laughed, and told him; there was hardly need to keep it a secret now, after all.

“Wow,” Bill said, grinning. “I’ll have to tell Fleur, she’ll get a real kick out of that.”

“How’s she doing, anyway? I hope I get to see her this summer.”

Bill’s smile turned a little goofy at the mention of his fiancée. “She’s great. Part of the Order officially, now. We’ll figure out our next weekend off, have lunch together or something.”

“When’s the wedding?” Harry asked, tossing a couple of the Decoy Detonators into his basket with the Darkness Powder.

“Haven’t pinned a date down yet. But we’re not in a rush; I need to find us a house, and Fleur wants to be done with her internship and onto the apprentice programme before we’re married. It’s, ah, a more secure job — better hours, less chance of gallivanting about with something weird and dangerous. We’re pretty keen to try for kids, as soon as we’re married, so we want to make sure that’ll all work out.” He blushed faintly at the admission, and Harry stared at him, wide eyed.

“That soon? Really?”

Bill nodded. “We both want a family. Just got to get the essentials squared away; marriage, house, apprenticeship. After that... well, we’ll figure out the rest when we get there, yeah?” He was grinning, clearly eager for that future. Harry could see him with a little red-haired baby in his arms — or even a little blonde baby, if the veela blood ran true.

“You’ll be brilliant parents.” He’d seen Bill with all his younger siblings, and the way Fleur doted on Gabrielle. Any kids of theirs would be incredibly lucky.

“Thanks, Harry,” Bill said, beaming. “You’ll have a lot of competition for favourite uncle, though. Better start brainstorming now,” he joked.

They found their way towards the till, and Harry set his basket down. Angelina stared at him flatly. “No can do, Potter,” she declared. “Fred’s told me you don’t pay here.”

“Oh come on, Angie,” Harry whined. “I can’t just take all this stuff!”

“Quit being such a bloody Gryffindor, Potter,” Blaise drawled. “You’re better than that.”

That just made Harry roll his eyes, and eventually he was forced to stand aside so the person behind him in the queue could pay. Blaise grabbed him gently by the elbow, directing him

into the back room. “How did everything go last week?” he asked, voice low and urgent. It took Harry a moment to figure out what he was referring to.

“Oh, that. Yeah, went smoothly. Everyone you sent my way is where they should be. Haven’t you heard from Theo?”

Blaise shook his head. “I think he got too focused worrying about Susan, after the attack was reported in the paper. I only know he’s fine because she told me.” He scoffed. “Lovestruck little idiot that he is.”

“Pot, kettle,” Harry retorted, smirking.

“Don’t start fights you won’t win, Potter,” came Blaise’s immediate retort. “I’ve seen you and Draco.”

Harry had to concede there.

“Speaking of, I assume you’ve heard about what happened at the Manor?”

Harry wasn’t sure how *Blaise* had heard, but he nodded all the same. “Mrs Malfoy claimed Lucius’ proxy seats before Sirius’ trial yesterday,” he explained. “I think her votes in his favour were the only reason he won, actually.” If all those seats had been down as abstaining, it might not have been enough.

“She’s certainly making her stance clear,” Blaise agreed, impressed. “I’ve heard a few rumours, down Knockturn way; there were a few darker families under a bit of pressure to join up, but several of them seemed to have mysteriously disappeared, with all their belongings. Current theory is they’ve moved in with the Malfoys.”

Harry’s eyebrows rose; Draco’s letter hadn’t said anything about that. “What makes you think that?”

“They’re all women from Mrs Malfoy’s social circle — women with family members in His service, but who have never pledged themselves. A few men, too. And their kids of course. I can’t think of anything else that would have such a prominent collection of dark socialites vanishing all at the same time.”

“Hopefully it’s not for more sinister reasons.” If Narcissa was rescuing people who were stuck in the same position she once had been, more power to her. “I should get to see Draco soon; I’ll give him your regards, and see if I can get some answers for you.”

“Please do. I’ll send you some names, too — Mrs Malfoy may be able to look into them. They’re kids I know are struggling, but they’re not in the position to help themselves. If she can do anything...” Blaise’s face was drawn, and Harry nodded.

Even if Narcissa couldn’t do anything, maybe Harry could, or even Snape.

The curtain to the back room was suddenly pulled back, and George peered in at them, smirking. “Oi, go back to your own snake, Potter,” he teased. “This one’s taken.” He slung an arm around Blaise’s waist, kissing him.

“You can keep him,” Harry replied lightly. “I just had some information.”

“About your boy?” George’s brows furrowed in concern. “Heard the Manor’s gone dark.”

“He’s fine,” Harry assured. “His mum came to Sirius’ trial. We’ll tell you about it later; it was *amazing*, you should’ve seen Dumbledore’s face! But she passed on a letter, and Draco’s safe. Hoping to visit soon.”

That made George crack a smile. “Glad to hear it.” There was a shout from the other side of the curtain, and George nudged Blaise forward. “Come on, you two. Come join the party.”

‘The party’ turned out to be watching Sirius pay for a truly obscene amount of Weasley products, a look of childlike glee on his face. Harry sighed. “Remus is going to hate us,” he said to Charlie, who just laughed, looking back at his partner indulgently.

“Probably,” he agreed. “But it’s worth it. Look how happy he is.” Then his eyes turned mischievous. “Besides, we’ll just blame Bill. He’s the one supposed to be telling us no.”

They both looked over to Bill, who was chatting away with Angelina about something or another, not even blinking at the amount Sirius was buying.

“Works for me.”

Eventually, Sirius was finished, all his purchases shrunk down into a bag. “We’ll owl you about dinner plans,” Harry promised, ducking Fred’s attempt to ruffle his hair — only for Angelina to get him instead.

“See that you do,” George insisted, kissing his cheek. “Don’t be a stranger, kid.”

After a long round of goodbyes, they were finally stepping back out into the alley. “Is that all you wanted, Padfoot?”

Sirius turned to him, grinning in a way that had dread gathering in the pit of Harry’s stomach. “Oh, pup,” he said brightly, “I’m just getting started.”

.-.-.-.

It turned out that shopping with Sirius Black was an endurance event. By the time they made their way back to Seren Du, Sirius had dragged them into what felt like every shop in the alley — it was even more of a shopping spree than Harry had gone on in the summer before his third year, when he’d been there alone! Bill bailed at around one in the afternoon, while Charlie and Harry were stuck with him until they finally returned home a little after five, laden down with bags. They found Remus in the living room, looking amused at the sight of them.

“You knew,” Harry accused, collapsing down on the sofa. “You knew how bad it would be.”

“Of course I knew,” Remus confirmed. “I grew up with the bugger. I can imagine he’s only gotten worse after fifteen years without access to shops in person. Why do you think I left

after Gringotts?" He reached out, patting Harry's cheek consolingly. "How many new outfits did you end up with?"

"Twelve," Harry replied. "With a promise to go muggle clothes shopping sometime."

"For him or for you?"

"Both."

Remus glanced over at Sirius, who was stroking Charlie's hair while the redhead sprawled out on the sofa, as exhausted as Harry. "I'd make those two separate trips, and let those two get Sirius' clothes by themselves," he advised. "Unless you want to know things about your godfather you may regret learning."

Harry screwed up his nose in disgust. "Noted."

"Oh, come on, you two; it wasn't that bad," Sirius insisted cheerily. He was hardly even winded; Harry wondered if he was just riding on the high of finally being able to go out and be around other people.

"You're even worse than shopping with Tonks," Charlie groaned. "Maybe I should send the two of you off together next time."

Sirius looked delighted at the prospect.

"Why don't you go take a nap, Harry," Remus suggested, squeezing his ankle. "Put away the mountain of things I'm sure Sirius bought you. We'll call you when it's dinner time." His face softened. "Then we can get the pensieve out after?"

Harry brightened up; that sounded like a perfect plan to him.

.-. .

After dinner, Charlie begged off, saying he was still tired from the shopping spree. Harry suspected he just didn't want to intrude in their little trip down memory lane, but that was fine with him.

The four of them — Harry, Sirius, Remus and Snape — gathered in the upstairs living room, where the pensieve was sat on the table. Beside it was the box containing the memory vials from Harry's grandfather.

"I haven't watched any of them, yet," Remus said. "I wanted to wait for you to get home."

There were five vials in the box; one for James, one for Lily, one for the pair of them together, one for Sirius, and another simply labelled 'our boys'.

"What do we do about these three?" Harry asked, gesturing to the ones for his parents. Sirius and Remus shared a long, considering look.

"Leave them, I think," Sirius decided. "Whatever Monty and Phee wanted to say to them... that's not for us to intrude on."

Part of Harry wanted to argue — those were his grandparents' memories, and he wanted to know them! — But a bigger part of him wasn't sure he had the capacity to watch his dead grandparents leave a message for his dead parents, one they would never get to hear.

"Okay, then."

Sirius reached for the 'our boys' memory, pouring it into the pensieve. "Come on, then, Moons," he said, voice choked. Together, they placed their hands in the liquid, getting sucked into the memory.

Harry had never seen someone else use a pensieve before. It was strange, seeing them blank-eyed and bent over the bowl. Watching them unnerved him, so he looked away, turning to Snape instead. "Did you, uh... did you know my other grandparents?" he asked tentatively. "My Evans grandparents?"

Slowly, Snape nodded.

"Mr and Mrs Evans — Mark and Rose, though I could never bring myself to call them by their first names no matter how many times they asked. They were... incredibly kind individuals. Every Friday, Mr Evans would stop in at the chip shop on his way home from work. He always made sure to buy enough for me to have some, and they'd insist I stay for dinner, and to watch Come Dancing on telly. Mrs Evans used to be a ballroom dancer, in her youth."

Harry hung on his every word, watching the nostalgia cloud dark eyes. "They knew what things were like, with my family, and they always tried to help the best they could. I think... it confused them, once they found out about magic, wondering why my mother stayed. But I was always welcome at their house, even when I was not welcome at my own."

"I— Remus said, once... Mum's dad died in your sixth year."

Snape nodded. "He was hit by a car on his walk to the shops. Drunk driver," he explained, and *God*, that made Petunia's lie about how Lily and James died all the more painful. "Mrs Evans didn't last much longer, without him. She saw us graduate, and she was at the wedding, but... she passed in her sleep, only weeks before Lily found out she was pregnant with you. She was only fifty five. Broken heart, they said."

"That's so sad." Petunia had never talked about her parents. Harry had only ever seen one picture of them in the house; a photo with Petunia, looking around eighteen or so, sat beneath a *Congratulations* banner at a dinner table somewhere. Harry had always assumed it was to celebrate her graduating school.

"You never would have gone to Petunia, if Mrs Evans had been alive," Snape remarked.

Harry was saved having to figure out a response by Remus and Sirius returning to their bodies. Both of them were crying. "Are you alright?" Harry asked, eyeing them worriedly.

Remus turned straight to Snape, burying his face in the man's black shirt. Snape blinked for a moment, but cradled him close, long fingers running through Remus' hair.

Sirius sat beside Harry with his hands clenched, tears streaming down his cheeks. Harry leaned into him. "Do you need me to get Charlie?" he broached, but Sirius shook his head, pulling Harry into a hug.

"No. I'm good. I... Merlin, pup, I wish you could've known your grandparents. Finer people you'd never find in this world."

Harry let Sirius hug him, his own heart aching. So much family he would never know.

It took several minutes for the pair to compose themselves, and even when they turned back to the pensieve Sirius had a white-knuckled grip on Harry's hand. "Think I'm gonna leave that other vial for another day," he said, voice hoarse. "Two in one go might be a bit much."

"We can do this another time," Harry offered, but Sirius shook his head.

"No, no; you promised you'd show us those shenanigans you got up to," he said, mustering a smile. "Why don't you put your first year in. The stone."

Harry wasn't sure it was the best idea for two emotionally fragile people to watch the events with Quirrell, but it was too late to turn back now. After some instruction from Snape on how to remove the memories, Harry set them in the pensieve. "I, uh, I think I'll come with you," he said uneasily. It would be interesting, watching it back with everything he knew now.

And so the four of them plunged into the pensieve, right into the moment Harry and his friends tried to convince Professor McGonagall that Snape was going after the stone.

"You thought it was me?" Snape asked, looking bewildered. Harry blushed.

"You were sort-of scary back then," he pointed out. "Definitely seemed more evil than Quirrell."

"Never mind that, look how tiny you were!" Sirius cut in, stepping up close to eleven year-old Harry Potter.

It made Harry wince, looking back at his younger self. How had no one seen his rail-thin frame, his battered glasses, the clothes that swamped him. How had everyone looked at him and thought him a perfectly happy, healthy child?

But that was the least of his worries when they headed for the third floor corridor.

The series of challenges ahead of the stone hadn't seemed nearly so terrifying when he'd faced them the first time around. Watching the three little first years on the chess board, watching Ron get flung off the board... Harry could understand the looks of fury on both his godfathers' faces. Even Snape was paler than usual, his jaw clenched tight. Though he did smirk a little when they reached his potion puzzle.

Harry regretted his decision to go with them when they came to the part where Quirrell unravelled his turban. Seeing the grotesque face of Voldemort made his stomach churn — and he almost lost his dinner when Quirrell burned to ashes beneath his hands. The memory went black as eleven year-old Harry fell unconscious, and they were ejected from the pensieve. A long silence stretched between them.

“I’m going to murder Albus Dumbledore,” Sirius growled vehemently. “Setting that up for a bunch of bloody *first years*!”

“So you, ah, don’t want to see my second year, then?” Harry asked hopefully. Sirius narrowed his eyes at him.

“Put it in, pup.”

Harry obediently reclaimed his first year memory and replaced it with his second, though he declined the trip this time. He wasn’t in the mood for seeing teenage Tom Riddle try and win him over with how similar they were.

His knee bounced anxiously as the three adults were inside the memory, and he yelped as soon as they were out; Sirius had immediately grabbed him in a strangling hug. “You could’ve died,” he muttered into Harry’s hair. “You could’ve died before I ever even met you!”

“But I didn’t!” Harry pointed out, arms trapped at his sides. “I’m still here, Pads. Things got better after that year!”

“You say that,” Remus drawled, looking very much like he’d like to give Harry a hug himself. “But we still haven’t seen the graveyard. If you’re up for it.”

Harry swallowed thickly. “I— I suppose.”

“Last one, then we’ll show you some good memories, promise,” Sirius rasped, reluctantly letting Harry go.

Harry took a deep breath, and replaced the memories. He *definitely* wasn’t going with them on this one.

The wait was excruciating. But it was worse to see the looks in their eyes when they came out of the memory; that haunted, horrified, *pitying* look.

“Oh, pup,” Sirius breathed. Harry shook his head.

“I’m fine,” he insisted. Sirius’ lips pursed, but to Harry’s utter relief, there was no interrogation.

He’d done his grieving for Cedric. He wasn’t sure he could stand to reopen that wound.

“Take it back, we’ll give you one each,” Sirius instructed. Harry did so, the memory somehow even sharper now it was in his mind once more. He forced it away, watching Remus place his wand to his temple.

"I thought this would be a good one to start with." He dropped the memory in the basin, and offered Harry a smile. "Go on, cub."

Heart pounding against his ribs, Harry lowered his hand to the silver liquid.

He immediately recognised his surroundings; it was a Gryffindor dormitory. There were only four beds in this one, and two of them were extraordinarily messy. But Harry wasn't looking at that.

His gaze was stuck on the four boys in the middle of the room.

The Marauders, all together. They looked around twelve or so — James Potter looked heartbreakingly familiar, though he was taller and less scrawny than Harry had been at that age. He was staring at little Remus Lupin, who had a look of utter horror on his face. "We've figured it out," James declared, sounding incredibly pleased with himself. "You're a werewolf, aren't you?"

"What?" Remus yelped, voice cracking. "I— of course not! Dumbledore wouldn't let a— a monster like that in a school!"

"You don't have to lie to us, Remus," Sirius insisted earnestly. There was a fading bruise around the rim of his eye, and Harry wondered if it was a prank gone wrong or something more sinister.

"Yeah," little Peter Pettigrew agreed, voice shaking. Harry's stomach burned with anger, even though this version of Peter had done nothing wrong. "We— we won't tell anyone!"

"It makes sense, though. You're always gone on the full moon — there's no way you need to visit your aunt *that* much," James continued. "You've always got those weird scratches after, too. You got a rash when you touched the silver cauldron in Potions the other week. And I saw your eyes glow when you got really angry at Snivellus."

Remus' face went bright red, and Harry wondered if even at this age, anger had not been the emotion James had sensed.

Then, he burst into tears. "I— I'm not going to hurt anyone," he sobbed. "Please, I'll go to Dumbledore, I'll go home. You won't have to room with me anymore. Just— just don't tell the Ministry! They'll lock me up!"

Harry saw James and Sirius share a look of horrified alarm, and immediately the two were bundling the blond boy in a hug. "Don't be stupid! We aren't going to tell anyone!" Sirius said. "And we don't want you to leave!"

"You're our friend, Rem!" James agreed, reaching back to yank Pettigrew into the group cuddle pile. "So what if you have a bit of a furry problem?"

The sound that came from Remus was halfway between a laugh and a hiccup. "It's a bit more than that, James," he retorted, still crying. "I turn into a huge bloodthirsty beast once a month!"

"You're two whole inches shorter than me, Lupin," Sirius reminded him. "I bet you're not *that* huge, even as a wolf."

"Besides, if Dumbledore knows, then I'm sure it's alright," Pettigrew added.

Remus wriggled his way out of the hug, staring at the trio incredulously, cheeks still damp with tears. "You— you don't mind? You won't tell anyone?"

"It'll be our secret," James promised, beaming. "You're not getting rid of us that easily, Remus Lupin. We're *best friends*."

"Forever," Sirius added with a decisive nod.

Harry saw the wide, wondrous smile cross young Remus' face, and then the memory began to fade, and he was back in the living room once more, a smile on his own face. Remus looked at him expectantly.

"You were all so tiny and adorable! When was that, second year?"

"End of first," Remus supplied, retrieving his memory with a fond grin. "I thought for sure it would be my last, too. But they kept my secret, no matter what."

"We told you, best friends forever," Sirius insisted, grinning. "My turn, now! Don't worry, Harry; the rat's not in this one." He plucked a memory from his head, dropping it into the pensieve. "Go on, pup."

So once again, Harry plunged into a memory.

This time he found himself in the living room at the Pottery, decorated for Christmas. Three of the four Marauders were sprawled on a huge Persian rug on the floor, staring up at the ceiling. This time, Harry put them at about seventeen or so; older than they had been in the memory of tormenting Snape, but still students. Christmas of their sixth year, or maybe even seventh.

"I hope Lily likes the gift I sent her," James sighed, and Sirius let out a groan.

"You'll find out when we get back to school," he droned, kicking James' hip lightly. "Can you stop thinking about her for five whole minutes, Prongs?"

"We all know he can't," Remus said dryly. He sat up, his shaggy hair flopping into his eyes. It was definitely the 70s, even by their wizarding fashion; all three had impressive feathered mops of hair, though Sirius' was cut more stylishly than the other two. Then again, Sirius was also wearing eyeliner, and a red tartan kilt.

"You boys look far too sedentary for my liking." Harry's breath caught in his throat; in the doorway stood a beautiful Indian woman, her face lined with age but her eyes bright and warm. "I'm always suspicious when you sit still for too long."

"We're *bored*, Mum," James whined. The woman — Euphemia Potter — laughed lightly. Harry's heart stuttered.

"Well, we can't have that," she teased. "Perhaps your visitor might liven you up a bit."

All three boys stared at her. "Visitor?" Sirius asked, confused. "It's not Pete, is it? He's supposed to be in Germany."

"No, it's not Peter."

Euphemia stepped aside, and Harry gasped; there was Lily Evans, green eyes shining so like Harry's own, a few flakes of snow melting on the shoulders of her dark blue jumper. She waved shyly, then laughed as James pitched head-first into the chair leg in his hurry to stand up.

"Lily Flower!" He rushed over to her, taking her by the hands. "I thought you were with your family?"

"I had a fight with my sister," Lily replied, her voice sending shivers down Harry's spine — still as Brummie as she had been as a child, but softer; more like the woman he would hear in his dreams, begging for his life to be spared. "She's brought her *fiancé* over for Christmas and he's just the *worst*, I couldn't stand being there any longer. So I told Mum I was going out for a bit, and... you did say I could visit, if I had the chance. I'm sorry I didn't give you any warning."

Suddenly, James was sweeping her up into his arms, spinning her around with a shout of joy. "Best surprise ever," he declared, kissing the tip of her nose. "Lily can stay for dinner, right, Mum?"

"Of course, dear," Euphemia agreed. "Lily, you're always welcome here. It's no trouble to set the table for one other; the elves cook for an army just to feed Sirius!"

"I'm a growing boy!" Sirius protested indignantly, while Lily giggled.

"Yes, and I wish you'd stop; you're taller than Monty now," Euphemia teased. "Any more and we'll have to make the fireplace bigger so you don't crack your head flooing home."

Harry saw the way Sirius' cheeks flushed, just a little, like he still wasn't used to thinking of the Pottery as home. Harry knew the feeling.

James slung an arm around Lily's waist, then froze. "Lils," he said slowly, "is that snow on your jumper?"

"Yeah? Did you not notice it's chucking down outside?" the redhead asked, bemused. James' brown eyes went round behind his glasses.

"Really? How long's it been snowing, Mum?"

"Look for yourself."

Harry followed his father to the window, looking out into the darkening garden to see nothing but a blanket of white. James yelped excitedly. "Why didn't you tell us!"

"Forgive me for thinking you were old enough to figure it out," Euphemia replied dryly.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking, Prongsy?" Sirius asked, and with a wave of his wand his kilt became a pair of tartan wool trousers, tucking themselves into his biker boots.

"I'm *always* thinking what you're thinking, Padfoot," James retorted in a very Weasley-twins-esque way. Lily snorted.

"I hope not, or I've got a lot of questions about your feelings towards Polly Ashton," she joked, and James wrapped her in a bear hug.

"You know I only have eyes for you, my love."

While this was going on, Remus and Sirius were summoning and transfiguring hats and scarves, covering themselves in warming charms. After a solid fifteen seconds of watching James and Lily stare into each other's eyes, Sirius tossed a balled up pair of gloves at James' head. "Oi, lovebirds, are we making snowmen or what?"

James and Lily looked at each other, gaining identical competitive grins. "You're on," Lily declared in challenge.

The memory continued through the four of them rushing outside, first building snowmen together — James and Lily versus Sirius and Remus — then, when Sirius declared Lily too good at snowmen and body-slammed their effort, into the vicious snowball fight that followed — James and Sirius versus Remus and Lily, when Remus agreed that Sirius had cheated in the snowman contest and James had jumped to defend his best friend's honour.

It only ended when a voice called them in for dinner, and Harry could hardly see through his tears as he finally got his first glimpse of Fleamont Potter. If possible, Harry saw more of himself in his grandfather than his father; Fleamont was lithe like Harry, while James was a bit broader in the shoulders. Sirius was indeed taller than the Potter patriarch, though he still glowed with delight when Fleamont ruffled his hair on his way past him when setting the table.

James was on his best behaviour; there wasn't a trace of the arrogant boy who had flipped Severus Snape upside down after their OWL exam. He was funny, and still a little big-headed, but Lily happily deflated his ego when necessary. Sirius, too, was more mature, more like the Sirius Harry knew. Remus was ever the same, watching it all with fond eyes and an indulgent smile, occasionally piping up with a quip that had the whole table in fits of laughter.

And through it all, James and Lily stared at each other like there was no better sight in the whole world.

Harry was crying when the memory finally ended, and he hugged Sirius tightly, smiling against the man's shoulder. "Thank you," he breathed, his heart so full he felt like it might burst. It hurt, knowing that he had missed out on family dinners like that, with his grandparents and parents and Sirius and Remus around. But just to see them like that to begin with, together and *happy*... it was more than Harry ever could have dreamed of.

"I... I have a memory to offer as well, if you would like," Snape said, more hesitant than Harry had heard him before. Harry wiped his face, nodding eagerly. He would take every scrap of memories he could get — he knew it would be a good one. Snape wasn't in the mood to show him how awful James Potter could be, not right now. Not today.

Sirius reclaimed his memory, and Harry tried to steady his breathing while Snape gathered his own, setting it in the swirling liquid. "It isn't very long, but... she would want you to see it."

Harry braced himself, and dove in.

They were sat outside a cafe. Muggle, by the looks of it; a little run-down, the paint peeling on the sign. It was a gloriously sunny day, and there was Severus Snape, dressed all in black with his sleeves buttoned to his wrists.

And sat opposite him was a heavily pregnant Lily Evans.

Harry goggled at her; his mother, in her maternity sundress, sandal-clad feet propped up on Snape's denim-clad leg. "I hate this, Sev," she groaned loudly. "Be bloody grateful you can't get pregnant."

"Believe me, I am, frequently," Snape assured dryly. "You haven't long to go, Lily. Three weeks, now?"

"Two and a half," Lily replied. "Not that I'm counting every day or anything. And that's assuming the little bugger comes out on time; if he's anything like his father, he'll be a week late just to make a point."

Snape's face darkened ever so briefly at the mention of James Potter, but it was gone when Lily looked up again. "But that's the thing, Severus — in three weeks, it won't just be this awful huge belly and swollen feet and leg cramps and the constant need to piss, and all the rest of it. It'll be an actual baby! A baby that me and James are responsible for!"

"I'm sure you'd prefer not to hear my thoughts on Potter's parenting ability," Snape drawled. "But you've nothing to worry about, Lily. You'll be a wonderful mother."

The smile Lily gave him was blindingly bright. "I hope so. I just... I don't know what to do! Tunie's no help — she just told me that giving birth is the most painful and terrifying thing in the world, and I'll never feel the same down there again."

Snape looked a little green at the idea. "Considering the picture you showed me of that small whale she birthed, I'm not surprised."

Lily laughed, even as she glared at him. "Sev! That's mean. He's my nephew, and he's wonderful. Even if he is half Vernon's."

"It's the half that's Tunie's I'm more worried about," Snape groused, eyes flashing. Lily laughed harder.

"I swear to Christ, Sev — stop making me laugh, I'll wet myself!" she scolded, and that made Snape laugh, a slightly rusty sound, like he wasn't used to making it. Then Lily's eyes softened. "I know—I know I've complained about being pregnant the whole time, and I still haven't done the birth part and it *might* be the worst thing in the world. But... you know I'm still happy to carry for you and Remus, right? If you want that. You just have to ask."

The humour died from Snape's face, along with the little colour to his skin. "Don't be ridiculous, Lily," he snapped. "Remus and I can't even keep ourselves together, let alone a child." His lips pursed as Lily opened her mouth to respond. "Don't. It's... just don't. Not today."

Two sets of green eyes watched the man scratch at his left forearm, beneath his shirt sleeve.

"Just focus on the one you're carrying," Snape added, sadness forced from his tone. "You know damn well Potter will want a second, as well."

"He'd wait if I asked him to," Lily said easily. "We've got to figure out the first one. James is still struggling with the whole nappy-changing thing, and I can't make heads nor tails of half the stuff in that book of child-rearing charms Molly Weasley recommended me." Suddenly, her eyes were welling with tears. "I wish Mum was here. She'd sort me out."

"She would," Snape agreed, reaching over to place a pale hand over Lily's on the table. "But you'll manage on your own. You and *Potter*."

Lily sighed, turning her fingers over under Snape's to hold his hand. "When I'm not the size of a whale, I swear, I'm gonna sit the pair of you down and force you to hash it all out until you can at the very least be civil to each other. Remus'll help me."

"That's not necessary, Lily—"

"Yes it is," she insisted. "James called dibs on Sirius as the godfather for this one, but I've got you down for the next, so you'll have to be able to stand being in the same room as James by then. Y'know. Baby steps." Her smile was fond, her hand squeezing his. "You have to teach all my kids how to be good at Potions. And how to lie, when they need to — me and Jim can't lie for shit. And you can put the fear of God into the little blighters when they aren't listening to their mum and dad."

"I... I'll try, Lily," he promised. "But you know it's more complicated than that. The war—"

"Fuck the war," Lily said firmly. "I know, it's the worst time to have a kid, and anything could happen. I *know* we're on different sides of this bloody thing," she added with a sharp gaze. "But I also know that you, Severus Snape, are a good man, and you're gonna bloody love my kid. I know I'm gonna love my kid." She looked down at her bump, stroking it gently with her free hand. "I already love him so much, Sev, and he's not even born yet," she whispered. "But it's terrifying, knowing what's coming. And I need to know my best friend is at least going to *try* to get along with my family, when things are better."

"Remus is your best friend," Snape tried half-heartedly, only to be fixed with a glare.

"He will be if you keep talking like that, mister," she warned. Snape faltered under her gaze, then managed a small smile.

"You're going to be a brilliant mother, Lils," he assured her quietly. "That boy is lucky to have you."

She beamed at him, her other hand still stroking her bump. "I hope so," she murmured. Then, with what looked like considerable effort, she let go of Snape's hand and hauled herself to her feet. "I'm getting another slice of cake," she declared. "Only got a few more weeks with the excuse of eating for two, I'm going to make the most of it!"

Snape watched her go, his hand once more going to his left forearm, his eyes dropping to the hidden Mark with a look of disgust. And then the memory faded, and Harry was sat on the sofa once more.

"I... wow." He'd learned so much in that one memory, Harry could hardly comprehend it all. Snape's jaw tightened fractionally. "Thank you for showing me that, Professor. It's... yeah." He managed a smile, even as tears trickled down his face. "You kept your promise, though. Mostly." Snape blinked at him, perplexed. "You did teach me to be good at Potions," Harry pointed out. "Maybe not how to lie, but how to be better at lying. And you sure as hell put the fear of God into me, several times."

A beat, and then that rusty laugh again — even more of a foreign noise now. "I suppose you're right," Snape admitted, a strange glint in his eyes.

Harry was utterly drained from the emotions he'd experienced in the last few hours, and from the looks of the three men around him, they weren't far off either. "I think I'm going to bed," he declared, leaning into Sirius for a hug. "It's been a long day."

"Too right," Sirius agreed, kissing his forehead. "Sleep tight, pup. And the pensieve will be here, if you want to watch more memories another time. You just have to ask."

Harry knew that one day he would ask for the difficult memories; the times when James was a prick, and Lily hated him. But right now he wanted to ride on the warm fuzzy feeling of the memories he'd been shown so far.

He got up, hugging Remus tightly. Then, gathering his bravery, he hugged Snape, too. "Mum was right," he whispered, making sure he was looking right at the Slytherin, unflinching. "You're a good man, Severus Snape," he echoed her words, watching dark eyes widen.

"I... I try to be. For her. And for you." His throat bobbed as he swallowed. "For this family."

Harry stepped back, hands falling from the man's sides, and after a short nod he turned to leave the room, heading for bed. He wished he could curl up in Draco's arms, cry it out with someone who didn't have their own grief to bear for Lily and James Potter. But it was okay; even if he did cry, he knew that when he fell asleep, he would dream of his family. At it would be wonderful.

Chapter 78

The sound of the front door slamming could be heard through half the house, and Harry jumped up from his bed, tossing his book aside. He knew Snape hadn't been at a Death Eater meeting, so he didn't feel like he was intruding to go and investigate; not like the nights when Snape came home and he and Remus went straight upstairs.

He bumped into Sirius and Charlie on the stairs, and then Remus; all four of them hurried down to greet Snape in the entrance hall. The Slytherin was cursing up a storm, pacing back and forth, and he only seemed to realise they were there when Remus stepped in to place hands on his shoulders. "Severus, what happened?"

"I'll tell you what bloody happened," the man growled. Looking closer, Harry could see the tight line of exhaustion in the corners of his eyes. "Albus fucking Dumbledore happened! The imbecile almost killed himself!"

Harry gaped. "He what?"

"He went out and found a ring that used to belong to the Dark Lord, and in his *ultimate wisdom* decided he had to put it on!" Snape explained, still furious. "It's a miracle I managed to stop the curse before it killed him, but even so his left arm will never be the same."

"Did he know it was cursed?" Charlie asked, wide eyed. Snape scoffed.

"Considering it was *dripping* with dark magic, I should sodding well hope so!" There was just the faintest hint of a northern accent creeping into his words, and Harry sucked in a sharp breath; Snape had to be *really* made to be letting that slip.

Remus clearly noticed it too, as he pressed his forehead to Snape's, running soothing hands over his shoulders. "It's alright, Severus," he assured. "You said you stopped the curse, right? Albus is okay?"

"For now," Snape affirmed. "He wouldn't tell me what was so special about the ring, but I could feel the magic on it. If I had to guess, I'd say it was a horcrux."

It was Harry's turn to curse. "Dumbledore's hunting them?" he asked, and Snape nodded. "Did you destroy it?"

"I believe so," Snape confirmed. "I had to use phoenix fire to get the ring off Albus' hand without cutting it off, and when Fawkes burned it, it screamed like it was dark magic dying. All that was left was the stone in the ring. Albus seemed quite insistent that the stone remain unharmed."

Harry's brow furrowed. "Why? What's so special about it?"

"I've no idea," Snape said, shaking his head. "He wouldn't tell me."

"Well, that's good news, isn't it?" Charlie piped up tentatively. "Another horcrux gone?"

"Yes, and no," Remus hummed. "It's good that it's gone, but it's a little worrying that Albus is hunting them. If he finds out we know about them, that we found and destroyed one ourselves... worse, that Harry knows about the one in his scar..."

Charlie paled behind his freckles. Yes, that was not what they wanted.

"There is some good news out of the whole mess," Snape added, drawing their gazes once more. "I did what I could to stop the curse, but I couldn't get rid of it entirely. The Dark magic is leeching off his own, slowly destroying it. Albus Dumbledore will be dead within a year." A cold smirk curled across his lips. "You'd better start defaming him, Harry, before he can die a martyr."

Harry stared, hardly able to believe what he was hearing. "I... really? You're sure?" Snape nodded. "Bloody hell." He'd never really thought too hard about the act of killing Albus Dumbledore. He'd resigned himself to likely having to do it, but always hoped it would sort of... take care of itself.

Now, apparently, it was doing just that.

"That changes things," Sirius murmured. Harry nodded.

He had to make some plans.

.-.-.-.

The news about Dumbledore was certainly unsettling, but there was little Harry could do about it so far. Amelia had already gotten the ball rolling, after her pointed questioning at Sirius' trial; Harry had some time to kill before he could make his next steps.

He had to admit, it was oddly... freeing, to know that Dumbledore was dying. To have the certainty that even if Harry failed to discredit the man, he would soon be gone; restructuring the Ministry would be doable, even if Dumbledore's legacy was still in tact. Harry really just had to focus on staying alive long enough to kill Voldemort.

With that in mind, he pestered Snape into training with him the next morning. He could tell the man was in need of a little stress relief, after spending half his evening thanklessly saving Dumbledore's life. So Harry finally got the adults to break on their little moratorium on training him, and soon he and Snape were back in the ballroom with spells flying.

It felt good, to be back at it. Considering his last fight had been with very real consequences, it was nice to train again with the security that he wasn't fighting for his own life. Sure, Snape was pushing him hard, but it wasn't any harder than Harry could handle.

They hit a stalemate, Snape gesturing with one hand to end the duel, and Harry was grateful for the moment to catch his breath.

"You've been holding out on me, Potter."

Harry was smiling before he'd even turned around; Draco was leaning in the doorway, his grey eyes fixed on Harry. "Draco!" Harry sprinted towards him, barrelling into the blond with a soft 'oof'. "How long were you watching?"

"Only a few minutes." Draco's hands came to his shoulders, his smile softening as he leaned in for a kiss. "That's a bit more than you taught me and the HA."

Harry flushed. "I, uh, I've been at this a while."

Draco looked past him, at Snape. "I want to learn." Harry jolted in surprise, but when he looked at Snape the man was merely nodding, lips thin.

"Considering you're likely to spend any future battles at this fool's side, it would do well for you to be adequately prepared," he agreed. "I will speak to your mother." Then he smiled, infinitesimally small. "It is good to see you well, Draco."

"You too, Uncle Sev."

"Potter." Harry straightened up expectantly. "You're dismissed, for now." An amused smirk. "I know better than to expect you not to be distracted should I send Draco away."

Harry couldn't even deny it, and laughed softly. "Thank you, sir."

"Is Narcissa with you, Draco?" Snape asked, putting his wand away.

"Down in the conservatory with Sirius," came Draco's immediate response. Snape nodded, and Harry felt that was their cue to leave, so he grabbed Draco by the hand and tugged him towards the stairs.

They ended up in Harry's bedroom, and Harry shut the door by pressing Draco back against it, crowding him in a slow kiss. God, he'd missed this boy. "I'm so glad you're safe," he murmured, hands resting on Draco's hips. "When Snape told us about the Manor wards, I was worried."

"Mother had it handled," Draco assured. "I... I've never seen you duel like that before." There was awe in his eyes, and it made Harry blush. Of course, Draco hadn't been at the Department of Mysteries. He'd never seen Harry in a real fight.

"I'm not as good as Snape," he insisted. "I think he goes easy on me sometimes, even when he says he's not."

Draco snorted. "Uncle Severus doesn't lie to spare egos, Potter." He shook his head slightly, still looking amazed. "All my life, I've watched men who are obsessed with power. Men who are addicted to it, who will do anything they can to get more of it. Who will flaunt their power over others. And you... you have *so much power* and you don't even care about it."

"Power is only good if you can use it to protect those who don't have it," Harry retorted, watching Draco's smile widen a fraction.

"I've never known a powerful man like you, Harry Potter," he whispered, tilting his chin up for another kiss. Harry pressed into it eagerly, sliding a hand down to Draco's backside.

"If anyone has the power here, it's you," Harry pointed out breathlessly; if Draco said jump, he'd ask how high without a second of hesitation, and they both knew it.

The blond smirked, pushing back on Harry; all the way over to the bed.

"That's what's so incredible," he drawled, gently shoving Harry onto the bed and crawling up to straddle him. Harry's pupils were wide behind his glasses, his pulse racing frantically with lust. "You're arguably the most powerful wizard in the country, and you just... let me do this." Draco's hand pushed firmly on Harry's chest, pinning him to the mattress. Harry couldn't help the low, needy groan that escaped him. "A boy could get addicted to that sort of power."

"Good," Harry gasped, desperately wishing Draco would kiss him, touch him, do *something* other than sit there on his lap and look at him like Harry was the most beautiful thing on the planet. "If you're addicted, you won't leave me."

Draco's laugh was like warm honey over Harry's skin. "Oh, that ship sailed long ago," he breathed, and finally he leaned down to seal their lips together.

With a careless wave of Harry's hand, the door was locked and silenced. Draco's eyes darkened at the easy use of magic. "I use my power for the important things," Harry remarked cheekily, watching amusement flash across the blond's face.

"Clearly," he drawled, fingers playing at the hem of Harry's t-shirt. "One of these days, we'll have to *experiment* a little with that wandless magic of yours. I'm sure we'll find quite a few good uses for it."

Harry smirked at the challenge, want pulsing through him hot and urgent. "Well it sounds like you'll be moving in this summer after all, if you're training with me," he murmured. "So we'll have plenty of time on our hands for that." This summer, next summer, after graduation; they would have all the time in the world.

Draco grinned at him, grinding down against Harry, both of them moaning at the blissful friction. "Fuck, I missed you," he sighed, palming himself, head thrown back. Harry was transfixed by the pale column of his throat, Adam's apple bobbing delicately. He wanted to bite it.

He surged up to do just that, holding Draco in place while he ravaged the blond's neck, drawing desperate little gasps from his mouth that were music to Harry's ears. "Missed you, too," he breathed, biting at Draco's jaw. "Glad you're home."

If Harry had his way, Draco would be staying with him until September 1st. He was so tired of only getting snippets of time with his boyfriend.

.-. .

Both teenagers did a remarkable job of not blushing their way through dinner; even though they'd healed the impressive number of bite marks on Draco's fair skin, Harry could still just tell that the adults around the table knew what they'd been up to.

Or, at least, they were assuming, and they weren't entirely wrong.

"Severus tells me you want to move in here, darling," Narcissa remarked, neatly cutting her lamb shank into smaller pieces. "To work on your duelling with Harry."

"Uncle Sev is the best person to teach me," Draco pointed out. "Along with everyone else who helps out with Harry's training. It won't be easy to learn what I need to know at school; this summer is the best chance for that."

Narcissa frowned thoughtfully, and Harry silently prayed to any deity that might listen. "I suppose the Manor is getting rather crowded, as of late."

"So you have been sheltering people?" Harry blurted, then flushed sheepishly. "Sorry, I— Blaise mentioned he'd heard rumours. He, uh, has some names, if you're able to take any more."

Far from offended, Narcissa just looked amused. "That boy takes after his mother entirely too much," she said fondly. "Not a whisper that woman doesn't hear about. Yes, I've invited a few acquaintances to reside at the Manor, to get some space from their... difficult home life. I can certainly look into any names Mr Zabini has provided you." Her lips curved into a knowing smile. "And I suppose Draco and I can move our things over in the morning. If that suits you well, *Lord Black*?" There was just a hint of teasing to her voice, and Sirius laughed.

"I've been trying to get the pair of you to move in for months, Cissa; Ceri already has your rooms picked out," he assured brightly. Harry and Draco beamed at each other across the table.

This summer was looking better and better by the minute.

.....

They were officially at war.

The announcement had come in the *Prophet* in the middle of July, which quite frankly Harry thought was about three weeks too late. But it seemed the wizarding world was very reluctant to admit such a thing; only now they had no choice. The Death Eaters were no longer worried about keeping a low profile, attacking light-sided and muggleborn families almost every night of the week. Harry could hardly sleep for the visions that plagued him; more than once he had woken up with his wand in hand, sending a Patronus straight to Kingsley to mobilise either the aurors or the Order.

"Should we be worried about how many meetings he's having that you're not invited to?" Harry asked Snape one morning over breakfast. The Potions Master looked up from the paper.

"Only if you hear him talk about keeping information away from me," he said, unconcerned. "It has always been this way; I am his Potions Master, and his informant on Dumbledore — my position is too valuable to be risked with meaningless raids. Similarly, he believes me to reside at the castle over the summer, and I cannot be seen walking back and forth to the gates every night. I am summoned when I am needed, and do not involve myself with the rest." A sneer tugged at his lips. "A fact that would have those such as Alastor Moody convinced that I am more of a burden than an asset."

Harry scowled. "You're more of an asset than he is; he's bloody retired."

The sneer turned into a smirk. "Quite." He turned the page, then gave up on the paper entirely; he rarely had the patience for the whole *Prophet* before his first cup of coffee. "If anything is said that sounds like the Dark Lord is doubting me, then we shall make preparations. But until then, I can assure you this is entirely normal — under the circumstances, at least."

Beside him, Remus was frowning, much as he did any time Snape described working for Voldemort as any semblance of 'normal'.

"The only person who doubts you is Bellatrix, and she's not exactly been herself lately," Harry added with a flicker of amusement. Ever since Sirius had removed her from the Black family tree, Bellatrix seemed to have lost what little sanity she had left. Harry was amazed Voldemort put up with her raving and screeching — though she was very good at torturing, still, he supposed. After many late-night visions, he could attest to that personally.

"I'm more worried about how many meetings *you're* getting invited to, intentionally or not," Draco groused, his grey eyes surveying Harry fretfully. The Malfoys had only been living at Seren Du for a few days, but already it felt like they'd always lived there. "You're barely getting three hours of sleep a night!"

"I'm fine," Harry insisted, offering a smile. "I never slept much before, anyway."

"Do I want to know how you're aware of what sleep Harry is or isn't getting, Draco, darling?" Narcissa asked with raised eyebrows, her face unmoving as her son blushed.

"I can hear him walk past my room to get a cup of tea in the middle of the night," he explained defensively. Narcissa's lips pursed, but she said nothing further. Harry thought he could see a glimmer of amusement in her gaze.

"There's nothing I can do about the visions," Harry pointed out with a shrug. "I keep my Occlumency barriers up, but it doesn't stop me getting dragged into his mind. And sleeping potions aren't a long term solution." He was used to it, at this point. Used to functioning on very little sleep after years at the Dursleys'. Sure, it would be nice to sleep the whole night through every night, but honestly at this point Harry would probably wake up at four in the morning anyway, just out of habit.

Draco didn't look convinced. Harry reached over to squeeze his hand with what he hoped was a reassuring smile. He could handle it. And if his visions helped save lives, he'd put up with them even if they were making him struggle.

Snape had to go and skulk around Hogwarts for a while so Dumbledore wouldn't get suspicious of his whereabouts, and Draco was helping his mother settle a few new people into Malfoy Manor, so Harry was left to his own devices that morning. With that in mind, he decided to tackle the never-ending stack of post that needed replying to.

In his last batch of letters to his friends, Harry had discreetly insinuated that Dumbledore's health was beginning to fail him. Only to a couple of people; Susan, Blaise, Neville. But he knew word would spread from there.

Susan's response to the news was to not even acknowledge it, but instead to assure him she was getting in touch with other active Wizengamot members who may be amenable to their cause — gloating in the most polite way, as only Susan could. '*If I make overtures now, then with any luck I'll have good relationships with the neutral seats by the time things take their course*'.

She was already at least on reasonable terms with the parents and guardians of most of their heir friends at school, thanks to an entire childhood of playdates and dinner parties. Harry absently wondered how long it would be before half the Wizengamot knew Dumbledore was dying, though none would ever admit to the information.

He wasn't worried; Susan had everything handled. Harry just had to focus on getting his hands dirty elsewhere.

But Susan was thinking of that, too; she had suggested Harry get back in contact with his lawyer, as they would need a formal suit against Dumbledore sooner rather than later.

So Harry did, penning a letter to Mrs Frobisher, asking if they could meet to discuss some of the work he had requested of her previously. He knew better than to put anything down in writing with someone working in a legal capacity, just in case it could all get turned against him.

His letter from Neville was much more mundane, and made Harry grin; apparently Ginny had accepted an invitation to stay several days at Longbottom Manor in a week's time. Susan's presence there had gone a long way to smoothing over any ruffled feathers Mrs Weasley might have, as did Neville's gran's reputation for being incredibly proper. The letter was adorable to read, his best friend flustered over his girlfriend and his gran spending time together, about the possibility of *private time* with Ginny. Harry did his best to give advice, but also pointed out that Ginny was an incredibly determined witch and Neville was best off just talking to her about what she expected. That had certainly worked for him and Draco, and he doubted the dynamics were all that different in a straight relationship.

Considering how much Fred and George both had to say about the benefits of communication in a relationship, Harry was fairly confident that Ginny would be on the same page.

He knew the pair of them hadn't gone any further than snogging while still at school — but he also knew that she had definitely gone further with Michael Corner, though he wasn't sure how much of that she'd told Neville about.

Either way, Harry assured his friend that they would be fine, and he didn't need to feel pressured into doing anything he didn't want to do, but at the same time he shouldn't expect anything in particular from Ginny. Not that Harry thought he would — Neville was a gentleman to the point of reserve. Any progress in that relationship would almost definitely be at Ginny's urging.

Or manhandling, demanding and just outright taking matters into her own hands — that was more Ginny's style.

As he wrote his response, Harry couldn't help but look back at the letter and chuckle to himself; it was bizarre, going from one letter about political manipulations to another about normal teenage relationship woes. Sometimes he forgot he wasn't even sixteen yet himself, still just a teenager. It was nice, to be reminded of that. Harry had quiet hopes that he might be able to do a few more normal teenage things, over the summer.

Both with Draco, and with his friends.

Finishing off his letter for Neville and adding it to the stack to all be delivered to Longbottom Manor, Harry reached for the next correspondence; a three page letter from Viktor, mostly detailing his adventures with the Bulgarian quidditch team. It never failed to amaze Harry, how much the quidditch player could write, now they were more comfortable with each other. Viktor might not be much of a talker, but once he got going with a quill...

Then again, Harry remembered Viktor being quite chatty in his native tongue, with the other Durmstrang students and the small handful of others who spoke Bulgarian. Considering he strongly suspected Viktor wrote with a Translation charm, Harry was sure the man's 'quiet, reserved nature' was actually just a lack of confidence with the English language.

And probably a fair dose of feigned aloofness to keep the fans at bay. Harry could relate to that.

It made him smile to read his friend's eager recounting of some antics he and his teammates got up to at their training camp, and he happily returned the favour with a story of a prank he and Draco had pulled on Sirius and Charlie a few days before.

There was a knock on his bedroom door, and Harry looked up, grinning at his godfather.
"Hey, Padfoot. What's up?"

"Just letting you know we're headed to Grimmauld for dinner. Yourself included," the dog animagus replied, and Harry made a face.

"Order meeting?" he assumed, wondering if his blissful Dumbledore-free time was coming to an end. But Sirius just smiled at him, eyes sparkling.

"Nope. Family dinner." Harry cocked his head in confusion. "Charlie arranged it with Bill and Fleur; you'll get to congratulate them in person. And, ah, the Tonks' will be there. Bringing Kingsley, if he can get off work in time."

Suddenly, Harry was very suspicious of the look on his godfather's face. "When you say 'family' dinner..."

"Draco and Cissa are coming too," Sirius confirmed, bouncing on his toes. "Fleur swiped the bit of parchment Dumbledore used to let her in on the Secret. I'll be damned if I let that old goat keep my family out of my own bloody house." He grinned devilishly. "We tried to get the twins and Ginny in too — and the plus-ones, of course — but they've got stuff going on tonight. Also I thought perhaps it would be best not to have *too* many people around, considering Cissa and Andi haven't seen each other since before Tonks was born." A shrug. "We'll have the rest of them over some other time."

Harry blinked; that was a lot of information to take in at once. "Okay. Well, sounds good. Is Snape coming, or...?"

"No, he's managed to wiggle his way out of it. Don't want too many people knowing about him and Moony yet, after all. Might get back to the wrong ears." Sirius scowled lightly, but shook it off. "Anyway, the Malfoys will be back at four, so we're leaving at six, make sure you're presentable." He wiggled his eyebrows, making Harry blush.

"Shouldn't I be telling *you* that," he retorted, pointed gaze reminding his godfather that it had not been Draco and Harry who got caught half-naked in the library together.

Sirius just grinned wider, entirely unrepentant. "Pup, when you've had the life I have, people forgive your eccentricities," he declared happily. "As long as I'm wearing clean clothes, I'm more presentable than half the family expects of me." Harry snickered; that was certainly true.

He did a mental headcount; even without Snape, that was still eleven people meeting for dinner.

And to think, that was still missing a huge chunk of the people Harry considered family these days.

"Did you ever think you could have this, Siri?" he blurted, voice suddenly small. Sirius frowned at him. "Family dinners with people you don't hate. Y'know. *This*." He made a broad gesture, vaguely encompassing the whole house. Sirius' gaze softened in understanding, and he leaned against the door frame.

"Not for a long time," he admitted. "And then never again after Prongs died. But... life's got a funny way of surprising you."

"Sirius!" That was Charlie, calling from somewhere in the direction of the stairs. "I'm popping into work for a bit! Trouble with one of the hatchlings. But I'll be back in time for dinner, promise. Love you!"

"Good luck, don't die!" Sirius called back cheerfully. "Love you too!"

There was the sound of footsteps on the stairs, and the front door opening and shutting. Sirius looked to Harry, and laughed, running a hand through his hair. "No, pup, I definitely didn't

think I could have this,” he agreed ruefully. “We’re lucky buggers, though, aren’t we?”

Harry’s eyes trailed over his bedroom, with the wardrobe full of clothes that had only ever been his, the shelf full of books, the posters and the comfy bed and the big sunny window; the desk, covered in letters from friends and family. “The luckiest,” he said, voice soft.

Life’s surprises, indeed.

.-. .

Narcissa Malfoy was nervous.

It was hard to tell just by looking at her, but Harry knew the tells in her son, so he knew what to look for. The way her fingers were curled ever so slightly at her sides, like she was trying not to clench her hands. The tightness to her jaw. The sharper edge to her comments, not quite sharp enough to actually hurt.

Harry would be nervous, too, in her position.

They were at Grimmauld, watching Ceri set the table for dinner. It was just the group from Seren Du so far, though Harry knew that would change soon.

The fire flared green, and Bill and Fleur stepped out. Narcissa’s shoulders tensed further.

“Harry!” Fleur greeted him delightedly, beckoning him over to kiss him on both cheeks. “My, you have grown!”

He laughed. “Better late than never,” he joked. “Congratulations, by the way,” he added, glancing down at the very impressive engagement ring on her finger. “Blimey, that’s a bit of a rock, isn’t it?”

Fleur beamed, holding it up for his inspection, while Bill flushed at her side. “When you work with goblins, you develop a bit of a high standard for jewellery,” he defended.

“It is beautiful,” Fleur declared, kissing his cheek. “But not more beautiful than the man who gave it to me.”

That made Bill go as red as his hair, and Harry heard Charlie fighting a laugh behind him. Like the dragon tamer hadn’t said soppier things to Sirius!

“Now I hear you have someone for us to meet, non?” Fleur pressed, turning back to Harry with intrigue dancing in her eyes. “Charlie talked a lot, but he did not say much.”

“Sounds about right,” Sirius piped up, earning an elbow to the ribs from his partner.

Harry was suddenly hit with a wave of nerves of his own; he’d somehow forgotten this part of the evening’s proceedings. “I—“ He turned around, looking desperately for platinum blond hair, and reached towards Draco. “I think you’ve technically met, in the past. Fleur, this is Draco Malfoy, my boyfriend. Draco, you remember Fleur, of course. And I don’t know if you’ve met Bill?”

“Not properly,” Draco replied, offering an open-palmed bow. “Well met, Lord Prewett.” Then he turned to Fleur, with his most charming smile, kissing the back of her hand. “Miss Delacour, it’s a pleasure. Congratulations on your engagement.”

“Merci.” Fleur looked back to Harry. “He is charming.”

“Too charming for his own good,” Harry agreed wryly. He was about to say something else, but the fire flared green again, and Draco went stock-still beside him.

The Tonks family had arrived.

Harry hadn’t met Ted Tonks before, and he was quietly surprised by the kind-faced, slightly rotund man stood at Andromeda’s side. He wasn’t sure what he’d expected of the man Andromeda had been so in love with she’d abandoned her entire family, but… not someone who looked like a muggle green-grocer.

Still, he knew better than to take people at face value, and judging by the set of the man’s shoulders as he faced his wife’s estranged sister, there was certainly more to Ted Tonks than met the eye.

“Cissy,” Andi murmured, voice choked with emotion.

“Andi,” Narcissa replied, in the same sort of tone. “I… you’re looking well, sister.”

Andi cracked a smile. “A few more grey hairs since last you saw me. Entirely down to raising this one, I assure you,” she added with a gesture to Tonks, earning an offended look — which was quickly turned on Kingsley when he snickered quietly. “You, on the other hand, haven’t aged a day.”

Narcissa’s laugh only sounded slightly strained. “That isn’t true, but I appreciate you saying so. I… this is your child, then? I’ve been told you prefer to be called Tonks.” She turned to Tonks, who blinked, taken-aback.

“I… yes.”

“You’re welcome to call me Cissa,” Narcissa offered. “Or… even Aunt Cissa, if you like. Though it may take some time to get there.” She tittered quietly. Then she turned, and before she’d even said anything Draco stepped forward as if in a trance. “This is your cousin, Draco. Andi, I… I’d like you to meet my son.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mrs Tonks,” Draco responded, every inch the polite young pureblood he’d been raised to be. Andi smiled as Draco kissed her hand.

“The pleasure is all mine, I assure you.” She studied him carefully, and Harry could see his boyfriend trying very hard not to fidget. “I’m very much looking forward to getting to know you, Draco,” Andi said warmly, then her gaze travelled back up to her sister. “We have a lot of catching up to do.”

There was a beat of silence, and then Sirius clapped his hands together. “I think dinner is ready, now we’re all here?”

He was in fine hosting form, carefully seating everyone around the table so that reunions could be had without anyone getting overwhelmed. Harry found himself placed between Draco and Fleur, with Tonks and Kingsley sat opposite. Ceri flitted about, levitating plates of food in front of everyone, expertly managing the many drinks needing poured — she was a Black family elf, after all, even if it had been many years since their last dinner party.

With his knee pressed reassuringly to Draco's under the table, Harry started up a conversation with Tonks about a band that she'd got him listening to on the Wireless; a band that Draco had enjoyed too, giving them common ground to have a conversation of their own. He needn't have worried so much; by the time the second course came around, Draco was happily chatting away about school as if he'd known Tonks all his life.

"You are so protective," Fleur murmured in his ear, leaning in close. "It is very cute."

Harry flushed, turning to talk to her now that Draco was fine on his own, though he still kept his knee against his boyfriend's. "He hasn't had much in the way of good family," he replied in an undertone. "I just want this to go well."

"He is the boy you were with during the Tournament, non?" Fleur checked, and Harry nodded. "So sweet, that you have stayed together through it all. I did wonder if you were in love, when you wrote that article."

"I—I didn't know it at the time," he confessed sheepishly — though even then he'd had some idea of how much Draco Malfoy would come to mean to him. "But yeah. He's the one."

Fleur cooed delightedly. Beside her, Bill chuckled.

"Charlie mentioned you were smitten," he remarked. "I'd like to say I'm surprised, but honestly at this point I don't think anything you do could surprise me, Potter." His tone was teasing, and Harry shrugged ruefully.

"I try."

"You will have to bring him to the wedding," Fleur insisted. "Whenever it may be."

Harry glanced at Draco, imagining seeing the blond in dress robes again — and actually being able to dance with him in public, this time. "Sounds great, Fleur."

By the time they got married, Harry knew he would be ready to go public with Draco. Hell, he doubted they would be able to wait that long. With Narcissa openly setting the Malfoy family apart from the Dark, there was little reason to keep it secret these days.

As everyone grew more comfortable with each other, the conversations slowly expanded to involve the whole table; Narcissa offered recommendations for a florist for Bill and Fleur's wedding, while Ted got to talking with Charlie about the niffler nest in Ted's garden. Around the time Ceri served dessert, Harry looked over at Sirius — the Lord Black was in his element, face shining as he chatted with his cousins, Charlie's arm slung over the back of his chair. It was clear he was enjoying the company, after so long being mostly alone.

Harry could imagine him in the future, hosting even bigger dinners than this; Yule, perhaps, with the full family gathered around the enormous table. Big parties in the summer, at the Pottery so everyone could be there, spilling out onto the lawn to play quidditch and enjoy the sunshine.

The mental image made Harry's chest ache with hope — they could have that, if they just survived the war.

Dry lips pressed to his cheek, and he shook the thoughts away, meeting Draco's inquisitive gaze. "You alright, there? You were a million miles away," the blond asked quietly. Harry grinned at him, squeezing his knee.

"Just enjoying the company."

Draco gave him an odd look, but let it lie, though his fingers tangled with Harry's; he only needed one hand to eat his white chocolate parfait.

After dinner they retired to the big parlour, and for once Grimmauld Place actually felt cosy and warm and the right size for the number of occupants; even the previous summer, with the entire Weasley family living there, Harry had always felt like the house was far too big.

Now it felt almost as much like home as Seren Du.

"I must say, Sirius, I love what you've done with the place," Narcissa declared, running a hand over the back of the sofa. "Your mother had *horrendous* taste in interior design."

Sirius' laugh was loud. "Horrendous taste in a lot of things, Cissa," he joked. "Merlin, did you know she left a portrait of herself here? Oh, the old hag used to *scream*—"

Harry tuned him out as he regaled his cousins with the story of the removal of Mrs Black's portrait, though he was sure Andi had heard it before. He was glad Sirius was getting to reconnect with his family. It was good for him to have someone to talk about his childhood memories with; to remind him they weren't all awful and traumatic, and to sympathise with the ones that were. Harry and Remus and Snape might have all had terrible childhoods, but they had never experienced being raised in a Dark pureblood home.

He noticed Bill beckon him over, and slipped across the room towards the redhead. Fleur was over chatting to Tonks, so they went unnoticed.

"I just wanted to let you know, you were onto something with the idea of checking the Death Eater vaults," the curse-breaker said quietly, and Harry's eyes widened.

"You found one?"

Bill nodded. "In Bellatrix Lestrange's vault. A cup; looked like it belonged to Hufflepuff herself. It was a hell of a shame to have to destroy it," he added with a slight frown. "We tried to use the ritual from that book Snape gave me, but that's definitely only for moving horcruxes from one living vessel to another. The team wanted to experiment a bit with the inanimate vessel, but Gorra and I convinced them it was best to just destroy it and let it lie."

Don't want to risk doing something we can't reverse." His face turned grim, and Harry nodded. That was a dangerous road to go down.

"So another one's been destroyed?" Bill nodded. Relief flooded Harry's veins. "Blimey." Including Harry's scar, and assuming the ring Dumbledore nearly died over was indeed a horcrux, that was six of the damned things — with only his scar and the snake remaining. "Surely there can't be many more?"

"No more than three," Bill assured. "We're close, Harry. We're getting there."

Harry grinned up at him; there was light at the end of the tunnel.

.-. .

It was an exhausted group of six that apparated back to Seren Du, the balmy summer evening perfect for the short stroll up to the house.

"Thank you, Sirius," Narcissa murmured, linking arms with her cousin. "That was delightful." They all knew she was talking about more than just the dinner, and Sirius grinned at her, patting her hand.

"There'll be plenty more to look forward to," he promised. "The Black family used to dominate the social calendar, back in the day. I think it's about time we brought it back to that — though with better company, this time, preferably."

Narcissa's laugh chimed through the garden. "Charlie, dear, I hope you know what you're getting into with this one," she teased lightly. "A more social creature you'll never find."

"He lets me keep my dragons, I can put up with parties," Charlie replied, grinning. "I like the idea of a full house."

The couple shared a heavy look, and Harry felt like a voyeur just for being present.

They parted ways inside, each heading to their own bedrooms. Harry prayed he would get to sleep through the whole night for once, with no Voldemort-based interruptions. He just wanted one night to bask in the feeling of family.

Dragging himself to bed, he tugged the duvet up to his shoulders — and froze when his door creaked open. His wand jumped to his hand, but he needn't have bothered; it was just Draco, the moonlight shining off his pale hair.

"What's the matter?" Harry asked, reaching for his glasses. Draco was in a matching set of silver silk pyjamas, and Harry was only briefly distracted by the play of the material across his thighs. "Not that I object to a late night visit, but I'm a bit too tired for anything fun tonight." He grinned lopsidedly, and Draco rolled his eyes.

"I overheard you and Bill talking, in the parlour," he declared, and Harry froze. "What the hell are horcruxes?"

Harry sat up properly, and patted the mattress beside him. "That's... kind of a long story."

With a ball of light glowing overhead, Harry told Draco the truth — all of it, including the matter of the fragment of Voldemort's soul within Harry's own head. With every word, the blond's face grew more and more horrified.

"So that's why Occlumency doesn't help with my visions," he finished. "I can keep him out of my mind, but dreams are a sort-of... in-between space. And he's not putting much effort into keeping me out of his."

"And he doesn't know? That part of— that it's inside you?"

Harry shook his head. "Not as far as we're aware. But Dumbledore knows. That's why he blocked my magic, we think. So that he could use me to destroy both the horcrux and Voldemort himself, once the time was right. Then he could swoop in and play the devastated mentor, and keep the country eating out of the palm of his hand."

The horror on Draco's face was replaced by a scowl. "He's lucky he's already dying, the bastard," he muttered. "I'd kill him myself for what he's done to you."

Harry gave Draco a chaste kiss, stroking his face. "It's fine. Like Bill said, there's no more than three others out there, maximum. Probably less. We know how to get the one out of my scar, so we've just got to find a couple more, kill the snake, and then I can end it."

Draco tilted forward, until their foreheads were pressed together. "I wish you'd let the Gringotts team destroy the one in your head," he whispered. "But I know you won't. Fucking Gryffindor." Harry laughed quietly, fingers threading through Draco's hair.

"I've saved lives with that connection," he said. "You can't ask me to give it up for my own comfort."

A quiet sigh escaped Draco's lips. "I know. I'm not asking. But... can I stay here tonight?" He pulled back, grey eyes hopeful, tentative. "It's a hell of a lot to take in. I just—I just want to hold you. Please?"

Harry couldn't say no to that. He tugged back the duvet, shuffling them both to lie down beneath it. Draco pulled him close, Harry's back to his chest, a kiss fluttering across Harry's temple. "Promise me," he breathed, barely a whisper. "Promise me you'll get rid of it if it starts looking dangerous. If it starts looking like he's manipulating the link."

Harry put his hands over Draco's, melting back into the warmth of his boyfriend's body. Really, that was more than he could ask for — he wasn't sure he would be this calm, had their positions been reversed. "I promise," he vowed, curling his foot around Draco's ankle. "I want to survive this war, Draco. That wasn't always true, but now — now I know what's waiting on the other end of it. I won't take stupid risks. I won't let him kill me when I'm so close to winning."

Draco squeezed him tighter, his steady breath hot on Harry's neck.

Nothing more was said between them, but nothing else needed to be.

And for once, Harry slept through the night.

Chapter 79

Neither of the boys was so naive as to think the adults weren't aware of exactly where Draco had slept that night. But no one commented on it, so Harry was sure they were in the clear. Not that they had done anything they shouldn't have.

Not that he thought any of their guardians would really care at this point if they did. Draco was sixteen, and Harry was almost the same — he had told Sirius when he and Draco started getting more intimate, and Sirius just said he trusted the pair of them to be responsible.

They'd been together long enough now to be trusted not to make hasty decisions in that regard.

The morning paper arrived, full of more incompetence from the Ministry. Along with it came a couple of letters; one for Remus, and one for Harry. He opened it eagerly, reading the contents.

“Sirius, Mrs Frobisher has invited us for dinner on Tuesday,” he relayed. “She says the Bones’ will be there too. We can talk everything over. Is that okay?” He had promised Susan a dinner with their families at some point in the summer, so this would kill two birds with one stone.

“I think that’s a marvellous idea,” Sirius replied, looking up grim-faced from the paper. “We can talk about how Dumbledore is insinuating you’re possessed in a national newspaper.”

Harry blanched. “He what?”

Sirius handed the paper over, and Draco jostled Harry’s shoulder as he squeezed in so they could both read it.

It was a piece digging deeper into the attack at the Ministry a month ago — namely, how Harry had come to be there to begin with.

‘When questioned, Albus Dumbledore reminded our reporters that he was not present at the school at this time. “However,” he went on to say, “Mr Potter has long had a connection to the Dark Lord. The specifics of which are unknown to me, but as both have grown stronger it is increasingly clear that Harry has insight into [You-Know-Who]’s mind that the rest of us can only make guesses at.’

When asked if the connection went both ways, or for further details of the incidents, Professor Dumbledore declined to comment. On further investigation, it appears many students have witnessed Mr Potter experience ‘visions’ throughout his school life, claiming to have seen within the mind of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Indeed, sources report that Mr Potter may have experienced such a vision during his History of Magic exam, where witnesses say he had some sort of fit and left early — mere hours before the attack on the Ministry began.

What is the nature of this connection Mr Potter seems to possess? Could it be dangerous? This reporter is unqualified to make such speculations, and the Unspeakables were unavailable for comment on the matter.'

By the time he finished reading, the dishes were rattling on the table.

"Control it, Potter," Snape droned, sounding almost bored. Harry took a deep breath, pushing his magic back down.

"Surely there's something in there we can sue him for," Harry growled, glaring down at the paper.

"If there is, I'm sure Mrs Frobisher will find it," Remus assured. "But Albus has been playing this game for longer than any of us have been alive, cub; he knows how to say just enough to get people to fill in the blanks, while keeping it vague enough to avoid legal problems. And it's not like you can hide the visions you've had, not after having one in the middle of an exam."

"I'm sure half the auror department have put the pieces together, considering Amelia and Kingsley always have the earliest warnings on raids and you're known to be friendly with them both," Sirius added.

Harry's scowl deepened — he couldn't even go on record with the truth about the connection, not without giving up the secret of horcruxes. Dumbledore knew *exactly* what the connection was, but instead of declining to comment he was dropping infuriating little hints — giving support to these vague '*witness claims*' of him having visions.

"Does he really think I'm being possessed, or is he just trying to make my life difficult?" His question was directed at Snape, who frowned.

"He knows you're not possessed, in the traditional use of the word. However, I do think he truly believes you have been... changed, by the presence of the Dark Lord's soul in your body, especially now the Dark Lord himself is active once more. He does not think you could have shed the compulsions and magical blocks so fully by yourself — and he thinks you too foolish to have discovered them and had them removed elsewhere. His reasoning is that the Dark Lord's soul is influencing you to become more powerful and lean towards the Dark — and away from the headmaster and his *influence*." The Slytherin snorted derisively. "He is too arrogant to consider you might have developed a mind of your own at some point in the last three years. So, naturally, the only explanation is the mind of another leading you astray."

A sound of disgust worked its way out of Harry's throat. "I hate him," he muttered, and several people hummed in agreement.

"We'll get him, pup," Sirius assured. "Write back to your lawyer, tell her Tuesday's perfect."

Harry hoped they could get enough evidence to *destroy* Albus Dumbledore.

With Draco living at Seren Du, Harry's training had picked up in full force — it was good for him to go back on things he might have already learned, while Draco learned them for the first time. And at the rate the blond was progressing, he'd be caught up to Harry in no time; Harry might have the raw power to smooth his way, but Draco had the brains and determination to match the fiercest of Ravenclaws. Not to mention far too much pride to let himself look bad in front of both his godfather and his boyfriend.

For Harry, who had spent the past two summers feeling like he'd stolen Snape from Draco, it was great to see the pair finally getting to work together. And very amusing, to see Snape working with someone he didn't feel the need to snipe at every few minutes, even in jest. Harry could see how much Draco idolised his godfather; sometimes, watching them, he could easily imagine a much younger Draco, begging Snape to teach him about potions, carefully mimicking the man's every movement. Snape indulgently explaining the different techniques for preparing ingredients — he didn't suffer fools, but his godson was no fool.

It always made Harry think back to the memory Snape had shown him, of his heavily pregnant mother; of her offer to carry a child for Remus and Snape. Snape's instant dismissal of the whole thing — far too quick, in Harry's opinion.

How different things could have been.

But today they weren't working with Snape, as the Potions Master was at Hogwarts brewing for the upcoming school year. Instead, they were with Sirius, walking out into the woods surrounding the property; past the property line entirely.

Outside the apparition wards, for lessons both Harry and Draco could hardly wait to start.

"Apparating isn't really as hard as it's cracked up to be," Sirius told them as they walked. "Won't be for you two, anyway; it's all about focus, and you've got that in spades."

Another thing Harry likely would have struggled with under Dumbledore's compulsions. Merlin, the man really had hoped to make Harry helpless!

They stopped in a clearing not too far from the ward line, and Sirius brandished his wand, tracing two sets of white circles on the ground, about ten feet apart. "We'll start off easy, to get a feel of things. You can see where you're going; all you'll have to do is get from one circle to the other."

As Sirius began to explain the three Ds of apparition, Harry tried his best to focus, stepping into the nearest circle. He very pointedly didn't look at Draco — the look on the blond's face when he was concentrating incredibly hard was far too cute, in Harry's opinion, and he knew he'd just end up getting distracted.

"Don't expect much to happen immediately," Sirius warned them, stepping back to watch. "It takes some time to get the hang of it. Remember, you've got all summer. No need to rush it and splinch yourselves." Both boys winced; yes, they definitely wanted to avoid that outcome.

Much like he did with his animagus practice, Harry steadied his mind and his magic, staring hard at the circle he was aiming for. He knew what apparition felt like from a side-along perspective; he just had to figure out how to get that feeling himself.

The first time he tried, nothing happened. Same for the second, third and fourth tries. After a while, he started to feel a bit of a tingle of magic, but it still wasn't quite enough to just *throw himself* into nothingness and hope he might reform on the other side.

He was also starting to develop a headache.

A glance over at Draco showed he was equally frustrated, and Sirius grinned sympathetically. "That'll do it for now, I think. Like I said, it takes time. It's a bit like the animagus transformation; once you've done it once, it becomes easier. You just have to make that initial pathway in your magic."

"I'm sure if I'd succeeded in the animagus transformation, that would make me feel better," Draco sniped, folding his arms. Sirius wasn't swayed, still smiling.

"Why don't you give it a try now, I'll see if I can help you out. I know you're at least halfway there; Harry told me you managed wings the other week."

"There were feathers *everywhere*," Harry piped up playfully, sticking his tongue out at Draco's glare. "If you two are gonna work on that, do you mind if I do the same? I've only ever been a fox indoors, so far; I want to see what it's like to really be in a forest." His fox senses were so sharp, he knew it would be overwhelming the first few times.

"Sounds good, but we'll move back inside the wards, first."

Sirius left the four white circles on the grass and led them back towards the house. Harry felt the faintest tingle when they crossed the ward boundary. "Don't go too far, pup," Sirius warned. Harry gave him a thumbs up, then kissed Draco's cheek, and within an instant he was a lot lower to the ground.

As he'd anticipated, being a fox in the woods was *a lot*. There were so many smells; creatures, magical and muggle alike, the different plants, the moisture in the earth. The scents of Sirius and Draco and himself. The scent of the wards, the magic fizzing lightly under his nose.

Mindful of his boyfriend and godfather, Harry bounded off into the trees, getting used to the feel of the soft earth under his paws. It was incredible, experiencing the world like this.

In the process of becoming an animagus, Harry had read the warning stories of people who became so attached to their animal forms that they ended up stuck in them forever, unable — or unwilling — to return to human form. Even Sirius had mentioned, once or twice, how he'd almost crossed that line after spending so much time as a dog to save his sanity in Azkaban. For the first time, Harry could understand how such things could happen; being out in the woods, his fox senses in full force as he sniffed out rabbit trails and strange birds and even the scent of Buckbeak having passed through, it was a strange sort of bliss Harry hadn't

experienced anywhere else before. Things were so much simpler, in the mind of a fox; his worries melted away, in favour of keen-eyed exploration of the undergrowth.

He didn't let it overwhelm him, though. He had to keep a firm hold of the human side of his mind; he had too much at stake for that. When things started to get a little much, he turned back towards the familiar scents of Sirius and Draco, ignoring any other scents that might distract him. That was much easier — even as a fox, Draco's scent made Harry feel safe, made his heart flutter.

He didn't want to disturb his boyfriend's concentration, so Harry looked around for a comfortable place to watch from. His gaze landed on a nearby tree, the bark rough and the low branches wide and sturdy.

There was something he hadn't tried, yet...

Skittering up the tree, Harry grinned to himself in triumph when he made it to the lower branches, and settled in to watch Draco meditate. Already, the blond seemed to be making progress; his wings came far quicker this time, arms sprouting feathers all the way up to the shoulders. Sirius crowed in delight, and Harry's little fox heart warmed at the smile on his boyfriend's face.

"That's a really great start, Draco!" Sirius enthused. "Bird forms are supposed to be really hard to get, anyway; with the bone density and everything, it's a bit more complicated than mammal to mammal." He watched Draco shake his arms, feathers shedding onto the grass as they became human once more. "Keep practicing, I bet you'll have it down by the end of summer." Sirius checked his watch, and frowned. "We should probably get back inside before Remus sends out a search party. Wonder where Harry's wandered off to?"

Harry chuffed quietly, then launched himself out of the tree towards his godfather; Sirius yelped, but thankfully managed to catch Harry, steadying the fox somewhat awkwardly in his arms. "Bloody hell! Scared ten years off my life, you little menace."

Harry let out a little fox laugh, licking Sirius' chin. Sirius' already half-hearted glare melted. "You're lucky you're cute," he declared, then held the fox out. "Draco, here you go."

Draco cradled the fox like a baby, ruffling the soft white fur of his belly. Harry wriggled in delight, snuggling at Draco's neck. "Do I have to carry you all the way home?" Draco asked laughingly, and Harry nodded. "And you say *I'm* high maintenance," the blond muttered, rolling his eyes.

Harry chuffed again, making himself comfortable in his boyfriend's arms. Draco smelled even more amazing to his fox senses, this close.

It was nice; being carried, listening to Draco's soothing heartbeat. It was even nicer when they got back to the house and Draco carried him to the small living room, sprawling on the soft rug with him and petting him gently.

Harry could definitely understand why Sirius liked being Padfoot so much.

.--.

On Tuesday evening, Harry and Sirius bid goodbye to the rest of the household and set off for the edge of the wards, planning to apparate to Grimmauld and then floo from there to the Frobishers' house.

When they arrived, Vicky and her parents were waiting in the hall for them; Vicky clearly took more after her father, a tall man with curly dark hair and the same gap-toothed smile. Mrs Frobisher on the other hand was a smiling East-Asian woman with her black hair tied back in a simple ponytail, far more petite than her husband and daughter. "Lord Black, Mr Potter, welcome," she greeted, shaking both their hands. "It's so good to finally meet you both in person. Amelia and Susan just arrived, come on through."

Harry and Sirius both took their shoes off where instructed, then followed the family through to the dining room. Sure enough, Susan and Amelia were both waiting, and Susan hurried forward to hug Harry. Then she offered an open-palmed bow to Sirius. "Well met, Lord Black." She grinned. "Nice to meet you properly."

Sirius laughed. "You, too, Heir Bones. And Madam Bones, I can't thank you enough, for everything." He shook the woman's hand earnestly, and she smiled.

"Your godson saved my life, I think we're even," she remarked. "Thank you, Mr Potter. Without your warning..." She trailed off, squeezing her niece's shoulder. "Well, it's best not to think what might have happened."

"I'm just glad I could help."

Mr Frobisher levitated dinner through, and Harry took a seat between Sirius and Susan. There was a current of anxiety twisting a coil in his belly; for all he'd gotten used to family dinners in the last couple of years, he'd never had a proper dinner *outside* the family before. The closest anything came to it was staying with the Weasleys, but they had always just treated him like an extra kid, so it wasn't nearly the same.

Adding on that this was a business dinner, of sorts... Harry just hoped he didn't make a fool of himself.

You'll be fine, murmured a voice in the back of his head that sounded remarkably like Draco.

"I thought we'd save all the work-talk until after we've eaten," Mrs Frobisher said, waving her wand to pour water for everyone. "No need to ruin our appetites!" They laughed, and Harry looked down at his meal; it was a rice and vegetable dish he wasn't familiar with, but it smelled amazing.

"So, Harry — if I might call you Harry," Mr Frobisher began, and Harry nodded in assent, "Vicky was telling us about the defence club you put together last year. It sounded awfully exciting!" He chuckled. "I wish she was that enthusiastic about all her classes."

Further down the table, Vicky blushed.

"It was a lot of fun," Harry agreed. "I mean, I wish it hadn't been quite so necessary," a dark look crossed everyone's faces at the reminder of Umbridge, "but it was fun getting to know everyone better and work on spells we might not have learned in class."

"I didn't expect joining the quidditch team to lead to a secret underground defence club," Vicky remarked, "but it definitely made the year interesting!"

"With any luck, the next teacher will be a bit more competent, and you won't need a secret club just to pass your exams," Amelia mused.

"Provided we did pass our exams," Harry said. Susan scoffed, rolling her eyes.

"Come off it, Harry; if anyone in the HA got less than an E, I'll eat my copy of that awful Slinkhard book," she said, making him blush.

"Well, not much longer to wait to find out." Sirius clapped Harry on the shoulder.

"Don't remind us," Susan mock-groaned. "Only a couple more weeks to find out if all our dreams are crushed forever."

"Speak for yourself," Harry teased, "I don't need OWLs to play quidditch."

Susan's only response was a glare that had everyone at the table laughing.

"Well either way, I'm sure when Vicky does reach her OWL year, she'll be very grateful for your help," Mrs Frobisher said with a smile. Then her face turned mischievous. "Meanwhile, I'm sure she's very grateful to your club for getting her talking to the boy she's been writing non-stop since she got home."

Vicky immediately turned red. "*Mu-um!*" she groaned, and Harry looked at her with raised eyebrows.

"I've not heard anything about a boy."

"He's another Gryffindor. Name begins with a C — Christopher? No. Callum?"

"Colin?" Harry asked, and Mrs Frobisher clapped her hands together.

"Yes! Colin, that's the one."

"Colin Creevey?" Harry's gaze moved back to Vicky, who looked ready to sink through the floor. "Well, that *is* news."

"They've been sending letters back and forth all week," Mrs Frobisher teased. "Should I be worried, Harry?"

"Nah, Colin's great." Now he had stopped being weirdly obsessed with Harry, at least.

"Don't worry, Vicky. I'm a great matchmaker. Just ask Susan." It was Susan's turn to blush, though she did so with a glare.

"You're lucky Aunt Amelia's already met Theo, Harry," she grumbled, and he laughed.

"He mentioned you'd told her about him, don't worry. I'm not that mean."

"I don't need a matchmaker, Harry," Vicky informed him, still bright red. "Colin and I are just friends. He's really good at Transfiguration."

Harry hadn't known that, but he could also tell Vicky was not being entirely truthful. "Well, if that changes," he drawled lightly, "Colin and Ginny are good friends. So when Ginny's back on the quidditch team next year you'll have an in."

"But you'll be back as seeker?"

"Ginny's going to try out for chaser," Harry explained. "Katie'd be mad not to pick her."

Vicky, keen for the change of subject, happily turned the conversation onto the Gryffindor quidditch team's chances.

"That reminds me, Harry," Amelia cut in, "you'll be pleased to hear that all of Umbridge's Educational Decrees have been rescinded — including your lifetime quidditch ban. There will be no trouble with you returning to the Gryffindor team."

Harry beamed at her. "Brilliant."

"I almost wish Umbridge wasn't in Azkaban, just so she could see the exam results from the last year and know exactly how much better a teacher than her Harry was," Susan mused. "I bet the look on her face would be *brilliant*."

"Surely not all the students who weren't in the HA did poorly?" Harry asked. "I mean, sure, we were a bit more organised, but wasn't everyone practicing spells in secret?"

The two girls shared a bemused look. "Not that we saw," Susan replied. "Everyone else was too scared of getting caught."

"Sometimes Harry forgets that not everyone has the same disregard for the rules as him," Sirius said dryly, clapping his godson on the shoulder. "It runs in the family. In all ways, quite frankly."

"Auntie Zelda said she could pick the HA kids out just by their practical exams, and not just in Defence," Vicky chirped, and her father sent her a scolding look.

"Vicky, you shouldn't talk about other students' exam performance. Especially when you haven't even taken your own yet."

"I didn't name names!" Vicky protested. "Just said the difference was obvious."

"Excuse me, but — Auntie Zelda?" Susan asked, perplexed. Vicky grinned.

"Griselda Marchbanks," she said with a shrug. "It's more my great-great-something auntie, but who's got time to say all that."

Harry and Susan turned to stare at each other, eyes wide.

“You’re related to Griselda Marchbanks?” Susan asked. “I— does that mean... I’m sorry, but... Mrs Frobisher, how much are you aware of what Harry and I have been doing at school — outside the HA?”

Far from being confused, Mrs Frobisher’s face was knowing. “Are you talking about your alliance with the other heirs?” She smiled, reaching to place a hand on her daughter’s shoulder. “Aunt Zelda hasn’t publicised things for safety’s sake, but considering what we’re going to discuss later, I think I can trust that none of you will be spreading rumours. Vicky is indeed the heir to the Tremblay seat. Well, technically I am, but as soon as Vicky comes of age she’ll be the next in line. I’ve no intention of being on the Wizengamot — and Zelda certainly has no intention of leaving the seat empty any time soon!”

“I... we had no idea,” Harry murmured. “I mean, your family tree isn’t public record — we haven’t been snooping,” he insisted quickly. “Just... seeing what information is common knowledge.”

“No, no, I understand. Amelia has mentioned a few things about Susan’s political future,” the lawyer remarked with a grin. “But the Tremblays have never really fallen in to the whole Wizengamot crowd — I myself was educated in Japan, where my mother’s family is from. We didn’t want Vicky to feel like she had a reputation to uphold when she’s just trying to be a teenager. No offence, of course, Amelia,” she added hastily, but Amelia waved her off.

“Oh, none taken. Sometimes I think that’s the right idea of it — unfortunately, the Bones family have been far too proud of themselves in the last few centuries to hide away their family tree. And of course, there’s only the one branch of it left, now.” Amelia’s smile turned sad as she looked at her niece.

“We’ll keep your secret,” Susan promised. “But, Vicky... if you’re ever interested in taking a more active role, before your aunt passes the seat on. Or if you just want to meet the other heirs our age — we’d be happy to introduce you. We’ve got a sort-of study group.”

“I’ll think about it,” Vicky confirmed. Then she frowned. “Is Cormac McLaggen in it?”

Harry frowned. “No? Should he be?” Harry was only vaguely aware of the older Gryffindor, in that Katie thought he was a prick.

“He’s always bragging about his Uncle Tiberius like he’s the Ogden heir.” Vicky scowled. “Like he’s *special* for having a family member on the Wizengamot.”

“Cormac McLaggen isn’t Tiberius’ heir, love,” Mrs Frobisher assured. Her eyes flicked to Susan as she spoke. “Aunt Zelda knows who it is, but she won’t tell me. She’s good friends with Tiberius, though, and apparently he’s got a few things to say about how his brother-in-law raises children,” she said, sounding amused. “If I remember correctly, Tiberius had an older sister who passed the seat on to him to go travelling, but I don’t know where she ended up. Presumably she has a child that’s in line.”

"Well, that's good," Vicky said decisively. "McLaggen is the worst. He kept flirting with my roommate last year, even when she told him to bugger off. He was a *sixth year*." She gave a thetic shudder. "And Katie told me he was talking about trying out for Keeper this year."

"He didn't try out last year, did he?" Harry asked, horrified at the thought of Katie having to play on the same team as her hated yearmate.

"No," Vicky said, shaking her head, "he was in the hospital wing. Ate something stupid on a dare, I think."

"What a delightful young man," Mr Frobisher said dryly. "Well, I wouldn't worry about it, sweetheart; I'm sure you'll beat him even if he does turn up for tryouts. And on that note, I think we'd best leave your mother to talk business with her clients."

Vicky looked a little dismayed to have to leave the table — Harry could relate — but she nodded in the end, getting to her feet.

"It was good to see you both," she said to Harry and Susan. "I'll see you at school, I suppose. If not sooner."

"See you, Vicky. And don't worry — I'll talk to Ginny about putting in a good word with Colin for you," Harry teased, winking. Vicky huffed.

"I think I'm doing just fine on my own, thanks," came her confident retort. Then, she offered picture-perfect curtseys to both Sirius and Amelia, and followed her dad from the room.

When they were gone, Mrs Frobisher sighed. "Never thought I'd be raising a Gryffindor," she muttered, shaking her head.

"If it helps, Huflepuffs aren't easy, either," Amelia sympathised. Susan just gave an innocent smile.

"Professor Sprout says I'm a delight," she insisted.

"Professor Sprout doesn't know half of what you get up to at that school," Amelia accused without hesitation.

"Now, Amelia," Sirius drawled, eyes bright, "People in glass houses shouldn't throw stones."

"You know absolutely nothing, Sirius Black," Amelia retorted, narrowing her eyes at him. "And remember I got you out of Azkaban."

"For which I will always be grateful," Sirius agreed, though as soon as Amelia looked away Harry saw his godfather wink at Susan, mouthing '*I'll tell you later*'.

"Student hijinks aside," Mrs Frobisher cut in pointedly, Vanishing the empty dishes on the table with a wave of her wand, "we do have quite a bit to discuss. From here on, you can be assured that anything said falls under client confidentiality."

“Good to know.” Harry cleared his throat. “So, uh; I suppose I should start by telling you that Gringotts has magical signature evidence that Albus Dumbledore put a block on my family magics when I was a baby? And put enough compulsions on me when I started school that I repeatedly endangered my own life without hesitation?”

Both women stared at him in horror. Sirius squeezed his shoulder. “You’d better go from the beginning, pup.”

“I... yes, I think you’d better,” Frobisher agreed faintly. Harry gave a grim smile.

They certainly had a lot to cover.

.-. .

Harry’s recount of everything he knew for certain Dumbledore had done to him took a little over half an hour, but when it came to things they only speculated it was a much larger conversation. “I’m worried that if we bring everything out too early, he’ll get it swept under the rug,” Harry said, running a hand through his hair. “He just... half of wizarding Britain is so *convinced* he can’t do anything wrong, and they’ve already painted me a lunatic half a dozen times.”

“With even half this evidence, he’ll struggle to convince everyone,” Mrs Frobisher assured. “Especially with what I’ve heard Amelia pulled out at Lord Black’s trial.”

“That was brilliant,” Harry agreed, grinning up at Amelia. The dark-haired witch smiled slightly.

“I saw the opportunity, and I took it,” she demurred. “The Wizengamot has spent decades being Albus Dumbledore’s personal chessboard, it’s long overdue for that to change.” Then she shook her head, amazed. “I had no idea he’d gone so far as to put compulsions on *children*.”

“You didn’t tell us it was that bad, Harry,” Susan added, biting her lip worriedly.

“It’s fine. They’re gone, now. And as far as I know, he hasn’t done any on any of the other students.”

“Still,” Mrs Frobisher said, “we can only imagine what else he might have done that no one has discovered.”

“I suspect we’ll never know the full extent of it,” Sirius mused with a frown. “But as long as we can get enough to break what hold he currently has. Long enough for the kids and their friends to get in and show us old farts how politics is really done.” He winked, making both Harry and Susan grin.

“I certainly think we’ve got enough to work with,” Mrs Frobisher agreed. “I can’t yet file anything for his comments regarding your connection with the Dark Lord, but you can be sure I’m keeping an eye on the paper, Harry — the second he steps out of line, I’ll file a suit on your behalf,” she promised.

"I can't do anything that means I have to explain what the connection is," Harry warned her. "Or have it examined or anything. *I* know what it is," he added at Amelia's mild look of alarm. "But it's not something that should be talked about, even in private."

The fewer people who knew anything about horcruxes, the better.

"I understand," Mrs Frobisher assured. "Don't worry, I won't let it get that far. A cease and desist to the *Prophet* is likely all it'll take." She pursed her lips. "With influential people like Albus Dumbledore, a lot of the work is done behind the scenes. Much like his own work — let people read their own conclusions into the little things that *are* done, and you'll get better results than attacking outright. From what I've heard from Vicky, you've already done very well with that — a lot of the students at the school think more critically of the headmaster these days, and that's gradually spreading to their families. And with Amelia working on the Ministry and the Wizengamot, the dissent is certainly rising."

Slowly, a devious smile overtook her face — the kind of look that Harry had learned to be wary of, after so many years with both Weasleys and Marauders around.

But in this case, it was Dumbledore about to face Mrs Frobisher's wrath, so Harry wasn't wary at all.

"I have something of a plan, if I may?" Frobisher asked, and Harry shared a look with Sirius.

"The floor is yours," Harry offered.

The devious smile grew wider.

.-. .

Once they were back at Seren Du, Sirius slung an arm over Harry's shoulders on the walk back up to the house. "Remind me never to get on your bad side," he said conversationally. "Your lawyer would eat me alive."

Harry laughed, grinning. "Keep that in mind when you're planning your summer pranks," he teased. Sirius ruffled his hair.

"You did well tonight, pup," he said, stopping Harry just outside the front door. With his hands on Harry's shoulders, Harry had to tilt his head up a little to look Sirius in the eye, though the difference between them was far less than it had been a year ago. "Both over dinner, and afterwards. I know you were worried about the whole thing." Harry flushed.

"You think it went okay?" Harry still worried that teasing Vicky about Colin in front of her parents was too far, even though her mum had been the one to bring it up in the first place. He was so used to considering the quidditch team practically family, Vicky had just slotted right into that spot in his mind.

"I think it went brilliantly. And as someone who has purposefully made about every social faux pas in the book at one time or another, I'd say you avoided them well enough." He winked, grey eyes softening. "I can't say if Prongs would be proud — he always hated all

that pureblood, Wizengamot crap. But... for what it's worth, you're making your old godfather very proud indeed."

Harry's breath caught in his throat. "I— really?"

Sirius' eyes twinkled, and he leaned in to press a kiss to Harry's forehead. "Really. I can't really claim responsibility — you practically raised yourself thanks to those bloody muggles — but I'm glad I get to be here to see the young man you're becoming."

"I think you've got more responsibility for it than you think, Sirius," Harry insisted. Sirius pulled back, chuckling.

"Maybe. Have to share it with Moony, though. And Severus, I suppose." He made a mock-annoyed face. "It's probably for the best we got you after the formative years were out of the way."

"We'll see about that." Harry side-eyed him, grinning. "Once you've raised a kid or two of your own from the start, we'll see what they turn out like."

Then he reached for the door, because Sirius seemed entirely too gobsmacked by the prospect to do anything but stand there, wide-eyed and gaping. "I— we—"

Harry laughed at him, beckoning him inside. Only then did he let his grin soften. "For what it's worth — I think you'd be great at it." He rocked up on his toes, kissing his godfather's cheek. "I'm going to tell Draco how it all went. Goodnight, Padfoot!"

And so he skipped upstairs, leaving his godfather in the hallway to retrieve his brain from wherever it had fled in response to Harry's words.

.

On the night of the first full moon of the summer, Harry could hardly sit still through dinner. It was finally time — he would finally be able to join his godfathers on their moonlit escapades.

He could tell Draco was a little jealous, though the blond was hiding it well. He knew how important this was to Harry, how much it meant to be able to take part in this ritual his father had helped begin. He'd get to join them eventually.

Sirius and Remus were restless, too, though Harry suspected theirs wasn't entirely excitement as his was — Remus was wary of Harry getting hurt, even though he had run with animagi hundreds of times in his life without issue, and also the Wolfsbane would leave him aware and docile even in the face of humans. But they were his godfathers, and it was in their nature to worry, so Harry didn't protest; they were still letting him join, after all.

If he could prove tonight that everything would go smoothly, hopefully he could become a regular addition to the full moon nights. The ones he wasn't at school for, at least.

After dinner, Remus and Snape disappeared upstairs; Harry was familiar with their pre-moon rituals enough to know that they wouldn't resurface until around half an hour before

moonrise. He looked across the table at Sirius, who offered him a small grin. “You should take a nap, pup,” the dog animagus suggested. “Save your energy for tonight.”

Harry scoffed; as if he could sleep with all this anticipation running through his veins. But then Draco’s hand slipped into his, squeezing gently.

Maybe he could nap with company, Harry mused.

“You’ll come get me when it’s time?” he checked, and Sirius barked a laugh.

“Of course,” he promised. “Go on. We’ve a few hours yet.”

Harry still set an alarm, just in case. He didn’t want to miss a single second of this.

With Draco’s body twined with his, thin fingers carding gently through his hair, Harry managed to drift off for a while, dreams full of abstract flashes of grass and trees and the feeling of being on four paws. When he woke to the beeping of his alarm clock, he found himself with his face buried in the hollow of Draco’s throat. He sat up, and the blond blinked dazedly up at him.

“You’re off, then?” Draco asked, voice husky with sleep. Harry nodded. “Mm, be safe. Have fun. Don’t die.”

The Gryffindor snickered, leaning down to press a chaste kiss to his boyfriend’s lips. “Will you be here when I get back?”

Those lips curled into a smile. “I’m far too comfortable to move now,” Draco assured. Harry grinned wider, and a wave of his hand transfigured Draco’s shirt and trousers into much more comfortable pyjamas. “Thank you. Go play in the woods now,” Draco dismissed, eyes already falling shut again. Harry kissed him one last time, unable to help himself, then shuffled off the bed and let him to sleep.

Sirius was in the hallway, clearly on his way to retrieve Harry, and he beamed at his godson. “You ready, pup?”

Harry matched his expression. “More than.” He fell into step beside the older man. “You’ll have to give me a proper nickname eventually, y’know,” he said, and Sirius rolled his eyes.

“Prongs came up with all the nicknames,” he revealed, running a hand through his hair. “Moony and I were shit at it. Honestly, some of the attempts we made...” He snorted, smile turning a little sad, and Harry’s heart clenched.

“You never told me that.” They’d always made the nicknames sound like a group effort.

“Yeah. So we can give you a nickname if you really want it, but you might regret asking,” Sirius said teasingly. “Or we can take Severus’ suggestion, just call you and your boy Mischief and Mayhem. Since that’s all you seem to cause,” he added with a wink.

That startled a laugh out of Harry. “I think Draco might take offence to that.” The Slytherin regularly maintained that any *ridiculousness* was entirely Harry’s doing, and he just got

dragged along for the ride. “I... I like it, though.” Mischief wasn’t a bad name, for a fox.

That made Sirius brighten up, and he ruffled Harry’s hair. “Mischief it is, then,” he decided, just as they reached the entrance hall. To Harry’s surprise, Remus was already there; alone, wearing nothing but a pair of flannel pyjama bottoms, his shoulders tense.

“You hear that, Moony?” Sirius said, grinning at his best friend. “We’re sticking with Mischief. You can tell the old bat he’s now officially contributed to the Marauders’ legacy.”

Remus chuckled. “I’m sure he’ll be thrilled,” he said dryly, then turned to Harry. “You’re ready, then? You know what to do if... if things don’t go well?”

“Straight back in the house, let Padfoot deal with you,” Harry recited, as if they hadn’t been over it a million times before even considering allowing him to join in. “It’ll be fine, Remus. We’ll have fun.”

All Remus managed was a tight half-smile, and then he sucked in a sharp breath, his eyes flashing gold. “I need to go,” he declared, sharing a look with Sirius and then slipping out the front door.

Harry knew how it would go — Sirius had explained that Remus never let anyone see him in the act of transforming if he could help it. As children the other Marauders had waited outside the Shack for their friend, and now they would offer Remus the same privacy by staying inside the house until the transformation was complete.

Having seen the transformation as a third year, Harry could understand Remus wanting to do that alone.

And so they waited, listening as human screams became lupine howls. Harry’s stomach churned; normally he was in his room at this point, under a Silencing charm so he didn’t have to listen. It was awful, knowing that Remus was going through such pain and there was nothing any of them could do about it. Even though Remus brushed it off, insisted that it had been much worse before the Wolfsbane, that he barely even felt it now.

At last, there was a scratch at the door; the signal that the transformation was complete.

Sirius looked at Harry, grey eyes bright and lips tugging in a challenging grin. He winked, then in an instant there was a huge black dog stood there, staring expectantly up at Harry. Harry didn’t waste time; a twist of his magic, and he too was on four paws, his senses shifting in a way he was becoming increasingly familiar with. Instantly, he could smell the wolf on the other side of the door; Remus’ usual scent still present but overwhelmed by the scent of the predator within him, brought to the surface by the light of the moon.

Sirius nudged at the house wards, opening the door, and for the second time in his life Harry stood face to face with a fully transformed werewolf.

But he had no fear, this time. He knew Remus was in control, knew the wolf would not see the fox as a threat — he bounded out past Padfoot, paws hitting the still-warm grass as he

approached the wolf eagerly. Remus had told him what to do here, too; let Moony get his scent, get used to him. Then they could play.

The wolf seemed even bigger, now Harry was so small. The fox sat patiently, keen-eyed and braced to sprint if the wolf should decide it didn't like what it saw. A large muzzle bumped against the side of his jaw, hot breath tickling his fur as Moony inspected him from tip to tail, circling him with wary gold eyes. Mischief didn't flinch. A few feet away, Padfoot stood watching the whole exchange, ready to intervene if needed.

Moony took a step back, then huffed, nudging Mischief with his huge head — a distinctly playful gesture.

The fox grinned, and took off.

In the back of the fox-led mind, Harry's human self was practically shouting in glee at getting to run with the wolf and the dog, all three of them headed for the woods. He darted between larger bodies, yipping excitedly as Padfoot chased after him and Moony followed close behind.

He and Padfoot had run together before, but it was nothing like this. Nothing so... freeing. So exuberant. This was the three of them giving in to their animal instincts, letting Moony truly be himself under the light of the moon. As he ducked and dodged between trees, following interesting scent trails and jumping on his two companions, Harry wistfully imagined a time in the future when there was a shadow overhead, a whisper of white feathers following them from above. Perhaps even two shadows; Snape might be persuaded to make the transformation, now he would not be the only avian among them. Draco would enjoy flying with his godfather.

They ended up in a clearing, a place the two canines were evidently familiar with; the space was layered with the scents of the two of them from many months past, other animals steering clear of a place claimed by the predators so blatantly. Moony and Padfoot wrestled playfully, and Mischief didn't hesitate to throw himself into the mix, taking advantage of his smaller size to live up to his nickname and trip the pair up, even clambering on top of the werewolf at one point to the sound of Padfoot's barked amusement.

Harry's heart raced with joy, even as the three of them slowed down in their play and made to settle in for the night. Padfoot trotted over, swiping his tongue over Mischief's head and chuffing at the disgruntled look it earned. He wasn't sure how much of the night had passed, the moon still bright overhead, but already he knew he would very happily do this every full moon for as long as he could.

Sirius had tried to explain what it was like, back when Harry had first expressed interest in joining them on full moon nights. But he'd always insisted it was something that couldn't truly be described, that the feeling of *pack* was unlike anything else in the world. Harry hadn't fully understood what he meant until now.

There were no human feelings he could put to this, not that would do it justice.

When he curled up between the dog and the wolf, fluffy tail tucked in close to his body, he caught the pair of them sharing a heavy gaze, and then Moony tipped his head to the sky and howled. A howl of welcome, for their newest pack member; a howl of mourning, for the one they had lost. The one who should have been there, antlers raised proudly at the introduction of his pup to the fold.

As he raised his gaze, Mischief caught a flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye — it was probably just his imagination, but for a moment he thought he'd seen the shadowy outline of a stag, lurking in the trees, watching them.

Then he blinked, and the shadow was gone.

The human soul ached within the fox's heart, and Mischief turned back to his godfathers; they were looking at the trees, too. Maybe he hadn't imagined the stag after all.

A full moon held a magic all of its own, everyone knew that. Perhaps that magic was enough to bring the echo of Prongs to life, just for a moment. Just enough to offer his blessing to his old pack, to his son's new animal form.

It made something settle in Harry's mind, an ache he hadn't realised he still held.

He was so grateful to Sirius and Remus, for so many things. But for this, for giving him this connection to his father in such a *visceral*, soul-deep way... Harry would never be able to thank them enough.

Chapter 80

Chapter Notes

This chapter takes us over the 500k mark! It's something of an interlude; checking in with all the people who aren't Harry, getting some cute relationship fluff and also some smut in the mix there, with a healthy shot of plot progression thrown in too.

Warning for depression/anxiety/PTSD in the Sirius/Charlie section, with Sirius' post-Azkaban struggles.

Also warning for discussions of gender dysphoria and other similar gender-related feels in the Tonks/Kingsley section.

Sirius had woken up cold.

It happened, sometimes. Charlie had been told many times in his life that he was obnoxiously warm to sleep next to, but Sirius had never complained about it — and sometimes, like that morning, Charlie woke up with the dark-haired wizard wrapped around him like an octopus, plastered to his chest as if he was trying to suck every scrap of warmth from Charlie's body.

When he felt the tiny shivers wracking Sirius' body, Charlie knew it was going to be a rough day. Still, he did what he always did on Cold mornings; rolled them over until Sirius was securely cocooned beneath his broad form, and pulled the duvet up to his neck, wrapping it around both of them. Never mind that it was summer, and already boiling in their room.

There was the smallest relaxation of Sirius' shoulders. Charlie's heart clenched. He tilted his head down, pressing the most gentle of kisses to Sirius' temple. "Good morning, sweetheart," he said quietly, trying carefully not to let his full weight rest on the man, else he go from cuddling to crushing. Sirius liked being weighed down, but when he was mentally in Azkaban Charlie always worried he'd smother him.

He waited, occasionally dropping another kiss on his partner's face. Little by little, Sirius stopped shivering. Then, finally, the ex-convict let out a long breath. "Fuck," he muttered, and Charlie hummed against his cheek.

"Want to have breakfast in bed this morning?" he asked. He felt Sirius wavering. "It's a Saturday. We've nowhere to be."

More than once, Sirius had tried to hide his own depression while Charlie got ready for work, so he wouldn't *feel obligated* to stay at home and care for him. Like any part of that was an *obligation*.

Charlie hated the demons in his boyfriend's brain, the way they made him hate himself.

Fucking Azkaban.

But luckily Sirius was fine with falling apart on a weekend, so he gave a small nod — and as if she'd been waiting for the signal, Ceri popped silently into the room, levitating a lap tray. Charlie slowly manoeuvred them both into a sort-of sitting position, Sirius still tucked securely against his side. He took the tray from Ceri with a grateful smile, and the elf bobbed her head. Before she left, she clicked her fingers, and the fire in the grate jumped to life.

Sirius had chosen this bedroom for a reason.

The room was warm enough already, but it was clear the dog animagus couldn't feel it, his whole body strung tight against Charlie. But he showed at least a little interest in the food Ceri had brought them, and with a little encouragement he was eating.

"Was it your dreams, or just... one of those days?" Charlie asked, and Sirius shrugged.

"Dreams, I think. Dunno. Just... cold. Empty."

Charlie knew the word wasn't referring to his surroundings, but himself. His heart squeezed tighter.

"It's going to be gorgeous out today. We could read outside for a while, by the fire pit?"

"I promised the boys I'd help them with apparition training today," Sirius rasped in protest.

"Let Moony do it," Charlie urged. "You know his only plans for the day were sitting in Snape's lab and trying to flirt him into bollocksing up a potion."

That got a tiny huff of laughter out of the dark-haired man, and Charlie's whole chest filled with pride. Small steps.

They stayed in their warm nest of a room until Charlie was sure the sun would be up, and then they slowly got dressed — soft, well-worn jeans, long-sleeved t-shirt, Charlie's old Gryffindor quidditch hoodie that Sirius had claimed when they'd moved in together. Comfortable clothes, clothes that wouldn't remind him of Azkaban.

Outside it was already warm, but leaving their room had Sirius shivering again.

The fire in the fire pit built quickly with a wave of Charlie's wand, and another wave had one of the benches transfigured into a comfy divan, just wide enough for both of them. Charlie laid down and pulled Sirius to lie between his legs, head on his chest. A thin layer of sweat had already formed on Charlie's skin.

Sirius' hands were still like ice.

The animagus turned his face up to the sun with the most genuine smile Charlie had seen from him all day, and the redhead stroked a hand down Sirius' side, sliding it beneath the hoodie and shirt to touch bare skin. Physical contact helped — often, Sirius couldn't decide between wearing a hundred layers to stave off the cold, or going entirely naked to get as much skin pressed against him as possible.

But Charlie's hands on his stomach seemed to be enough, and inch by inch he relaxed into the embrace. When Charlie finally felt him loosen fully against him, having drifted into a light doze, a spark of relief and triumph tingled in his body.

It was the worst day Sirius had had since he and Charlie had got together, and for a moment Charlie had worried he wouldn't be able to bring him out of it.

Warmth, sun and human contact; three things Sirius had been denied in Azkaban. With a combination like that, and a little patience, he could drag Sirius back from even the darkest corners of his own mind. Charlie glanced up at the sky with a small quirk of his lips, mentally thanking the weather for cooperating. He wasn't sure what he'd have done if it were raining.

They were out there for hours, Sirius waking up occasionally with a full-body jerk, but Charlie soothed him every time. At one point, Charlie summoned the book he'd been reading about the migration habits of various European dragon breeds, propping it up on a conjured bookstand to read while Sirius stared up at the cloudless sky with that chilling, vacant gaze.

Ceri brought lunch out to them. Ripe, juicy berries, and toasted sandwiches cut into bite-size squares. Packed with flavour — another thing to distance Sirius from the prison in his mind.

Sirius didn't talk, but Charlie didn't expect him to. Later, when they were back to reading and staring respectively, Harry appeared from the direction of the house. He approached cautiously, and Charlie offered what he hoped was a reassuring smile. The teen's eyes were sympathetic as they flickered down to his godfather, who didn't react at his presence.

"Draco and I were thinking about swimming for a bit," the green-eyed Gryffindor started, "but Moony said we should check with you first. Don't want to disturb."

"We're fine," Charlie assured, running a hand through Sirius' hair. "Just relaxing out in the sun. Bit of laughter in the background won't harm anyone. Just don't drown," he teased. Harry brightened up — then, cautiously, he stepped closer, leaning in to hug Sirius around the shoulders.

"Love you, Padfoot."

Sirius reflexively hugged him back. "Love you, too, kid. Have fun swimming."

And inside, Charlie cheered, because that meant Sirius was present enough to have registered the conversation. Finally, the shadows were lifting.

But it was slow going. When the sun began to set, the breeze picking up a slight chill, the pair of them went inside — back up to their bedroom. The fire was still going, the room swelteringly hot, and Sirius sprawled on the bed with a heavy sigh.

Charlie settled in beside him, still touching but not as close — if Sirius was ready to come out of his own head, he didn't want to overwhelm him. He ran his fingers through Sirius' long hair, blunt nails scratching across the man's scalp in a way that made him smile faintly.

At last, Sirius rolled over, making eye contact. For the first time all day, there were no shadows in those stormy grey eyes. “Hey.”

Charlie smiled. “Hey, you.”

“I’m sorry.”

That made Charlie frown. “What? What for?”

Sirius scoffed, one arm gesturing to the room at large. “This. Making you baby me all day, deal with my fucked-up head.”

“Okay, first of all, you didn’t *make* me do anything,” Charlie pointed out. “Second, as far as I’m concerned I’ve had an excellent lazy Saturday, reading a book in the sunshine all cuddled up with my gorgeous partner. Pretty sure that’s the definition of bliss in some circles.”

Sirius narrowed his eyes at him. “With the fire roaring on a twenty-eight degree day?”

A flicker of a smirk across Charlie’s face. “I play with dragons, sweetheart. A little heat never bothered me much.” Indeed, Sirius on a Cold day was very much like dealing with dragons; no sudden movements, no expectations, just warmth and steady companionship until they came to you.

“Still,” Sirius muttered, frowning. “I shouldn’t be having days like this, still. I’ve been out for three years.”

“And you were in for twelve,” Charlie reminded, shuddering at the very prospect of twelve years surrounded by dementors. “Don’t beat yourself up, love. Sometimes there are days when your brain just doesn’t cooperate. Not your fault.” He wriggled closer, watching for any sign that he might not be welcome, but Sirius melted into him without hesitation. Charlie kissed him, long and languid.

“You shouldn’t have to take care of me all the time,” Sirius sighed against his lips, and Charlie’s heart ached for the man.

“I’m gonna spend my whole fucking life convincing you that spending time with you is never an obligation,” he decided, “even on your bad days. Taking care of each other is what couples do.” He grinned playfully. “Wait til I get burned from shoulder to knee by some dragon and I’m asking you to put ointment on my arse three times a day.”

Sirius snorted. “I still feel like I’m wasting your time,” he said in a heartbreakingly whisper. Charlie kissed him again.

“I’m exactly where I want to be, sweetheart.” It might not be what he’d expected for his life, back when he was eighteen, but he couldn’t imagine being happier with anyone than he was with Sirius. “Now, how about we round off this day with a long, hot bath?” He let his grin turn sultry, blue eyes dancing. “Little bit of warm, wet and naked sounds like a perfect evening to me. Maybe work on some other definitions of bliss,” he added with a wink,

hoping he wasn't pushing too far. Sirius didn't always want sex on Cold days, but sometimes...

Sirius' eyes lit up, and he arched up against Charlie's side. "Perfect," he agreed, hand coming up to cradle Charlie's jaw, bringing him down into a kiss. "So fucking perfect."

It was, Charlie thought. It really, really was.

.-.-.-.

Draco's shoulders ached, but his jaw was clenched indignantly as he dragged himself up off the floor.

Severus had beaten him, again.

"Better," his godfather said curtly, and Draco glared at him.

"I barely lasted two minutes."

"When Harry started, he lasted half that time," Severus returned instantly. That didn't make Draco feel better.

"When Harry started, he was thirteen," he grumbled. He should be better than this — he should be able to hold his own in a fight against a Death Eater! If even fucking *Longbottom* could do it—

No, that wasn't fair. Neville had improved enormously since getting a new wand. And likely the Death Eaters they faced at the Ministry weren't as exacting and punishing as Severus Snape in training mode.

But Draco should still be doing better.

"Take a break," Severus instructed. "I need to put Harry through his paces."

Across the room, Harry groaned, but Draco could see the light dancing in his boyfriend's eyes. He enjoyed this, the weirdo. He loved getting to duel, even if Severus still handed him his arse nine times out of ten.

He could last a lot longer than Draco did.

It was hard, training with someone like Harry. Years ago, Draco might have gotten unbearably jealous — the Gryffindor had power *pouring* off him, seeping from his every pore, eager to jump to life in a fight. He was light on his feet and quick to learn and surprisingly innovative when panicking.

But Draco couldn't be jealous, not really, not when he knew where those instincts had been born.

But it was frustrating. He had insisted on joining Harry's training so he could protect his boyfriend — now he just felt like he was holding him back.

Knowing how explosive the duels between his godfather and his boyfriend could get, Draco decided to step out into the corridor for a minute. To his surprise, as he did so his mother was walking past. She took one look at him and frowned. “What’s the matter, darling?”

“I’m fine,” he said, immediately hating how petulant he sounded. His shoulders slumped. “I — it’s nothing. I’m just... not taking to it as quickly as I anticipated.”

“You’ve only been here a fortnight,” Narcissa reminded him. “It takes time, Dragon. Especially with Severus — you know he’ll be pushing you to your limits.”

“That’s the damned problem,” Draco muttered, “my limits are lower than they should be!”

“Only compared to Harry. Any other person your age wouldn’t last ten seconds against Severus Snape. Hell, I barely last a minute against him, when he’s truly trying.” Narcissa moved closer, patting him on the cheek. “You know he’s proud of you. And you are improving.”

“It’s not about making him proud of me!” That was part of it, yes, he couldn’t deny that — he’d sought his godfather’s approval more than his father’s, growing up, because from Severus it felt like it truly *meant* something. With Severus he had to earn it.

But that wasn’t what had him upset now. “I need to be better at this, for Harry,” he insisted. “If I’m going to fight by his side I need to be able to *stay* by his side.” Right now he felt like he’d be cut down in the first five minutes of any proper battle, and that was no use to anyone, least of all his boyfriend who was training to go up against the fucking Dark Lord.

He hated the way his mother’s face softened in something that looked an awful lot like pity. “Oh, darling,” she sighed. “Harry Potter is both a law and a standard unto himself.” Her voice was fond, and Draco’s lips twitched reluctantly. Truer words had never been spoken. “I have every confidence that, when the time comes, you will protect *each other*. You think I would be half as willing to let you throw yourself into battle if I didn’t think he’d keep you alive through it?”

“He shouldn’t have to, though! He’s got enough to worry about as it is!” Anger flared deep in Draco’s chest. “What if he’s so busy protecting me he doesn’t look after himself?” He had nightmares about it; the pair of them in battle, Harry turning to block a spell from hitting Draco and taking a killing curse straight to the back for it.

“You’d never let harm come to him,” his mother told him. Draco wished he could have her confidence.

He let out a frustrated sigh, running a hand through his hair. “I just—I can’t fail him,” he whispered, voice cracking. “Malfoys don’t fail.”

“But Blacks do.” Draco blinked, staring at his mother incredulously. “Blacks fail. All the time. We’re rather good at it, actually.” Her lips curved wryly. “But we get back up and we learn from our mistakes and we become *better*.” When her grey eyes met his, they were intent; challenging. “We make it so that we do not fail when it matters.” Both her hands came to his shoulders, holding him firmly. “You will not fail Harry when it matters. Trust me on

that.” She patted his cheek once more. “You have far too much love for the boy to do that. So get back in there, face your godfather, and fail a thousand more times at his wand now, so you will not fail at someone else’s later.”

“I—“ Draco swallowed thickly. “What if it’s still not enough?” What if even his best couldn’t keep Harry safe?

“Then that is the way the world must be,” Narcissa replied without hesitation. “We cannot control everything, my darling. We can only control ourselves. And you *certainly* can’t control Harry Potter.” She smirked at him. “Your father only taught you that Malfoys don’t fail because he never dared try anything he couldn’t immediately succeed at. You’re a Black, darling; you’re better than that.”

Then she kissed him on the cheek, and stepped back. “Do you see, now?”

A pause, and then Draco nodded. “I do. Thank you.”

His mother smiled, nudging him back towards the door, and went on her way. Draco reached for the handle, determination burning through his blood.

He would be better.

.-.-.-.-.

Longbottom manor was *huge*.

Ginny’s hands clenched anxiously around the handles of her bag as she stood in the elaborate entrance hall, staring at the grand curving staircase in front of her. “Ginny! You made it!”

She turned, unable to help the smile that flooded her face at the sight of her boyfriend. He was a little windswept, a faint smudge of dirt on his cheek — he’d been out with his plants again, most likely. “Sorry, I lost track of time,” he admitted sheepishly, leaning down to kiss her. Ginny relaxed into the kiss, then tensed, pulling back.

“Where’s your gran?” she asked in alarm, eyes darting around as if the woman would pop out of nowhere, vulture hat and all. Neville just laughed.

“She’s off playing cards with your Aunt Muriel,” he explained. “She’ll be back for dinner, don’t worry. Oh.” He glanced down. “Posy!” A house elf appeared suddenly, wearing a pretty pale blue dress. “Posy, this is Ginny. Would you take her bag to her room for me, please?”

“Of course, Master Neville!” the elf chirped happily, and Ginny awkwardly set the bag down for the elf to take.

She’d never visited anyone who had a house elf, before. Sometimes she forgot just how old-money pureblood Neville was.

The elf vanished with her bag, and Neville beamed at her, holding out a hand. “Come on, I’ll show you around.”

It was just Neville, she reminded herself. Even as he led her around a house that was bigger and grander than anything she'd seen before in her life.

Just Neville — her shy, sweet, slightly clumsy but utterly endearing boyfriend. So what if his family was rich as hell? She was best friends with Harry Potter, she should be used to it by now.

"I thought Susan and her aunt were staying here, too?" she asked curiously as Neville showed her down a corridor that was nothing but guest bedrooms. They hadn't seen a single soul yet.

"Oh, they are. Amelia's at work, and Susan is... around, somewhere." Neville's face turned mischievous. "Theo's visiting today."

Ginny smirked. "*Ohh.*" They probably wouldn't see either of them until dinner, then.

They went up one more flight of stairs to see a beautifully decorating drawing room, and then Neville shrugged. "Honestly, that's about everything interesting inside. Would you, uh— do you want to see the gardens? I can show you my greenhouses?"

His face lit up so earnestly, Ginny swallowed the crack she'd been about to make about showing her his bedroom. "I'd love to."

They went outside, and finally Ginny's nerves began to fade — *this* was the Neville she knew, the boy she had fallen for. Chatting a mile a minute about plants, delight in his eyes as he showed her into one of the greenhouses; which was clearly under some hefty expansion charms, because it stretched on seemingly forever. "I've got some cobra lilies growing over there," he told her, gesturing broadly. "And the other week I managed to find some wild deadnettle seeds, but I've never worked with any of those before — they're really rare — so I'm not completely sure if they'll thrive in this section, but the books said they like drier climates, so if it doesn't work out I'll move them further along, and—"

Ginny kissed him, cutting him off mid-sentence, and after a startled moment he kissed back, his hand coming up to cup her cheek. Warmth flooded Ginny's body, and it finally began to sink in — she was staying at her boyfriend's house for a whole week.

She got Neville to herself — mostly — for seven full days.

When they broke the kiss, her arms were around his neck, and his hazel eyes were bright, his cheeks a little flushed. "What was that for?" he asked, smiling. Ginny grinned back.

"Just happy to see you, is all."

His smile grew wider, and he tucked a lock of bright red hair behind her ear. "I'm happy to see you, too." He kissed her again, more chastely. "I'm really glad your parents agreed to let you come stay."

"I'm pretty sure Mum was worried I might murder Ron and Hermione if I didn't get a break," Ginny joked, making Neville snicker. Hermione had only been at the Burrow for about a week, but already the pair were doing Ginny's head in; between their awkward not-flirting,

their intense bickering, and Hermione's determination to be *friends* with Ginny again — in a thinly veiled attempt to get back in Harry's good graces — Ginny would have run away to Longbottom Manor even if her parents had said no.

"Well, while I can't officially condone murder, I'll encourage anything that lets me see you more," Neville said, and it could have been a joke but his voice was so incredibly fond it made Ginny's breath catch. "There's not much to do here, honestly — we've got space for quidditch, but neither Susan nor I fly — but I'll try not to make you spend all week in the greenhouse."

"I don't mind," Ginny insisted. She wasn't brilliant at Herbology — constantly got confused with all the specific needs and variations of magical plants — but she'd been helping her mum with the family vegetable garden since Charlie started Hogwarts, in some capacity or another; the two of them were the only Weasley siblings with enough patience for it. Percy had patience, too, but he got upset at the feel of wet dirt on his skin.

"Still, I don't want to bore you."

"It's not boring." Ginny smiled at him. "I like watching you with your plants; they make you happy. Besides," she added, gaze dancing with mischief, "it's sexy when you get all knowledgable and competent like that." Her hand rested lightly on his chest, and she could feel his pulse pick up as he blushed.

"Oh." His smile turned a little goofy. "I— really?"

"Very sexy," Ginny confirmed, stepping in closer. "Not that I came here to spend a week perving on you while you garden, or anything. But, y'know. If the opportunity's *there*." She winked, giggling when he blushed even brighter. Merlin, it was fun riling him up.

"I wouldn't mind," he said, stuttering ever so slightly. "If— if you did want to perv on me, I mean."

Not the smoothest of lines, but Ginny would take it — Neville was still pretty new to flirting, bless him. Like with most things, he lost his nerve as soon as he started overthinking it; he could be smooth as anything when he wasn't even trying, sometimes knocking the breath right from Ginny with his words.

But right now, even with the fumbling attempt, Ginny could feel her blood rushing through her. It hit her then that they were entirely alone in the greenhouses — the only other two people in the house were occupied with each other, and the adult supervision wouldn't be back for hours.

Even at Hogwarts, sneaking around in alcoves and abandoned classrooms, they were never truly that alone.

A thrill ran down her spine, her hand trailing down Neville's chest. "Seems a bit unfair if I'm the one doing all the perving," she drawled lightly. "And it'd be a shame to waste time just *looking*."

Her fingers slipped beneath the hem of his t-shirt, sliding up the swell of his stomach, and he sucked in a sharp breath.

They hadn't gone very far, in the few weeks they'd been together at Hogwarts. Between exams and everything else, there hadn't been much time for it — and Neville had never so much as kissed a girl before her, was nervous and tentative and so very *proper*. It took a week for her to get him to stop asking permission every time he kissed her. But the few times he had slipped a hand beneath her school shirt, or trailed kisses down her neck, it lit her up in a way that anything she'd done with Michael had never even come close to.

"Is there a bench here, or anything?" she asked, suddenly feeling a little weak in the knees. Neville's large hand settled on the curve of her waist, directing her over to a simple wooden bench nearby. He sat down, and Ginny sat beside him, legs pressed close together as sparks pulsed deep in her belly. She happily went back to kissing him, her hand sneaking under his shirt once more to slide up his broad back.

Neville was one of those kids that had puberty hit them like the Hogwarts Express; he'd come a very long way from the round-faced, slightly buck-toothed boy she remembered from her earlier Hogwarts years. Even in the few weeks since she'd seen him last, he'd grown an inch or so and lost more of the baby fat from his cheeks. And his time working with his plants had built some muscle across his shoulders, helped by his work with the HA in the last year. There was still more softness to his body than she knew he was comfortable with, at his waist and thighs and chest, but Ginny liked that about him. Knew she'd like it a lot more, if she ever got him brave enough to take his shirt off in front of her.

He was turning into a handsome man, and Ginny knew she'd have some jealousy to deal with once they got back to Hogwarts.

But inside, he was still the shy, earnest, clumsy boy who had been so very sweet to her at the Yule Ball, and stolen her heart without either of them realising.

Slowly, tentatively, his hand moved from her waist, down to her knee. Ginny's breath hitched, and he froze. "No, keep going," she urged, lips moving to his jaw.

His hand moved again, sliding under the hem of her skirt, strong fingers wrapping ever so tenderly around her thigh. His touch was like lightning straight to her core, and Ginny hummed in encouragement, gripping at his shoulder beneath his shirt. "You can keep going," she breathed, pulling back a little to meet his wide-eyed gaze.

"I— out here? Are you sure?"

"Who's going to find us?" Ginny pointed out, voice growing husky with lust.

"O-okay."

"Only if you want to," Ginny said — she didn't want to push him, didn't want to make him uncomfortable, but *Merlin* if she didn't get some kind of touch down there soon she might explode. "I didn't actually mean to jump you as soon as I got here," she added, a little sheepish. Neville huffed out a laugh, his eyes darkened.

“If you hadn’t, I would have,” he said boldly. “Merlin, Ginny… can I—“

He didn’t finish his sentence, but the next thing Ginny knew she was being lifted onto his lap, straddling him with her knees on the bench. A gasp ripped from her throat at the action; the bulge in his trousers was pressing right up against her damp underwear. “Fuck,” she breathed, eyes fluttering shut.

“Good?”

“So good.” Ginny rocked down against him, and both of them moaned.

“Oh, God,” Neville yelped softly, his hands fisting tight in the fabric of her skirt. “I want…”

“Yes.” Whatever it was, Ginny wanted it too. One of her hands cupped the back of his head, and as his tongue curled around hers, his fingers moved back to her thigh, *finally* moving higher.

“Tell me if—I don’t want to hurt you,” he breathed, but Ginny could hardly comprehend the words as his fingers slipped beneath her underwear and brushed against her most sensitive parts, sinking into the wetness he found there. She gasped in pleasure, pressing down into the touch.

“I—*oh*, Nev, I—little higher, *yes*, there.” His touch was tentative at first, but her words seemed to spur him on, and he took direction like a champ, fingers wringing pleasure from her, adjusting speed and angle as she aided him along the way. Ginny tried to reciprocate, her hand moving towards the hardness in his jeans, but he batted it away. “Let me focus on you,” he said breathlessly, and how could she say no to that?

Her orgasm hit hard — harder than she’d ever had before, a loud moan pouring from her throat as pleasure shuddered white-hot through her body. Neville froze, holding her through it, and when she slumped against him he let out a long, ragged breath. “*Merlin*,” he murmured, awed, as he slid his fingers out of her, hand resting on her thigh once more. “Did I — did I do it right?”

A tiny giggle bubbled from Ginny’s lips, and she yanked him down into a deep, messy kiss. “You did it *very, very right*,” she assured him, still riding the high of her orgasm. “Fuck. Wasn’t expecting that.” She’d thought it would take all week to persuade Neville to touch her like that.

“I—me neither.” Neville laughed quietly, looking amazed at himself. “I’ve been thinking about that for ages.”

“Me too.” But good Godric, that had been better than her imagination. She could hardly envision how good it might be with a bit of practice, once they really got to know each other. “I—I’m on the potion,” she blurted, and then immediately flushed as red as her hair. Way to sound like a sex-fiend! “Not that I’m expecting anything. We don’t have to, y’know, do anything. I just — Fred brews it for Angelina and he started doing a double batch last year for me too—“ She realised where that was leading and swerved abruptly, not wanting to mention her ex-boyfriend, not now she *finally* had Neville in her arms, “—but he taught me

how to brew it, so there's no pressure for this week or anything, I honestly wasn't expecting—" He cut her off with a kiss, and when he pulled back he was smiling.

"You ramble worse than I do, sometimes," he teased playfully. "I—I know what you mean. There's no rush. We'll just go at our own pace, do what feels right. But... it's good to know that—that if things do get there, we're prepared. For whenever we want to take that step."

"Right." Ginny was glad he didn't take it the wrong way — she hadn't even meant it *like that*, not really, but Fred had made sure when she started seeing Michael to explain that there were always risks even if you thought you were doing something in a way that wouldn't lead to pregnancy, and it was better to be safe than sorry. So even though she and Michael had never actually had sex, she was in the habit of taking the potion every month, just in case.

She shifted a little in his lap, and he let out a choked-off gasp as she brushed up against his still-hard length. A pulse of renewed interest sparked within her, surprising her with its force; she hadn't expected to be ready to go again so soon.

She should have, really. It was Neville; she'd never get enough of him.

With all her Gryffindor courage, she kissed him hard, leaving him dazed. "It's my turn, now," she whispered, tracing the line of his jaw with her tongue, sucking a kiss against his throat. "Let me show you what *else* I've been thinking about."

She slid languidly from his lap, body humming with arousal, down onto her knees on the paving stones. Neville's spine went rigid, and she saw his cock twitch in his trousers.

"Are you sure?" he asked, and she grinned, carefully unzipping his fly.

"I want to," she insisted, adjusting his underwear to reveal his cock — while her other hand moved beneath her own skirt, where the aftershocks were turning just the right side of pleasurable. She leaned forward, taking him in her mouth, stroking herself as his hips bucked tightly.

They had a whole week together, Ginny knew; there was no need to rush things. But there was also no reason they couldn't start out strong.

.

Cassius loved the mornings when Ollie didn't have early quidditch practice.

Mostly because his boyfriend woke up early anyway, and the two of them could have slow, lazy sex, bodies still lax and warm from sleep. It was even better on weekends, when Cassius didn't have to go to work either.

Those were the days that felt like a dream, like a fulfilment of every fantasy Cassius had dared let himself have at Hogwarts — him and Oliver, living together and done with school, their time spent fucking and laughing and bickering about whose turn it was to do the dishes, reading together on the sofa, a hundred other little domestic things that Cassius didn't think he'd ever truly get to have. But he did — he owned this flat, and Oliver was here, and even

though it was a secret from his family and almost everyone in his life, it was more than he'd ever hoped for.

Oliver's hand trailed down to his backside, still a little sticky with lube, both of them too sated and lazy to do a Cleaning charm. "Good morning, gorgeous," he drawled, that thick Scottish burr rumbling in his chest. "It's going to be a good day."

"Is it, now?" Cassius asked, rolling over to look up at his partner, raising one dark eyebrow. "What makes you say that?"

"Well it started fabulously," Oliver reasoned in a husky whisper, sea-green eyes darkening. "And I'm in the mood to cook a proper breakfast. Then I thought we could go back to bed."

"Hmm, interesting suggestion," Cassius murmured, tingles running down his spine as Oliver leaned over him, those broad shoulders blocking out the light from the window above them. "I could be persuaded, I suppose." He arched up, biting lightly at one of Ollie's nipples in a way that made the older man gasp; a sound that quickly turned into a moan as Cassius' tongue soothed the sensitive flesh.

"Mm, Cass," Ollie groaned. "Food first. Then more sex."

Cassius gave an exaggerated huff, but lay back against the pillows, letting Oliver sit up properly. "By all means, go start cooking," he insisted lazily. He drew one leg up, setting his foot flat on the mattress, giving Oliver a perfect view as he reached down to stroke his own cock. "I'll be here. Entertaining myself."

"Fucking insatiable," Oliver growled, eyes lighting up as he crowded Cassius against the bed, pinning him down. Cassius smirked in triumph, leaning up to nip his lover's pouting lip.

And then a hand pounded on the door, and both of them froze.

Cassius' arousal died quickly, replaced by overwhelming fear — who the fuck would be knocking for them so early in the morning?

Knocking for *him*, rather. Only a handful of people even knew Oliver lived there.

"*Fuck*," he whispered vehemently, scrambling to his feet, almost knocking Ollie off the bed in the process. "Hide!"

As he summoned some clothes, he looked around the flat, frantically trying to figure out if there was anything that might give them away. Some quidditch pads in the corner — Cassius could claim those were his, his uncle wouldn't know the difference — a book on the coffee table about Puddlemere, a pair of jeans that were definitely too big to be Cassius' on the floor. He kicked them hastily under the bed, pulling on a t-shirt and some trousers, and when he turned around Oliver was under a Disillusionment charm, nowhere to be seen. Cassius hoped he'd moved somewhere out of the way — it was a studio flat, there weren't many places to hide if spells started flinging.

The knock on the door sounded again, and Cassius hurried to answer it.

It wasn't his uncle. "Hi. Cassius Warrington?" He nodded blankly, staring at the purple-haired auror on his doorstep. "Right. I'm Auror Tonks." He tensed, wondering what sort of trouble he'd been accused of. "I'm a friend of Harry's." That made him blink, and he pushed past his panic to really take a look at her — she didn't look like she was expecting a fight.

She looked like she was about to deliver bad news, actually. The same sort of face his brother had worn when he'd told Cassius their parents were dead.

Dread sank like a stone in his gut. "Oh. Do you— do you want to come in?"

The auror nodded, and he stepped back, letting her enter the flat. "Is— is something wrong with Harry?" Fear gripped him tight once more— had the idiot Gryffindor done something foolish? He shouldn't have, not with Draco there to stop him being daft; but even he knew that Potter was a tricky little bastard when he thought there was something he needed to do.

"Oh, no, Harry's fine," Tonks assured quickly, offering a hesitant smile. "I'm here about something else. I— do you want to sit down?"

"I'd rather stand, actually." Cassius folded his arms over his chest, his right hand ready to draw his wand. He had no idea what this was about — it didn't seem like this auror meant trouble, but she could be lying about knowing Harry.

Then again, how would she know to say that, unless she knew the truth?

"It's about your family," Tonks began. Cassius' shoulders tensed. Had he been accused of something? "There was a Death Eater raid on a couple of muggleborn families last night. I... there's no easy way to say this, Mr Warrington. Thaddeus and Corvus Warrington have been arrested as Death Eaters, and Titus Yaxley was killed in the fight."

Cassius stared.

He felt like he was underwater, the auror's words distorted as they echoed around his brain. His uncle and cousin had been arrested. His other cousin was... dead.

"Oh," he said lamely, struggling to find any other words. How was he supposed to react? Should he look sad? Angry? All he felt was... hollow.

"I know this is a bit of a shock, Mr Warrington—"

Cassius snorted. "Hardly," he muttered, bitterness colouring his tone, "I always told them they'd end up in Azkaban one of these days." He'd always said it like a joke, but he'd meant it in his heart, hoped that some day they might get caught and he would be free.

That day had arrived, it seemed.

What the hell did he do now?

"It's expected that both your uncle and cousin will serve life in Azkaban for their crimes," Auror Tonks explained, her words even and professional, though her grey eyes were

sympathetic. Cassius remembered her, now — she was the daughter of the disowned Black sister. Recently re-instated, if he recalled correctly.

She probably was a friend of Harry's then.

"Do I need to do anything? Testify, or... claim the body?" His voice cracked, just a little. Tonks shook her head.

"No; Mr Yaxley's father is being notified as we speak, and we expect him to deal with those affairs. And... testimony isn't needed, not after what they were caught doing." There was a look of disgust in the auror's eyes, and Cassius grimaced. He didn't want to know. "I'm just here to inform you; you're Lord Warrington's heir, according to our records... Minister Scrimgeour wants a quick trial — I'm afraid there won't be time for you to see your uncle or cousin before they're sentenced and transferred. It'll all be done by Monday." Her gaze grew pointed. "So if there's any family business you need to attend to, once that happens..."

She trailed off, and Cassius' chest tightened.

Family business. Heir.

As soon as his uncle was sentenced, he could become Lord Warrington.

"I— thank you, Auror Tonks, for letting me know." He cleared his throat, trying to regain some kind of composure, even as the gathering swell of emotion inside him clawed its way up his chest. "I don't want to see them. Or give them a message. Or— or anything." He could tell them to rot in hell, but that was hardly polite to pass through a member of law enforcement.

"Good to know." Auror Tonks nodded decisively. "I'll leave you to your weekend, then, Mr Warrington. I'm sorry for disturbing you." She headed for the door, and paused on the threshold, concern colouring her gaze. "I— you should contact someone. If you can. And stay safe." She frowned slightly. "You-Know-Who won't like losing that kind of power. Be careful. You know where you can go, if you need help?"

Cassius gave a jerky nod. "Harry has it covered." He didn't care if he was giving away too much — this auror was practically Harry's cousin, and she certainly didn't seem surprised to hear it.

"Good." She nodded again. "I'll see myself out."

She did, and as soon as the door shut behind her, there was a flicker of magic and Oliver appeared at Cassius' side, his face wary. "Cass, love?" he broached tentatively, one hand coming to rest on Cassius' back. "Are you... okay?"

Cassius sucked in a deep breath. And then another. And another. "I—" He shook his head, and suddenly he was laughing. Laughing and crying all at once, and then he was swept up in Oliver's wonderful, muscular arms, cradled against his big chest, and Cassius wept.

He wasn't sure why. He wasn't sad about Titus' death, or the fates of his uncle and Corvus. They deserved everything they got and more, as far as he was concerned. They weren't tears of sadness — they were tears of relief.

As soon as they were sentenced, that would be it. All political standing, all titles and boons, everything would be stripped away, including Uncle Thaddeus' position as Lord Warrington. Cassius could walk into the Wizengamot and claim his rightful seat, and *no one* would be able to stop him. The Dark Lord could come after him, could try and get him to accept the Mark, but Cassius no longer had to risk being disinherited — there was only his brother and his Uncle Atticus left, and neither of them had the Warrington family magic in them; there was nothing they could do. He might have to run, yes — he had not technically pledged to the Dark Lord, but he had been to enough meetings that he wouldn't be allowed to just *leave* — but Harry had offered sanctuary, and even if he ran he would still have access to his family magics and vaults.

He was free.

"I've got you, love," Oliver murmured, shuffling them over to the bed, still rumpled from their earlier activities — it felt like a lifetime ago, now. "Let it out, there you go. I've got you. You're alright. They can't hurt you any more, my love. Not now."

The Scotsman's words were a balm to Cassius' soul, his heart swelling with love. For the first time in his life, Cassius could look ahead, could imagine a future that didn't make him want to slit his own wrists in despair. A future where he and Oliver could stay together, could go public, could be *happy*.

"Marry me," he rasped, red-rimmed eyes meeting bewildered green. "Marry me, Oliver Wood."

A heartbeat, then a grin crept across Ollie's face, blinding in its intensity. Merlin, Cassius wanted to see him smile like that *forever*. "You're on, Warrington," the Gryffindor agreed, knocking him flat to the mattress in a bear hug. "Yes, I'll fucking marry you. I've only been asking for months!"

Cassius laughed, heart soaring. "But you never gave me a ring," he teased, and Oliver narrowed his gaze.

"Neither have you."

"Give me a second." Cassius unholstered his wand, and summoned the little box from where he'd hidden it far under the bed. It zoomed into his hand, and Cassius flicked it open, revealing the gold Celtic knot band nestled on a little velvet cushion. Oliver's jaw dropped.

"Oh, you crafty wee bastard," he breathed, and Cassius laughed as he slipped the ring onto Oliver's finger with trembling hands. Oliver kissed him hard, smiling against Cassius' mouth. "I love you."

Cassius' chest hurt from the force of his joy, his love for the man in front of him, and he kissed him again, fingers tingling from how fucking *happy* he was right at that moment.

Oliver was right. It was going to be an *excellent* day.

.-.-.-

Her shoulders slumped the moment she stepped through the floo, her fingers going to the buttons at the collar of her robe. The fire whooshed behind her as Kingsley stepped out, his dark eyes knowing. “Come here,” he urged, opening his arms. Tonks sighed, tucking herself against his chest, burying her face in his grey auror robe. “Proudfoot is a prick.”

“I hate him *so much*,” she agreed in frustration, arms winding around Kingsley’s hips. “I can’t believe Scrimgeour gave the auror office to *him*.”

The job should have been Kingsley’s, and they all knew it. Proudfoot might not be Marked but he was a Death Eater in every other aspect, and it amazed and horrified her that Scrimgeour had named him the new Head Auror. Could the man not see the kind of person he was promoting?

She knew the answer to that — no, he couldn’t, because Scrimgeour and Proudfoot had been friends for years, and as long as Proudfoot kept his blood supremacist bullshit just on the right side of socially acceptable, and continued to *bring in results*, Scrimgeour would forgive just about anything else.

“I just hate the way he talks to me! Condescending twat.” She scowled, looking up into Kingsley’s sympathetic gaze. “I swear, if he calls me *Miss Tonks* one more time, I’m cursing his dick off. I’m an auror, damn it!” She sighed, the fight draining from her, just replaced with the ever-familiar exhaustion of fighting a fight she knew she wouldn’t win. “Half the reason I joined the aurors was so people would stop calling me ‘Miss’.” Auror was a gender-neutral title, and she had fucking *earned* it, and she hated how dismissive Proudfoot was but more than that she hated how that word made her skin *crawl* like there were ants in her veins.

“Do you need to change?” Kingsley asked, but Tonks shook her head. More than once, she’d come home from work and immediately taken masculine form like her female body was going to burst into flames if she didn’t shed it soon. But it wasn’t one of those days. She was fine how she was — it was the way other people perceived her that made her mad, but she knew that would take a damned long time to change.

Still, she undid the buttons of her robe and stripped it off, letting it drop to the floor. Then she reached behind her back, underneath her shirt, and unhooked her bra, letting out a sigh of relief as she wriggled her way out of the hellish contraption. Kingsley shed his own robe much more gracefully, picking up hers and sending them both into the bedroom with a flick of his wand. “Are you hungry?”

“Not yet.” She was too angry to be hungry, too ready to claw off her own skin. Kingsley seemed to recognise the look in her eyes, and with another spell the record player was on, the Weird Sisters filling their flat; her favourite song.

“Dance it out,” he told her, smiling fondly. “I’m going to make sandwiches.”

He disappeared into the kitchen, and Tonks turned the volume up, belting out the lyrics as she danced around the living room, waving her arms and shaking her hips. Her hair cycled through a dozen colours as she purged the negative emotions, kicking off the tight auror-regulation trousers and ripping open the front of her button-up. She kept dancing through the first song, and the second, and by the third she felt somewhat human again. When she spun around at the end of it, she saw Kingsley leaning in the doorway, watching her with two plates in his hands and so much love in his eyes it hit like a punch to the gut. “You’re beautiful,” he told her, as she stood there in her pants and socks and an open shirt, her skin flushed and hair in disarray from her dancing. There was total honesty in his voice — and Tonks knew that he’d say that no matter what shape she morphed her body into. “Feel better?”

He approached, offering one of the plates with a sandwich on it, and she took it gratefully. “Much. Thanks.” A wave of her hand had the volume of the record turned down to a much more reasonable level. They collapsed together on the sofa, Kingsley’s feet propped up on the coffee table while Tonks tucked her legs underneath her. He was still in his full uniform minus the robe; the only concession to comfort he’d made was undoing the top button of his shirt, and rolling his sleeves to his elbows. Tonks trailed her fingers over the corded muscle of his forearm, tracing the line of the tattoo half-hidden against his dark skin.

The sandwich was delicious, and once her belly was full Tonks could finally let go of that last little bit of anger simmering inside her. “At least we’ll only have to deal with Proudfoot for a year or so.”

Kingsley raised an amused eyebrow. “So convinced he’ll be too incompetent to keep the position?”

“Convinced Harry won’t let Scrimgeour stay Minister that long,” she corrected. “Soon as he offs You-Know-Who, we’ll get someone competent instead. Someone who understands that the Head Auror position has had your name on it for years.”

His lips twitched. “If I become Head Auror, our relationship will be even more against the rules than it is now,” he pointed out, and Tonks just smirked.

“Rules, schmules,” she said, waving a hand dismissively.

“That’s not the correct attitude for an officer of the law, Auror Tonks,” he said, his voice serious even when his eyes were laughing, though Tonks doubted many people would notice it. They always thought he was so severe, so stern; they couldn’t see his wicked sense of humour. It just made it all the more precious, to Tonks.

“The auror department knew what I was like when they hired me,” she teased, “and if you gave a fuck about *those* rules you’d never have agreed to go on a date with me.”

“You’re surprisingly persuasive,” he remarked, and she laughed.

“Persistent, more like.” She’d spent at least eight months making a fool of herself trying to make him laugh before she’d gathered the courage to ask him out.

“Some rules are worth breaking,” he declared, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. Happiness fizzed in her belly, and she leaned against him, setting aside her empty plate. Her shirt opened wider, and Tonks didn’t miss the way Kingsley’s eyes trailed over her pale stomach, up the line of her sternum.

“If Proudfoot ends up with frogspawn in his desk drawers tomorrow, you’ll give me an alibi, right?” she asked, fluttering her eyelashes hopefully. He chuckled, the low baritone rumble sending electricity down Tonks’ spine.

“You’re good enough not to need an alibi,” he told her. “But if he comes after you, I’ll back you up.” He slung an arm around her, hand resting at the bottom of her ribs. “You’re not the only one who hates him, after all.”

That was true; the only aurors who *didn’t* hate Proudfoot were the ones who were also Death Eaters. “Maybe the twins will give me something good to get him with,” she mused, mentally going over what she knew of the shop’s stock. There was bound to be something Proudfoot wouldn’t immediately pin on her. Something with a time delay... Fred and George wouldn’t disappoint.

“You can go over and see them on Tuesday. Just don’t spend the whole day.” Kingsley’s eyes darkened, and Tonks’ skin prickled. “It’s rare we both have the same day off. We should make the most of it.”

Arousal chased through her veins, but on top of that was a sliver of guilt. “I... I promised Harry I’d go over to the house on Tuesday, actually. He wants to test his skills against an auror, see how he does.”

The playful light in Kingsley’s eyes dimmed, and the guilt grew bigger. “That’ll be good for him,” the senior auror remarked. “Though after watching the lad at the Ministry I’d say you better watch your step.”

Tonks snorted; that was an understatement. Watching Harry duel Lucius Malfoy had been a real eye-opener. “I keep telling him I’m not the auror he needs to be testing himself against,” she agreed. Then she bit her lip, anxiety curling tight. “I... I want to bring you, to the house,” she confessed, like it was some sort of deep, dark secret. “I just... the way that Mum talks about it, you have to understand... it’s the family summer home.” It sounded silly, put like that. But it was one of the two Black properties that wasn’t even on the Gringotts property register; as far as the world was concerned, it didn’t exist. Only those who were of the Black family, or as good as, were invited there. Sirius was pushing it a little having Remus there, but those two were brothers in everything but blood.

He was *certainly* pushing it moving Charlie in, but she knew her best friend; he’d been waiting half his life for someone to get domestic with, and from what Remus had told her Sirius was exactly the same, for all his teenage tom-calling around. Now they’d found each other, she was certain there would be wedding bells somewhere down the line.

That was what it meant, to invite someone to the family summer home. It was an agreement that they were welcome in the Black family — and an expectation that they would *always* be welcome in the Black family, would never betray those secrets.

"I know, Tonks," Kingsley assured her; he didn't seem remotely offended, and somehow that was *worse*, like he didn't expect her to want him there.

"No, it's not that," she said, though he hadn't even said anything, really. She groaned quietly as she tried to figure out how to articulate herself properly — but the only way to really do that was to just throw her entire heart on the line.

She looked up at Kingsley's patient, gorgeous face, and suddenly it seemed daft to even *think* about being worried. He had never batted an eyelash at anything else she'd emotionally-vomited at him in their relationship. Why would this be any different?

"Letting you come to the summer home, it's... even *I* didn't know about it until last Christmas — Mum didn't tell me because even after she was disowned from the Black family, it was still a Black family secret. She didn't consider her own *child* part of the Black family enough to tell me. It's the most secure place we have in the entire world, precisely because the only people who know how to find it are people who would rather die than give up its location — than betray the Black family like that. Inviting anyone who isn't blood... it's practically declaring intent to marry, in the eyes of the rest of my family. It's a big deal. And I don't want to put that kind of pressure on you just because my family is ancient and weird and secretive."

It all blurted out in one rushed mess, but she could see Kingsley taking in every word, thinking it over with that ever-present patience, that eternal steadiness that Tonks loved so much. Her heart pounded furiously in her chest as she waited for some kind of a response. Eventually, he took her hand, bringing it up to his lips. "That kind of commitment doesn't scare me, Tonks."

She stilled. "I— really?"

His deep brown eyes met hers, unflinching. "Amelia has promised me her job heading the DMLE, if she makes Minister after the war," he said, and she blinked, perplexed — what did that have to do with anything? "If I take that job, I'll no longer be your superior; not in any chain-of-command way that matters." His lips curved in a tiny, bashful smile. "I had hoped, once it was no longer putting either of our jobs at risk... well, let's just say that declaring intent to marry is not a problem for me. Not with you."

"Oh." Tonks was wide-eyed, turning to face him properly. She felt ridiculous, sat there in her shirt and pants while he was fully dressed, and he'd basically just *proposed*. "But— but I'm a mess," she blurted. "I'm clumsy and I talk too much and I have too many opinions about muggle music and I can't even stick to one bloody gender and you're—" He was Lord Kingsley Shacklebolt, accomplished and proud and capable in every situation he faced; never stuttering, never tripping over his own feet, never hasty or quick-tempered or anything less than incredible; the kind of man who deserved a wife just as capable and calm and able to be an actual *wife*, not like Tonks.

"I'm...?" Kingsley raised an eyebrow expectantly, kissing her hand again. "If the end of that sentence is anything other than 'completely in love with you', it's irrelevant. Your clumsiness is endearing, and I love listening to you talk because I spend far too much in my own head, and yes you might have questionable muggle music taste but my own is equally suspect. And

if I cared for even one second about gender I'd be dating someone else." He frowned all of a sudden, looking concerned. "Have I ever made you feel like your gender is a problem for me?"

"What? No, I—" Tonks stopped herself, because that was the thing, the thing she'd entirely missed — she was so used to her partners assuming she would *grow out of it* and *settle down* one way or the other that she'd just *expected* Kingsley felt the same, deep down, just like everyone else in the world. Except he didn't, he hadn't, not ever. From the very first time she'd admitted to him that on some days she felt like being female was like drowning, that she hated the way the rest of the world looked at her, he had been supportive. He had told her to be however she felt comfortable, he had switched pronouns when she asked without a second of hesitation, he had touched her male body with the same level of care and reverence and passion that he touched her female body with, and her body on all the days in-between when she wasn't sure what she wanted to be called but she knew what felt *wrong*, what made her skin itch and her brain feel like someone was drilling a hole in her skull with every continued use of *Miss* and *Nymphadora* and *woman*.

And Kingsley was sat there, now, waiting as patiently as always for her to figure out something that had been right in front of her face the whole bloody time. He didn't even have the grace to look smug about it.

"You really just get it, don't you?" she breathed in wonder, and he shrugged.

"As much as I can, I hope, when I'm not in your head myself." That was fair; half the time, Tonks wasn't even sure she properly 'got it', not in a way that seemed to make sense to the rest of the world. "And if you ever decide you're comfortable presenting as anything other than female outside of your safe spaces, I'll be right with you." He smirked, eyes lighting up. "Especially if I'm in a position to fire pricks like Proudfoot for the way they treat you."

Tonks had never thought she'd be that brave, make those kinds of waves, but with Kingsley at her side she might just manage it.

"So... do you want to come to the summer house with me on Tuesday?" she asked hopefully, and Kingsley cracked a wide, genuine smile, brighter than probably anyone but Tonks had ever seen.

"I would love to," he confirmed, and the weight of their words seemed so much *more*, now they both knew for sure what it truly meant. "I would also," he continued, dropping his voice, brown eyes hot as they met Tonks', "very much love to take you into our bedroom, right now, and have you fuck me." He spoke so plainly, as always, and arousal pulsed through Tonks just at that low, sexy rumble. "Your shirt has been open for the last ten minutes and I've been *very* good in not touching you but I only have so much restraint left in me."

Tonks looked down, and sure enough, her unbuttoned shirt was completely wide, her breasts bared and her nipples tight and perked with lust. Kingsley's hand came up, cupping one of them, and Tonks groaned softly into the touch. "Bedroom," she agreed. He stood, carrying her with him, and there was a question in his eyes as he did because some days that just made her feel so *dainty* and she hated it but right now all she cared about was getting Kingsley on a bed and underneath her; he could pick her up all he wanted, with those strong auror arms of

his, but soon she was going to be the one pinning him down and making him scream, unravelling him from the inside out, and he would love every second of it. So she wrapped her legs around his waist, making an impatient noise, all the while wondering if Harry would hurry the fuck up a bit and kill a Dark Lord so she could get her Happily Ever After with this man. And a smaller part of her wondered how he could even be *real*, so perfect for her, so endlessly fucking *incredible*—

Then he kicked the bedroom door open, and Tonks had much more important things on her mind than the war.

.

Two blonde girls walked through the woods; one with her hands in her skirt pockets and an indulgent smile on her face as she watched the second, who drifted between the trees like her feet barely even touched the ground.

“Finding anything good, honey?” Daphne asked, watching Luna peer up into the branches of a tall oak tree. Luna hummed, then huffed, the tiniest pout of frustration on her face. Daphne resisted the urge to kiss it away.

“There’s too many wrackspurts,” Luna declared in annoyance, shaking her head, making her dangling silver earrings jingle. “Even if I could find anything here, I wouldn’t see it through this *cloud*.”

Daphne had been with Luna long enough now to understand most of the things she said; at least when it came to her various creatures. Wrackspurts were the annoying little buggers that clouded her Sight, filling her brain with useless buzzing when the path ahead was unclear. It wasn’t a surprise — the current state of the wizarding world could definitely be described as *path unclear* — but she hated when Luna had that look on her face.

“How can I make them go away?”

Luna gave her a bright smile that made Daphne’s heart flutter, and danced closer, kissing her on the cheek. “Things will clear up soon,” she assured. “It’s just difficult, right now. But maybe the blibbering humdingers will make it easier. Come on.”

That was a new one to Daphne, but she didn’t protest when Luna grabbed her by the hand and pulled her along, leading her into a small clearing. Daphne had been staying with Luna and her father for four days now, and most of that time had been spent in the woods behind the house. Luna always said her head was clearer when she could feel nature’s magic.

The clearing they stopped in was pretty; just a circle of soft grass, about fifteen feet across, but even Daphne could feel the buzz of natural magic as soon as she stepped in. Perhaps it had once been a fairy circle, or it was a ley line crossing. She wouldn’t put it past Luna to find such things.

Luna let go of her hand and strode forward happily, lifting her dress over her head without a second of hesitation and tossing it aside, dropping down to lie on the grass in nothing more than a pair of pale yellow knickers printed with tiny smiling suns. Daphne’s eyes drank in the

sight eagerly, though it wasn't too unusual these days, either; Luna often went skyclad in the woods, or close to it, wanting that better connection to nature. Daphne wasn't going to argue — Luna knew natural magic far better than she did.

Regardless, she would never complain about her girlfriend getting naked in front of her.

"May I sit with you?" she asked, waiting at the edge of the grass circle. Luna blinked up at her, nodding.

"Please do. The humdingers won't harm you — they're just helping me find out what the wrackspurts are trying to hide."

Daphne approached, settling down cross-legged at Luna's side. "May I touch you?"

Luna reached out, taking one hand and lacing their fingers together. Daphne took that as silent permission, and let her other hand trace runes on Luna's skin; runes of protection, of clarity, of insight. Luna purred, arching her back like a cat in a patch of sunlight. "Oh, that feels nice."

Daphne smiled, brushing Luna's hair gently off her shoulders, the near-silver strands fanning out over the lush green grass. "This is a nice little clearing," she said quietly, gentle fingers running over Luna's brow and nose. The Ravenclaw's chest rose and fell steadily with her breath, her eyes falling shut.

"It's my favourite place in the whole forest," Luna told her. "But I can't come here too often, or the magic will change."

"Then I'm honoured you're sharing it with me," Daphne murmured. Luna cracked one eye open, affection dancing in her gaze.

"Of course, silly. My favourite person belongs in my favourite place."

Daphne couldn't help but lean down to kiss her, then; just a chaste peck, for the words she couldn't articulate. She didn't want to distract Luna from her thoughts, after all; not if she was trying to See something important.

She could feel the magic swirling around them both, pulsing gently in time with Luna's breath. Daphne almost forgot to breathe herself, so awed by the whole thing. Luna was... truly unlike any other person she'd ever met. Daphne still didn't know what had possessed her to say yes when the strange blonde asked her to Hogsmeade for Valentine's Day, but she hadn't regretted the decision — Luna might be odd, but she had a way of viewing the world that was so very jarring to Daphne's persistent cynicism, and Daphne liked that about her. Luna never expected her to change; she just offered up her own thoughts and let Daphne figure out the rest.

Luna made Daphne a better person. And she kissed like she was imparting the very secrets of the universe to Daphne's eager lips; so many people assumed that her child-like optimism made her childish in other ways, too, but Daphne could attest to that being entirely untrue. Luna felt all her emotions strongly — including passion.

Passion that nudged at Daphne now, stirring inside her, watching her girlfriend lie there on the grass like some kind of fae temptation. Daphne's hand, still drifting over Luna's skin, swooped down to stroke across her stomach. Her hand holding Daphne's tightened ever so slightly, and Daphne smirked, watching two rosebud pink nipples swell at her touch. Luna's hips canted ever so slightly, and she blinked her eyes open. "I don't think the wrackspurts are going to let me see what they're hiding," she sighed. "There are too many possibilities right now." A brief, worried frown flickered across her lips. "I hope it's not to do with Harry."

If it was regarding the uncertainty of the future, it probably was at least somewhat to do with Harry Potter. Everything else was.

"They'll show you if there's something you can warn him about," Daphne assured confidently. "Best not to worry about it too much."

"I won't." Luna smiled, letting go of Daphne's hand and lifting her arms above her head, stretching out languidly, pushing up against Daphne's other hand still on her stomach. Daphne swallowed tightly. "The magic here is so *warm*, do you feel it? It tickles my skin." The Ravenclaw looked up at Daphne, a flirtatious tilt to her chin. "You should feel it on your skin properly, too."

Daphne laughed softly, hand sliding up to cup Luna's breast, flicking her fingers over the nipple. "Are you giving up on Seeing, for now, then?" she asked, like she didn't already know the answer. "Because you know what'll happen if we're both naked."

Luna smiled impishly. "There's only one thing I'm interested in seeing right now," she purred, squirming in the soft grass, the flush spreading down her chest all the way to her stomach. Merlin, she was beautiful.

Daphne could look at her like this for hours — but touching was far better. She pulled her blouse over her head, feeling Luna's gaze on her, feeling the magic dance across her skin as clearly as if her girlfriend was touching her. The sensation made her gasp, and Luna giggled. "I told you," she sing-songed, as Daphne unclasped her bra, gooseflesh prickling across her arms. The Slytherin smirked, leaving her skirt on and turning her attention back to her entirely too-smug girlfriend, peeling the sunshine-print knickers down her hips, exposing the thatch of soft, pale blonde hair. "Oh, that's not fair."

Daphne settled in between Luna's knees, skirt rucked up around her, teasing fingers sliding into Luna's wet heat. "Slytherins don't play fair, honey," she drawled, crooking her fingers and making Luna gasp. As she did, the magic around them flared, and both girls jerked at the sensation.

Luna's favourite place in the forest might not have helped with her Sight, but it wouldn't be a wasted trip.

.-.-.-.

They had finally chased out their last customers, and Blaise flipped the sign on the door to show that Weasley's Wizard Wheezes was closed for the night. As he did, hands rested on his

hips, and lips pressed to his neck. “Come on, we’re all locked up down here. Angie’s gone to get dinner from the little place down the street.”

Blaise leaned back against George, humming quietly. “Sounds good.” He let the redhead nudge him towards the back room, where the stairs up to the flat were hidden. He took one last look around the quiet shop, smiling to himself; it always looked a little strange, empty like this, the displays deactivated. The whole shop sleeping, ready to burst to life in the morning once more.

They passed Fred at the till, sorting the ledgers and counting up, and the twins had an entire conversation with just looks and eyebrows before George carried on upstairs, Blaise close behind.

The flat wasn’t as chaotic as one might expect from Fred and George Weasley; with the shop downstairs and the workshop in the attic, they had plenty of other avenues for their chaos. The flat was a prank-free zone, as much as it could be with those two red-headed devils. Blaise went over to pour water for both of them, while George flopped onto the sofa. “Mm, thanks, babe,” the redhead murmured, accepting the drink and shuffling over so Blaise could get comfortable beside him. George wrapped an arm around him, pulling him close. “Do you have to leave tomorrow?”

Blaise had been living with the twins for three whole weeks now, and it had been wonderful, but he had to spend at least a little time with his mother. “Sadly, I do,” he sighed, kissing George’s freckled cheek. “But I’ll come back for Harry’s birthday. And I’m taking you back to Italy when I do.” They had worked it all out; Fred and Angelina would handle the shop for four days while George came to Blaise’s house in Italy, met his mother and spent some time with him there. Blaise was very much looking forward to it, even if George’s fair skin would need a hundred Sunblock charms a day when they went to the beach.

And at Blaise’s house, there was enough privacy that they didn’t have to worry about forgetting their Silencing charms, or being walked in on at inopportune moments. Not like they did with all four of them squeezed into the two-bed flat above the shop.

The door opened, and Fred and Angelina walked in, Angelina holding a brown paper bag that smelled deliciously of curry. “Fortescue’s is closed up,” she reported, frowning slightly. “Windows have been boarded up and everything. Looks like he’s gone for the foreseeable.”

Blaise and George shared an uneasy look; it wasn’t the first shop in Diagon Alley to abandon ship, since the attack on the Ministry. “That’ll be a blow,” George murmured. “Plenty of people thought old Fortescue could weather anything.”

“The more shops that close, the more customers we’ll have to entertain ourselves,” Fred said with false bravado — Blaise could see the worry in his eyes.

He’d gotten better at reading his boyfriend’s twin, in the last three weeks. At school, it had been so hard to get time with George he had so very rarely spent time with the pair of them together, unless it was in a group situation, and then they were too busy being the Infamous Weasley Twins for Blaise to properly get to know Fred. Now, after living together, he’d seen how they were without an audience, and had plenty of conversations with just Fred while

George was elsewhere. Angelina, too; he had hardly said two sentences to her before this summer.

Blaise hoped he passed muster, by now. George wouldn't keep him around for long if he didn't.

Angelina handed him a bowl of fragrant lamb curry and rice, and he grinned in thanks, sitting up a little so both he and George could have their bowls on their laps without making a mess. Fred and Angelina claimed the other sofa; the common positions the four of them found themselves in of an evening, after a long day of running the shop.

As they ate, the twins chatted about their products; what they needed to make more of, what they were considering introducing. Blaise mostly listened, quietly in awe of the things that came out of their brains. At one point, he glanced over to Angelina, raising an eyebrow pointedly. She made a face of agreement, and shook her head fondly.

"Oh, Merlin, they've got their own secret language, now, too!" Fred exclaimed, pointing at the pair of them and grinning. Angelina stuck her tongue out.

"It comes from putting up with you two," she teased.

"But you both do it so well," George said, winking at her and bumping his knee against Blaise's. "A little too well, honestly; not sure how I'm going to cope without you," he added to Blaise, pouting for extra effect.

"I'm sure you'll manage, tesoro," Blaise drawled, amused. "You will have to learn; I have two more years of school left."

"Ugh don't remind me," George groaned. "Sure I can't convince you to leave? It worked out pretty well for us."

"It is not me you have to convince, but my mother," Blaise replied, watching as a glimmer of fear flickered in those brown eyes. "Besides, not all of us can be genius inventors."

George preened at the compliment. "You can be a genius something else, though," he suggested. "Or just let me shower you with my joke shop riches so you'll never have to work a day."

Blaise laughed, shaking his head. "Caro, I have my own riches; I'll never have to work a day regardless."

"Exactly! All the more reason to ditch school." George grinned, and Blaise kissed him.

"I would be far too bored, and we both know it."

"I'd keep you plenty occupied," George drawled.

"Oi, boundaries," Fred protested with a glare. "Remember the rules."

With both couples living in the same space, the twins had developed rules about where and when innuendo was acceptable. Of course, the rules went largely ignored on both sides, but that didn't stop them sniping at each other about it.

"It's tempting, but I'm afraid I'll have to pass," Blaise mock-sighed. "You'll just have to wait until I'm graduated."

"That sounds terrible," George sighed. "Merlin only knows how Ollie and Cass handled it."

"I'm sure you and Oliver can commiserate over it all you like," Angelina placated. "Though be prepared for him to get pissy about how at least your relationship is public."

Blaise winced; from what he understood, it was a bit of a sore subject for the ex-Gryffindor keeper. Not that he blamed Cassius for it — it was just a difficult situation all around. Knowing Cassius' family, Blaise couldn't blame them for keeping things under wraps.

"I'll see you every Hogsmeade weekend," Blaise reminded, running a hand through George's fiery hair. "And we'll work out holidays." They hadn't exactly figured out things such as Yule, because George's mother currently refused to acknowledge *any* of the relationships her children were in, thanks to her grudge against Sirius Black. But it was a while away, so perhaps things would change.

"Maybe, but you've spoiled me after having you here for three whole weeks."

Blaise had to admit that he too wasn't looking forward to it — going back to Italy without George, or going back to Hogwarts. But they were necessary. Their relationship would survive the separation.

There was a sudden thud from upstairs, and the twins shared a slightly alarmed look. "We're... gonna go check on that," Fred declared, jumping up from the sofa and running to the stairs. George kissed Blaise quickly and followed after his twin, the pair of them disappearing into the workshop. After a beat of silence, Angelina giggled.

"Those two," she sighed in fond exasperation. Then she sobered. "I'm worried about them, Blaise. Keeping the shop open, some of the things they're making... they're the biggest target in this bloody alley."

"I know," he murmured, running a hand over his hair. "But would we love them if they were any less?" That bold, unbearably attractive *Gryffindor* quality of doing exactly what they wanted and not giving a fuck what might come of it. That belief that they could do anything with enough nerve and determination, and no one could stand in their way. Not even the Dark Lord themselves. "Bill's done the wards, they're as safe as can be," he reminded; having a Gringotts curse-breaker for a brother certainly had its perks.

"I know, but I still worry." She twirled one of her braids around her fingers.

"I'd worry more about what they're getting up to in that workshop than what's going on in the rest of the alley," Blaise said dryly, as another quiet explosion noise sounded. Angelina snorted.

"You're not wrong there," she agreed. "That sort of mess, I can handle. I've been dealing with *that* since we were first years."

Part of Blaise was a little jealous, that she'd known the twins for so long, shared so many experiences with them through their Hogwarts years while Blaise had really only just discovered how wonderful George Weasley was in the last few months of his time at school. But mostly he was glad, knowing the twins wouldn't be entirely at their own devices while he was gone; they had a tendency to get caught up in their inventions and forget things like sleep, and food.

"You'll just have to look after both our troublemakers while I'm gone," he mused.

"And on that note, I'm breaking out the wine," she said with a laugh, summoning a bottle of red and two glasses. "But I suppose it's nothing I haven't done before. Even if George will be unbearable when he starts pining for you," she teased. "The two of us have to stick together, after all." She poured, and Blaise clinked his glass against hers.

"Cheers to that." He and Angelina had developed a sort of kinship over the last few weeks, bonding over their shared love of those redheaded menaces. "At least I should be able to write this year. And like I said, there will be Hogsmeade weekends." He knew the twins had ways of sneaking in and out of the school from Hogsmeade; they would work it out.

"You'll be gone twenty minutes and he'll start pining," Angelina told him with a smirk. "Hell, when you went to see Daphne the other week he acted like he was going to waste away without you."

Blaise shook his head in despair, even as the smile threatened to take over; he'd only gone to have lunch with Daphne and Luna, for two hours at the most. "Then I'm sorry in advance, and I'll make it up to you."

Angelina's face lit up deviously. "Tell you what," she declared. "When things are quieter, we'll get Lee and Alicia to watch the shop for a week, you can take us all to Italy." She grinned at him. "Or we can leave the twins to the shop and go anyway."

Blaise laughed. "It's a deal."

"What are you two plotting down here?" It was George, returning from the workshop with Fred at his heel, both of them surprisingly unscathed.

"We're running away to Italy together without you, tesoro," Blaise told him mock-apologetically. George gave a theatrical gasp, falling over the back of the sofa and into Blaise's lap.

"You heartbreakers," he declared mutinously, kissing Blaise. He hummed, then pulled back, and stole the glass of wine from the Slytherin's hand. "Good wine, that."

Blaise rolled his eyes, reclaiming his wine but letting George stay sprawled over his legs and chest, stroking his hair with his free hand as they settled in for the evening.

Going back to school without George would be hard, but it wouldn't last forever. And for someone usually quite cautious, Blaise was surprised to find that there was not a single ounce of doubt in his mind that the pair of them would still be together by that time, as long as they were both alive.

If they could survive Umbridge together, and survive a war together, he was certain they could survive anything else life may throw at them.

Chapter 81

The morning *Prophet* often made the occupants of Seren Du fill with rage, but this one managed to have Sirius swearing before a single page had been opened.

The front page story covered how a transport of prisoners to Azkaban had been ‘attacked’ and the prisoners — all convicted Death Eaters — had broken free. *Miraculously*, both aurors involved were entirely unharmed.

“Scrimgeour is going to be the death of all of us, that incompetent fool,” Snape muttered, glaring daggers at the newspaper. Harry reached for it, wanting to read just how badly the Ministry had fucked up this time. Their new Minister was much more focused on looking like he was doing something externally than dealing with the many problems within the Ministry itself, so things like this would only keep happening.

“At least they’ve finally admitted they don’t have control over the dementors,” Harry pointed out, gesturing to a section on the third page that was a response to all the calls for harsher punishments, for all the confirmed Death Eaters to be Kissed immediately. It was only a tiny admission, hidden in a much larger paragraph about how the Kiss was too drastic — citing Sirius as an example of how that could go poorly, as if he’d even had a trial the first time round. But there it was; *Azkaban prison no longer serves as the home for the dementors, and their use in guarding prisoners has ceased to be Ministry protocol*. Like they’d just decided against it, rather than had all the dementors bugger off to join Voldemort.

“Well they’ve had to, after all the attacks further north,” Remus reasoned. “They’d rather admit they’ve lost the dementors than pretend they haven’t and take responsibility for that whole village that got Kissed.”

Harry shuddered at the reminder; that had been a truly awful attack to read about.

Not for the first time, Harry wondered if there would be anything left of wizarding Britain by the time he turned seventeen. So much had happened already in the time Voldemort had gone public... what if he couldn’t afford to wait.

“I know what you’re thinking, and stop it,” Draco muttered, bumping his knee against Harry’s. “You’re not responsible for any of this.”

“But I know how to stop him—“

“So does Dumbledore, and he sure as hell isn’t hurrying up with it. Besides, there’s still potentially three more horcruxes we don’t know about.” Draco kissed him, giving him a sharp look. “Stop beating yourself up about this.”

Harry huffed. “Stop being right all the time.”

A cocky smirk crossed Draco’s lips. “Shan’t,” he replied, turning back to his breakfast, both of them ignoring the amused looks on the adults’ faces.

They were due to practice apparating again with Sirius, who thankfully seemed in much better spirits than the day before. So, after breakfast, the three of them went out into their usual spot in the woods; both Harry and Draco had managed to apparate at least once, with the circles so close together, and today Sirius was going to move them a little further apart. Harry just hoped his godfather was right about it getting easier after the first time.

..

By lunch time, they had succeeded in apparating three more times each without anyone getting splinched, and Sirius promised to start them on destinations they couldn't see next time they practiced. So it was on a high that Harry returned to the house, and Remus floated a letter his way when he walked into the kitchen. "This came for you, about half an hour ago."

Harry frowned, tearing the envelope open. "It's from Cassius."

Draco appeared at his shoulder with concern, leaning in to read the letter as well.

Dear Harry,

I'm sure you've seen the paper. I don't know if your friend Tonks told you, but my uncle and cousin were two of the Death Eaters convicted in the group that escaped. My other cousin died in the attack. I'm the last eligible heir to the Warrington seat.

There's a Wizengamot meeting in a week. I'm going to claim my seat. If I do that, they can't take it away from me, no matter what happens. But I am not nearly as politically powerful as Lady Malfoy, so I fear I cannot do this without bringing quite a high level of wrath down on myself.

That isn't going to stop me, but I may need sanctuary. I'll do my best to convince the Dark Lord I am aligned with his views, though I will continue to avoid the Mark for as long as I can. With any luck, I can toe the line, but I'll be honest I don't see it lasting long.

I just wanted to prepare you — and if you happen to get one of those handy visions of yours in time to tell me to run, a warning would be greatly appreciated.

See you soon, but hopefully not too soon,

Cassius

P.S. Oliver sends his love, and says to hurry up and end the war so he can have the quidditch pitch wedding of his dreams. I asked him, he said yes.

Harry was grinning by the end of the letter, even though the rest of the contents was slightly alarming. "Sirius, Narcissa?" he started, looking up at the pair, "you two are going to be at the Wizengamot meeting next week, right?"

"We were certainly planning on it," Narcissa confirmed. "Is there a reason we shouldn't?"

"No, no — a reason you should, actually. Cassius Warrington is going to take his seat — apparently his uncle and cousin are two of the Azkaban escapees from this morning. So he's

taking his chance while he can, but... if Voldemort comes after him expecting him to be Marked and fall in line, he needs a place to take cover."

The two Wizengamot members shared a grim look. "We'll slip him a portkey once he's confirmed his seat," Sirius assured. "Let him know who his allies are."

"Thank you." With any luck, that would keep both Cassius and Oliver safe. He turned back to Draco, offering a slight smile. "Be my date to their wedding? Whenever it is." Whenever the war ended, by the looks of it.

Draco eyed him over, eyes sparkling. "I suppose I can stand to be seen with you," he agreed, making Sirius snort.

"He doesn't clean up too badly," he defended. "Shame there's little be done with that hair of his, Even Sleakeasy's doesn't work — best thing old Monty ever invented, and it's still not enough to tame the famous Potter mop." He ruffled Harry's hair pointedly, then raised an eyebrow. "A mop that looks to be due a trim, quite honestly."

"Ginny usually does it before school lets out," Harry said, running a hand through the messy locks. "With everything that happened, I forgot to ask her."

"Moony'll cut it," Sirius offered. "He used to do Prongsy's, never turned out too badly."

"One of these days I'll get you to a proper hairdresser," Draco declared imperiously. As he did so, Remus and Snape walked through the door. Remus raised an eyebrow at the blond.

"You do that and they'll weep," he warned. "We never found one brave enough to tackle James'."

"Is it part of the family magic?" Harry asked, slightly astounded that his hair was apparently that historically problematic. Aunt Petunia had always just cut it as short as she dared while still keeping his scar covered, no matter how strange or unkempt it looked.

"We were never really sure if it was magic or a weird genetic quirk," Sirius mused, sitting down to lunch. "Once James tried to see if growing it out would help, but that just made it worse. He broke three hair brushes in a month with that attempt."

"It will be very interesting to see which genetics come out on top," Narcissa remarked, eyeing Harry and Draco in consideration. "Every Malfoy since Henry VIII has been as blonde as a veela."

The boys looked at each other, blushing deeply at the insinuation. "Mother!" Draco protested in embarrassment. Narcissa just laughed, stroking her son's hair.

Harry stared down at his lunch with bright red cheeks — but, when he thought no one else was looking, he glanced up at Draco's pale hair in curiosity.

He was keen to see how those genetics would mix, too. One day.

.-.-.-

Harry was excited for their visitors the next day; Tonks had sent word ahead that she would be bringing Kingsley with her — something that had had Narcissa running straight to visit Andi, even though Tonks specifically said *not* to make a big deal out of it — but both of them had promised to duel Harry and see how he did.

According to Snape, this was not enough reason to slack around and wait for them to show up, but he couldn't be the one to do so without revealing his presence there to the two aurors.

So Harry and Draco were both being put through their paces by Remus when the pair finally turned up to the large room they'd turned into their training room. "Wotcher, Harry!" Tonks greeted, waving. Kingsley was at her side, and raised an eyebrow at the sight of Draco.

"Mr Malfoy, I didn't realise you were part of this, too," he remarked. Draco shrugged, holstering his wand.

"Someone has to keep this idiot out of trouble," he said, and Harry just grinned. "I'm a lot newer to it than Harry, though."

"Maybe the two of us can duel the two of you, later," Harry suggested, not letting Draco put himself down; he was far better than he gave himself credit for.

Tonks lit up at the suggestion. "Oh, that'd be brilliant," she enthused.

"Remus, do you mind...?" Kingsley trailed off, and the werewolf shook his head, smiling.

"No, no, not at all. These two are all yours — I'll be in the library if you need me." He shrugged his cardigan back on. "Have fun, all of you. Remember, no spells you can't reverse." That was mostly said to Harry and Draco, and once Remus had left Kingsley eyed them bemusedly.

"I sense a story behind that warning."

Harry shrugged sheepishly. "We've had a few close calls, over the last couple of years." And maybe just the other week he'd sent off a Bone-Melting curse that would've landed his opponent in St Mungo's if it had been anyone other than Snape.

Still, no permanent harm had been done, and Harry had learned a valuable lesson. He rolled up his sleeves, sending a grin of challenge at the pair of aurors. "Right, then; who's up first?"

.-. .

Duelling with two fully-qualified active service aurors was... difficult. Harry would be the first to admit he hadn't expected Tonks to be much of a challenge, considering how clumsy she was in her day-to-day life. But as soon as the fight began she turned into an entirely different person — though, not literally, even though it was well within her capability to do so.

Still, Harry had been trained by Severus Snape himself, and he was a lot more comfortable taking dirty shots than the aurors. It paid off eight minutes into the duel with Tonks, when he managed to freeze the ground beneath her feet for just long enough to get her slightly off

balance, catching her with a Stunner to the thigh. Kingsley had a Cushioning charm out a split second before she hit the ground, and he walked over to revive his partner.

“He got me?” Tonks grumbled, accepting the hand up. Kingsley nodded.

“He did.” He turned to Harry, clearly impressed. “You are not what I expected.”

Harry laughed. “I get that a lot. Are you alright, Tonks?”

“Oh, yeah, fine,” the auror waved him off. “Bloody hell, kid; you’ve got an arm on you! You sure you want to go into pro quidditch?”

“Professor McGonagall says the Auror Department has more rules than I’m capable of following,” Harry told her cheerfully, hearing Draco snicker in the background. “Besides, I think once the war is over I’ll be about done with fighting criminals.”

“That’s a shame; you’re better than our trainees,” Kingsley remarked. “Though honestly, that’s not difficult at the moment, considering the standards.” He grimaced, and Harry matched the expression; he could only imagine.

“If it helps, a lot of Hogwarts students have trained with me. Not quite at that level,” Harry added, gesturing vaguely to indicate the duel he’d just had, “but they’re good in a fight. So hopefully the auror ranks should swell in the next few years with some decent recruits.” Though, admittedly, Harry wasn’t sure how many of the HA members would trust the Ministry enough to apply.

In the corner, Tonks snorted. “Tell them to wait until Proudfoot’s been kicked; he’s an arse, and he hates people more competent than he is. Which is a pretty low bar, honestly.”

The faintest smirk flickered across Kingsley’s lips, and he didn’t say anything, which was as good as agreement.

With the first duel out of the way, Harry faced off against Kingsley. That was a much harder fight, which he ultimately lost — but only after eighteen minutes of hard duelling. “More than most people get against Kings,” Tonks complimented, patting her partner’s bicep.

Having seen the way they duelled against Harry, Draco was reluctant to step up, but with a little encouragement and a whispered promise that had the blond flushing faintly, Harry persuaded him to duel Tonks while Kingsley went over some tips with Harry.

“I had no idea Sirius and Remus were such ruthless duellists,” Kingsley remarked, when they were discussing some of the more morally dubious moves Harry had made. The Gryffindor tamped down a smile, imagining what the man might say if he revealed who his main instructor was.

“Sirius was raised a Black,” he pointed out instead, “use any advantage you can.” That wasn’t untrue — not all of Harry’s ruthlessness had come from Snape. Sirius and Remus were Marauders, and it showed when they got serious about duelling.

Duelling in pairs was where things really got intense; Harry and Draco had trained quite a lot together, but never against opponents who were also used to duelling in partnership. Fighting Sirius and Remus was the closest they got, but the older pair had a whole twelve year gap in their lives that had changed their duelling style. Tonks and Kingsley worked together, lived together, knew each other inside and out; and it showed in their fighting style, the pair working with a fluidity that Harry and Draco could only dream of.

Still, it was an incredibly helpful exercise, and Harry was a little sad when there was suddenly a chirping sound from the inside of Kingsley's robe. Tonks cursed, while the bald man just frowned and pulled out something that looked like a pocket watch, but was flashing bright red. "Duty calls," he sighed. "Good work today, boys. I'd be happy to come back and work with you further, work permitting." He turned to Tonks, kissing her chastely. "I'm sorry, Tonks; we'll have to postpone our dinner plans. I'll see you at home?"

"Be safe," she replied. "If it's Proudfoot fucking up again, do me a favour and hex him."

A flicker of a smile, and then Kingsley was striding from the room, leaving the three of them behind. When he was gone, Tonks let out a long sigh. "I swear to Helga, if he's gone all evening because of something stupid that the in-office aurors could've handled, I'm going to blow up the whole fucking Ministry."

"I thought the on-call aurors were only for emergencies?" Harry broached tentatively, and Tonks huffed.

"You would think so," she agreed, "but we've both had all sorts of ridiculous calls lately — it's worse than when Fudge was in charge! At least then it was genuine incompetence; now it's just Dark supporters within the Ministry *accidentally* letting things go wrong." She scowled, the tips of her hair turning red. "Sometimes I think they've figured the pair of us out; this only ever seems to happen on the times we have the whole day off together."

"Will it be bad, if you do get caught?" Draco asked with furrowed brows.

"Depends," Tonks said, shrugging. "They could technically fire both of us, if they wanted to. If they're trying to get Light-sided aurors out, that could happen. Best case scenario is a slap on the wrist and maybe a bit of suspension time, with a warning not to bring personal drama into the workplace. But ideally we'll keep it secret until it's no longer a problem."

At that, a secretive smile crossed her face. Harry and Draco shared a look; what did those two have planned?

"Well," Draco said eventually, checking his watch, "we were about due to finish up anyway, and I have some potions I wanted to brew. Are you staying for lunch, cousin?"

"Won't turn down a free meal," Tonks chirped cheerfully. "Especially now I've got nothing to go home to for a while."

Draco nodded, and tugged Harry into a brief kiss.

“Don’t blow up the basement,” Harry teased, earning a dirty look from his boyfriend before the blond also left. Harry glanced at Tonks, shrugging. “We’ve got an hour or so until lunch. Would you mind going over that rope-tripping thing you used with me? I’ve never seen it before.”

“Of course, yeah!” She grinned. “It’s something my dad taught me, actually. Dead useful in a fight.”

She happily launched into a demonstration, and Harry paid close attention. After a while, he finally gathered the courage to ask a question he’d been thinking about for a while. “Hey, Tonks,” he started, and she raised an expectant eyebrow. “Can I ask... why doesn’t Kingsley call you by your name? Y’know, since you two are together and everything.”

She blinked, perplexed. “He does?”

“No, I mean like, your first name or anything,” Harry clarified. “Draco calls me Potter sometimes, but it’s not really the same thing.” He and Draco used surnames practically as a term of endearment by now, after so much time only being able to use them in public.

Tonks frowned, and Harry wondered if he’d misstepped. “I’m sorry, it’s none of my business, I—”

“No, no, you’re fine,” she assured. “It’s just not always an easy one to explain. I...” she sighed deeply. “My first name... I hate it,” she told him. “Not just in the way that it’s old-fashioned and a bit of a mouthful. For a while at school I tried shortening it to Dora, but... it’s such a *girl’s* name, y’know?”

Harry blinked, trying to figure out where she was coming from. “But... you’re only a boy sometimes, right? Does having a girl’s name bother you even when you are a girl?” Had he misunderstood the whole situation? Was he using the wrong pronouns, even now?

“I’m only a boy sometimes,” Tonks agreed, “but even when I look like a girl I don’t always *feel* like a girl, y’know? It’s like... something in-between. Not quite one or the other.” She huffed in frustration, running a hand through her hair. “I’ll be honest with you, Harry; I can hardly explain it myself, let alone to anyone else. But... Tonks is a name that feels like me no matter how I’m feeling gender-wise, y’know? There might be days where I don’t mind being called Dora — though I will *always* hate the full name, really, I don’t know what Mum was thinking,” she added with a look that made Harry grin, “but Tonks is just... me. So yeah, it might sound weird when my boyfriend calls me by my last name like we’re just auror partners and nothing else. But it fits.” She grinned playfully. “Sometimes I like to think it’s like I’m one of those muggle pop stars, like Cher, or Prince, or Madonna.”

Harry snickered. “You could bring the trend into the magical world.”

“Right?” she agreed enthusiastically. “Clearly I missed my calling as the next greatest magical pop star. Weird Sisters eat your hearts out.” She winked, reaching out to ruffle Harry’s hair. “Anyway, I like to pretend my first name doesn’t exist, and Kings is happy to do the same.” Her gaze turned teasing all of a sudden. “Or were you thinking about what he calls

me when we're *alone*?" she drawled, wiggling her eyebrows. Harry blushed furiously, shaking his head.

"No!" he spluttered, making her laugh. "I just— it seemed a bit—" He didn't want to say weird, though clearly from the look on Tonks' face he didn't need to. She wasn't offended, though, and her smile softened.

"Not everyone needs pet names to know they're loved," she pointed out. "Him calling me by the name I choose is way better than any nickname either of us could think of, anyway." Her pale green eyes shone with adoration for a moment, and then she shook her head, blushing. "Merlin, listen to me, I sound like a besotted little third year."

Harry smirked at her. "Well, you *did* invite him here..." he started, yelping and ducking when Tonks sent a Stinging hex his way.

"We are *not* making a big deal out of that," she said pointedly, glaring even as her blush brightened. "Besides, it's Sirius and Charlie you should be teasing about that; moving the bloke in here after two months together."

Harry groaned, shaking his head. "Merlin, have you seen them, though? They're *disgustingly* happy together. And I thought Draco and I were bad!" Sirius and Charlie were the polar opposite of Remus and Snape, and having the two couples living under the same roof was wildly jarring at times.

"I've seen Charlie obsessed with boyfriends in the past, but it's *never* been like this," Tonks agreed. She shook her head fondly. "They're meant to be, I suppose."

Harry nodded vehemently; if ever there was an example of true love forming quickly, it was those two. "I'm just glad Sirius has someone. He was alone for so long..." Compared to the man he had been at the end of Harry's third year, Sirius was practically a whole new person. Even compared to how he had been in the weeks before Charlie had returned from Romania, there was a significant change.

"Yeah, takes the fun out of teasing them a bit, doesn't it?" Tonks said in mock-annoyance. "He's had so much shit, he deserves good things. Even if watching them together does make me nauseous."

Harry laughed; he could certainly agree with that, on both counts.

.-.-.-.

At last, the day had arrived.

OWL results.

Both the boys were surprised by the delivery over breakfast, too busy bickering about the plot of a muggle book Harry had made Draco read. They didn't even notice them, until Narcissa plucked two identical envelopes from the pile of post Ceri brought in. "Well, I've been waiting for these to arrive," she said, loud enough to cut over their argument. She held out

one to each of them, and Harry took one look at the Ministry seal and thought he might be sick. Suddenly all eyes were on them; even Snape was watching keenly, though his face gave nothing away.

Harry turned to Draco, who looked equally nervous. “Best just get it over with, then, yeah?” he suggested, ever the Gryffindor. Draco gave a jerky nod, and together they opened the envelopes.

There was complete silence in the kitchen as the pair of them read. Harry stared down at the parchment, the letters taking a minute to turn into actual words through the panicked haze in his brain. As he skimmed over the listing, his brain shorted out for an entirely different reason.

ORDINARY WIZARDING LEVELS RESULTS

Harry James Potter has achieved:

Astronomy: E

Care of Magical Creatures: O

Charms: O

*Defence Against the Dark Arts: O **

Divination: E

Herbology: O

Arithmancy: O

History of Magic: A

Ancient Runes: O

Potions: O

Transfiguration: O

**Mr Potter is to be congratulated for achieving the highest DADA grade since 1904*

“Well?” Sirius pressed eagerly, practically leaning over the table. “How’d you do?”

"I... I got an O in Potions," Harry stuttered — that, to him, was the most surprising grade of the lot. He looked up at Snape, wide-eyed. "I got an O in Potions." No matter how many times he said it, it still sounded utterly ridiculous.

Snape's lips curved in a smile, and even Harry could see the pride shining in those dark eyes. "Nothing less than I expected," he replied. The flood of warmth that filled Harry's chest at his words took him by surprise — had he truly been so worried about letting him down?

Yes, he realised. He had; Snape had put so much effort into working with Harry over the summers, despite their rocky start. He was a hard man to please, and Harry felt like a puppy who had just been given a treat for doing a good job. He grinned so wide his face hurt.

"You are never allowed to call me a nerd again," Draco declared, making Harry realise the blond was leaning over his shoulder to snoop at Harry's results. Grey eyes glittered, and lips pressed to Harry's cheek. "Not bad, Potter." It was said ever so fondly, and the warm feeling got impossibly bigger.

"How'd you do?"

Draco held his own parchment out so Harry could read it, right as Sirius gave up on patience entirely and plucked Harry's results from his hand. Harry ignored him, head pressed lightly against Draco's as he read.

Draconis Lucius Malfoy has achieved:

Astronomy: O

Care of Magical Creatures: E

Charms: O

Defence Against the Dark Arts: O

Herbology: E

History of Magic: O

Ancient Runes: O

Potions: O

Transfiguration: E

Harry looked up at him, beaming, and hugged him tightly round the shoulders. “Draco, that’s brilliant! Well done!”

“I would’ve liked to do better in Transfiguration,” the Slytherin said, frowning slightly. “But I knew I didn’t fully manage the animate to inanimate transfiguration, so it’s not really a surprise.” He let his mother take the results, and Harry kissed the corner of his mouth as the pair of them watched the adults react to the results. Sirius was beaming widely, Charlie’s chin propped on his shoulder so he could read as well, while Remus leaned in to get a look. Narcissa and Snape had their heads bent together over Draco’s, and when they looked up, both had approval clear on their faces.

“Well done, darling,” Narcissa said, reaching out to squeeze his hand. “Wonderful results!”

“You have done yourself a credit, Draco,” Snape agreed. Harry could feel the way Draco’s shoulders straightened at the man’s words, delight crossing his features — all he had ever wanted was to make Severus Snape proud of him.

“Sounds like you’re both nerds, to me!” Sirius declared playfully. “Oi, Snape, trade you.” He held out Harry’s results, his other hand reaching expectantly for Draco’s. Snape obligingly traded, and then Narcissa’s warm smile was directed at Harry.

“Congratulations, Harry, dear. You should be very pleased.”

“I am,” he assured, nodding hard. “Merlin, I can’t believe I got an E in Divination!” He definitely owed Parvati and Lavender something nice.

“Shame about History of Magic,” Charlie said. “But I guess you did sort of get a vision in the middle and everything.”

Harry snorted; yes, considering the circumstances, he was just glad to have passed that one.

“And I suppose I can let the Astronomy grade slide,” Sirius said with mock-dismay, “since there was a bit of an interruption. Although *Draco* still managed to uphold the Black family pride.” He was clearly teasing, and Harry laughed.

“Well done, both of you.” Remus smiled, amber eyes bright. “We’ll have to do something to celebrate. Certainly cake for dinner.”

“You just want cake,” Sirius teased, elbowing his friend. “You boys mind if I keep these for a bit? Cissa and I are having lunch with Andi after our Wizengamot meeting, it’s only fair if we do a bit of bragging.”

Harry didn’t mind at all; he wasn’t likely to forget any of those grades in a hurry.

“Should we write and see what the others got, or just wait until my birthday?” Harry asked, directing the question at Draco. Harry’s birthday was a little over a week away, and he knew he’d be seeing most of his friends then.

“Well I’m writing to the girls,” Draco told him, “but I’m going to wait on the rest.”

"I should tell Parvati and Lavender their efforts weren't wasted," Harry mused, still in shock over that Divination result.

"Go on, boys; go write to your friends," Sirius urged. "And take the day off training, too — you've earned it!"

Harry couldn't even argue with that; he was far too happy to even try and concentrate on duelling.

Abruptly, Draco snorted. "I bet you've done better than Granger," he remarked. Harry stared at him.

"Maybe in a couple subjects, but overall? I doubt it." He couldn't see Hermione getting anything less than an E. He wouldn't even be surprised if she had straight Os.

"You might not have noticed because you were busy doing a thousand things at once, but Granger spent half of the last year paying more attention to what you were doing than her own work," Draco informed him, deeply amused. "*And* you did one more subject than her, thanks to your two self-studies. Which, I can only speak for Runes, but she spent most of that exam trying to glare at you without getting caught. Between that and how much you improved through the HA, it wouldn't surprise me if you've beaten her. History of Magic doesn't count," he dismissed easily.

Harry shook his head, a little incredulous. "We'll see when school starts back, I suppose." The idea of academically out-performing Hermione Granger... well, it was incredibly satisfying, to say the least.

.-.-.-.

Sirius still felt strange walking into the Wizengamot chambers, his robes transforming into the official garb the moment he stepped over the threshold. It still felt strange to be in the Ministry at all; people looked at him like he was some sort of criminal, but he was getting used to that now.

It helped, having Charlie by his side. The redhead kissed his cheek before they all split up to take their assigned seats, and Sirius didn't miss the wave of whispers sparked by the action. He smirked to himself; let them gossip, he had nothing to be ashamed of. Charlie was the one whose reputation would take a hit, and the dragon tamer had repeatedly assured him that he couldn't give less of a damn about that.

He settled into the Black family seat, propping his ankle on his knee, and waited for the meeting to start.

"We have a new member joining us today," Scrimgeour announced once everyone was present and quiet. He didn't look too happy about it. Sirius sat up a little straighter; of course, the Warrington boy was claiming his seat, Harry had said.

The door opened, and Cassius Warrington strode in, the tightness of his jaw the only sign of his anxiety. Sirius could see the family resemblance easily; Julius Warrington, the boy's

father, had graduated Hogwarts the year Sirius had started, but their families ran in the same social circles.

“I, Cassius Julius Warrington, have come to claim the Warrington seat of my birthright,” the eighteen year-old declared in a firm voice. Sirius saw several people exchange glances, no doubt curious that the boy had not said anything about doing so with the permission of his uncle.

As if he would admit such a thing even if he did have it, when his uncle was a wanted fugitive.

The Warrington seat glowed in approval, and Cassius’ robes transformed, the ring appearing on his hand. Sirius saw the way his shoulders loosened minutely — it was the same way Harry’s had, when the Wizengamot chamber had let Sirius take on his proxy seats.

The relief of knowing your future was in safe hands. In this case, in Cassius’ own hands.

“Welcome, Lord Warrington,” Scrimgeour sneered, his contempt visible. Sirius scowled; they deserved better than a Minister who judged people by their family name rather than their character. “Please, take your seat.”

The Warrington seat was only a few down from the Black seat, and as the young lord passed in front of Sirius, the animagus cleared his throat, bending as if to pick something off the floor. “Excuse me, Lord Warrington, I believe you dropped this.”

Cassius looked confused, but that cleared rapidly as Sirius discreetly handed him a folded piece of parchment with a small lump inside — a ring. Cassius met his gaze, and Sirius gave the barest nod. The portkey would take him to safety, should he ever need it.

“Thank you, Lord Black,” the Slytherin murmured, and continued on his way.

Sirius let his gaze slide to Narcissa, who had the tiniest shadow of a smile for him in response.

Scrimgeour started the meeting, and Sirius did his best not to doze off through the whole thing; most of it was just unnecessary waffle, whether it was the Minister or Dumbledore taking the floor. Nothing useful was being suggested — everyone was too scared of upsetting the balance in one direction or another, with all the outside forces at work. And with Sirius and Narcissa shifting the power around, no one was quite sure how voting would fall on certain matters; the Dark no longer had the confidence of keeping the Malfoy bloc, while the Light was fractured into those who supported Dumbledore and those who did not.

Just as things were starting to wind down, Narcissa raised her wand, startling the gathering.

“Lady Malfoy, you have the floor.” Scrimgeour was clearly reluctant to hand things over, but rules were rules.

Narcissa smiled, getting gracefully to her feet. “Thank you, Minister.” She turned to the gathered Wizengamot, who were eyeing her with varying levels of trepidation. “I would just

like to announce ahead of time that I will shortly be placing a declaration in the *Daily Prophet*, where I will promise to personally fund any person who wishes to do an inheritance test at Gringotts Bank,” she stated. Sirius’ eyes widened for a moment — she hadn’t said anything about that to him!

“That is highly unorthodox, Lady Malfoy!” Lord Parkinson growled, and Narcissa’s sweet smile sharpened at the edges.

“Unorthodox, but not illegal,” she reasoned. “I’m sure we can all agree that it is... unseemly, for one person to hold such a large number of proxy seats in this governing body.” No one missed the way her gaze innocently landed on Dumbledore as she spoke. “I would very much like to return the guardianship of my houses to their rightful lines, to properly fill some of these grand seats once more. However, due to the events of the last several decades, I find myself lacking in viable heirs. We know they are out there, for the Chamber has not declared the lines extinct. I would like to encourage those who may not necessarily have considered their lineage to do so, with the hope that I shall not have to pass such an extraordinarily large burden onto my son, Draco.” She gave a demure laugh. “I find there are much better seventeenth birthday presents to be gifted.”

“I stand with the Lady Malfoy,” Sirius declared, on his feet before he really even thought about it. “And I am happy to offer coin from the Black vaults for this endeavour, should you be willing to accept.”

That sent even more shocked murmurs bouncing through the room, but Narcissa nodded to him in thanks.

Scrimgeour banged his gavel as the noise in the room grew, calling for silence. “Enough! Thank you, Lady Malfoy,” he said flatly, “for your... generous offer. Now, does anyone have any matters of *relevance* to discuss?”

Sirius sat back down, smirking to himself — across the room, Dumbledore looked like he had smelled something particularly foul.

Served him right.

.

Remus turned the page of his book, though if he was truly being honest with himself he hadn’t really been paying attention for the last ten minutes. His jaw cracked as he yawned — perhaps it was time to attempt sleep.

Beside him, Severus was still sat up reading a potions journal. Remus slid his bookmark in, setting his book on the nightstand, and shuffled closer to his partner. Severus’ lips twitched, and he raised one arm, silently inviting Remus to cuddle up against him while he read.

The familiar scent of potion ingredients and sandalwood filled Remus’ senses, relaxing him far better than any balm or candle could. Severus’ free hand rested on his shoulder, and Remus let his eyes fall to half-mast, happy to doze until his partner was ready to turn out the light and properly sleep.

“Remus.” The quiet voice startled him — Severus sounded surprisingly serious. Remus tilted his head up, trying to push the sleepy fog from his mind.

“Hmm?”

Severus’ mouth tightened imperceptibly; a sure sign that he was uncomfortable. Remus sat up straighter. “What’s the matter, love?”

“I— Potter may be Black’s godson, but it has become increasingly more clear to me that your relationship with the boy is equally… paternal.” His words were stilted, like he was trying to word things carefully. Remus froze.

Was he finally going to bring up the elephant in the room? The one that had been lurking since the first night they had brought the pensieve back from the Potter vault, and Severus had told him which particular memory he had decided to show Harry?

To celebrate the boys’ exam results they had taken another jaunt down memory lane that evening; perhaps bringing up the past was reminding Severus more and more of the good side of things, back then. The plans they had made, that may not be as hopeless as they once thought.

Severus seemed to be struggling with his next words, and Remus took pity on the man, carefully taking his potions journal and placing it aside so he could take both of Severus’ hands in his. “Severus,” he started, thinking through his next words. He didn’t want to scare the man away, not from this topic. “It’s true, Harry is like a son to me by now. And I won’t deny, it’s had me… thinking about things.”

Severus tensed. Remus forged on.

“I know, back in the first war, back before everything went wrong… we talked about it.” Only a handful of times, in the safety of their bedroom, just like this. When they could pretend the rest of the world did not exist. “I know you were always convinced it wasn’t possible, that it wasn’t advisable for you, but Sev, love; seeing you with Harry, and with Draco, it just makes me even more certain that you’ll be an incredible father.” He offered the man an earnest smile, squeezing his hands. Panic crept into those dark eyes he loved so much.

“I— both those boys are teenagers. And I am not solely responsible for either one of them,” Severus protested stiffly.

“I should hope you wouldn’t be *solely* responsible for any kids we had, either,” Remus teased lightly, feeling the Slytherin tense further. “I’m— I’m not worried about passing my genes on, either, not like I was when we were young. Especially not with recent research.” There weren’t many studies done on lycanthropy, but with the higher number of infected individuals thanks to Greyback’s efforts during the first war, people were discovering all sorts of things; namely, that a werewolf having a child with a non-werewolf was unlikely to result in a full werewolf child, unless the werewolf was the one carrying it. The child might have some wolf-like tendencies and sensitivities, but they were unlikely to change with the moon.

And even if they did, Remus no longer saw it as the horrifying curse it once was. Not now he was at peace with his wolf side, now Dumbledore's spells were long gone from his body.

"I was never worried about your genes," Severus remarked. "It is my own that concern me far more. And my actions even further."

Remus sighed, reaching up to cup Severus' face tenderly. "How do you still not see what an incredible man you are?" he breathed, heart aching. "Severus—you risk your life, every day, so that others can be safe. You may be more reserved with your emotions, but they are certainly there. And as I said; seeing you with the boys, I know you would be wonderful with children."

Near-black eyes shuttered with grief. "My father—" Remus cut him off with a kiss.

"Your father was a bastard, and you are nothing like him," he growled insistently. "You need to stop carrying his sins as if they were your own. Do you think I would ever let you do anything he did, to myself or to our child? Do you think *you* would ever allow yourself to stoop to such a thing?"

The fact that Severus was so worried about it was one of the things that most convinced Remus he would make a fine father.

But he could see the urge to retreat growing in his love's eyes, so he smiled slightly, kissing him again. "We don't need to decide anything now," he assured. "It's hardly the best time for it. And it would likely take a while to find someone willing to carry for us." They didn't have Lily, anymore. "But... so many things we thought would be denied to us have fallen into our laps, Severus. I just—let's not rule anything out, yes? The future is full of possibilities." He grinned playfully. "I'm sure Sirius and Charlie will beat us to the punch, anyway—we can see how we do with their babies before we attempt to create any of our own."

Severus' eyes narrowed. "As if a child of the two of us would be *anything* like the spawn of those two fools," he shot back automatically, making Remus laugh.

"Don't pretend you weren't a mischievous little sod as a kid; you just hid it better," he teased, smoothing a hand down the front of Severus' t-shirt. "It's something to think about, isn't it?" Something to dream about, when he was feeling bold; the two of them as parents, not only able to love one another openly without fear, but able to raise a child together.

There was a long moment of silence, and then Severus nodded — before letting his forehead fall against Remus'. "I convinced myself for a long time that such things were not meant for men like me," he admitted in a ragged whisper that broke Remus' heart. The werewolf gathered his partner up in his arms, holding him tight, tangling a hand in that silk-fine black hair.

"You are a wonderful man," he insisted, "and any child that has your love will be a very fortunate one indeed." He pressed his lips to Severus', coaxing him to relax. "I know I am lucky, to have your love."

Severus sighed quietly, hand resting on Remus' back. "I fear the love I have for you is all I am capable of offering," he confessed, eyes closed. Remus snorted softly.

"Now that's just not true at all," he murmured, thumb stroking the line of Severus' jaw. "You have much more than just your love for me. You wouldn't put up with half the shit Harry and Draco do if it were otherwise," he joked, feeling a rush of triumph when those thin lips quirked in a reluctant smile. "Come on, now. Let's get some sleep. We can talk this over again when the time is right." When the war was over, when things were safe, when Remus could freely admit his love of Severus Snape to the whole world.

Severus adjusted them both until they were comfortable, but before he turned out the light, he paused. "I will admit, though I am... *glad* the conversation took the turn it did, that isn't actually what I wanted to talk to you about."

Remus looked up, blinking in confusion. "I— it's not?"

"No, but it was clearly on your mind," Severus said with one raised eyebrow, and Remus blushed. "I merely wanted to let you know that I caught Draco brewing lubricant in the lab yesterday. The lemongrass variation."

Remus went wide-eyed — that was *not* what he had expected. "Oh."

"Indeed." There was the slightest flush across Severus' cheeks. "I merely thought that considering your relationship with Harry, you should be aware that the boys are clearly planning to... take that step."

The werewolf swallowed against the instinctive protest in his mind, the little voice that screamed the boys were far too young to be doing such things and they should intervene. They were sixteen — or close to it — and they knew what they were doing; Remus had had enough conversations on the matter with Harry to know that neither was going to be pressured into something they weren't ready for.

That didn't mean Remus wanted to think too hard on the specifics, or acknowledge any of it. Having an enhanced sense of smell gave him more information than he ever wanted, and not just on the teenagers in the house.

"Well, then," he said, forcing himself to remain calm, to think it through properly. "At least... at least they're adequately preparing. The lemongrass variation, you said? That's the same one you used when we..." Severus blushed, but nodded, fighting a smile. Remus smiled back; Merlin, they had been so nervous back then, tucked away in the Gryffindor dorms one Christmas when all the other Marauders had gone home for the holidays. "That's, *ahem*, good, then." The lemongrass variant had a muscle relaxant, and was specifically designed for... *starting out*, with these things. Merlin only knew where Draco had found the recipe; Remus suspected the book George Weasley had given Harry in his fourth year.

"I told Draco he could come to me if he had... concerns," Severus said, his discomfort plain, though he smirked. "He told me everything was fine and ran out of the lab like his cauldron was about to explode."

Remus snickered; he probably would have done the same, at Draco's age. "They're good boys, and they love each other. I don't think we've anything to worry about." Both those boys had difficult times ahead; let them get joy where they could. "But, ah, let's not tell Sirius, yes?" The poor kids didn't need any more teasing than they already got.

Severus huffed a quiet laugh, and finally let the light above their heads go out. "Quite," he agreed, tilting his head for one last kiss before the pair of them laid down properly, Remus sprawled over Severus with his nose tucked into the man's neck, as always.

As they drifted off to sleep, Severus' arms were a fraction tighter around Remus than usual, and the werewolf was unsure which of their conversations had prompted it. Their boys were growing up and taking big steps, which was terrifying in itself, but... there was a bigger step waiting on the horizon, and perhaps if Remus was lucky, Severus would maybe be willing to take it with him.

Chapter 82

Chapter Notes

It's birthday time! Ending the week on a good note :)

Also, some of you thought Harry's OWL results were a little overblown, but the way I see it; removing the compulsions, giving him a support network (that he's desperate to make proud) and reinforcing the belief that he has to be the best/strongest he can possibly be in order to defeat Voldemort and save everyone he loves, all that combined seems reasonable to bump everything up a letter grade. And Divination would bump up several because Lavender and Parvati wouldn't let him take the piss like Ron did. So there's my reasoning~ Harry did get mostly Es in canon, after all.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

On the morning of his sixteenth birthday, Harry woke to the sensation of gentle fingers stroking his cheeks and jaw. "Morning, beautiful," Draco greeted quietly, fuzzy around the edges due to Harry's lack of glasses. The blond leaned in, kissing him slowly. "Happy birthday."

"Mm, it certainly is," Harry agreed, lifting up the duvet so Draco could join him in bed. The Slytherin was a little cold, and eagerly crawled into Harry's cocoon of blankets, cuddling in close. "What are you doing here?" Despite temptation, and the knowledge that their guardians didn't really care at this point, Harry had gone to bed alone.

"Wanted to be the first to wish you happy birthday," Draco murmured, tangling their legs together. "And thought maybe I could give you part of your present early." His lips brushed the edge of Harry's mouth.

Harry felt heat rush to his cheeks, even as a different part of him also got a quick rush of blood. His present... they had decided, together, that they were ready to have sex, and decided Harry's birthday was the day to do it. As much as it seemed a little cliche, doing it as soon as the younger partner turned sixteen... but they wanted it to be special, so prior planning seemed like the way to go.

"Oh," he breathed, inhaling the scent of Draco's shampoo as the blond kissed his way down Harry's neck, sucking right on the spot that felt like a direct line to Harry's cock. Harry's breath hitched, his body arching automatically, desperately seeking friction. "I— now? You think?" How early was it? If they missed breakfast, someone would come looking for them.

"I said part of your present," Draco murmured, though his hand slipped below the waistband of Harry's boxers. "Not the main present. Consider this a... preview."

Harry relaxed; that was something he could fully get behind. He rolled over, pulling Draco on top of him, thrusting his hips against his boyfriend's body. Merlin, he could hardly wait.

Draco started to wriggle down Harry's body, pulling the dark-haired boy's boxers down as he went, licking his lips intently. Harry keened, gasping as Draco's mouth went around his length, grey eyes fixed on Harry's face the entire time. Harry scrambled for his glasses; he wanted to be able to see this properly.

Draco swallowed him deep, moaning low in his throat, and Harry tried not to choke him as one hand threaded through silky blond hair. Fingers started to play with his balls, occasionally slipping teasingly further back, expertly seeking out all of Harry's most sensitive spots. Harry threw his head back against the pillow, pleasure building in his veins—

And then there was a loud knock on the door. "Happy birthday, pup!" Sirius called loudly, banging another couple times for good measure. Draco choked, scrambling back off Harry's cock, spit trailing from his mouth. "Ceri's making pancakes, come down when you're ready!"

Then it went silent outside, and Harry looked down at Draco, still kneeling between his legs, though Harry's erection had deflated at the sound of his godfather's voice.

"He knew you were in here," Harry realised, utterly mortified. "He would've come in otherwise." Draco went bright red, wiping at his mouth.

"He can't," he denied, shaking his head. "I— surely he didn't—" But he trailed off at Harry's knowing look; Sirius absolutely *would* have noticed Draco sneaking over, and decided a loud interruption was in order.

Fucking Marauders.

"I can never look him in the eye again," Draco groaned, and Harry laughed. He reached down, hauling his boyfriend up to eye-level, feeling a little silly with his boxers still hooked around one ankle.

"Hey, he didn't see anything. He's just guessing," he pointed out, kissing Draco's nose. "He wants a reaction, which is exactly what we're not going to give him." He winked, green eyes full of challenge. "Put that Slytherin mask to good use, yeah?"

It took a little more encouragement, but eventually Harry sent Draco back off to his own room to get dressed, and when he came down for breakfast Harry just smiled at his godfather, hugging him around the shoulders. "Morning, Pads. Thanks for knocking for me; I overslept a bit," he said brightly, internally laughing at the taken-aback expression on Sirius' face. "Ooh, blueberry pancakes! Thanks, Ceri."

The house elf grinned brightly, and Harry took his usual seat, smiling as the rest of the household wished him happy birthday, kissing Draco as if it was his first time seeing him that day.

All through breakfast, Sirius looked between Harry and Draco as if expecting one of them to break, but they had not studied under Severus Snape for nothing.

.--.

As was tradition at this point, Harry and Draco headed out to the quidditch pitch to go fly together. “I have to say,” Harry said, capturing Draco’s mouth as they hovered side by side, ten feet in the air, “it’s much better having you here all day on my birthday.”

“Good to hear you’re not sick of me yet,” Draco agreed dryly, kissing him again. He had already veto-ed both of them climbing onto Harry’s Firebolt to make out properly, so this was the closest alternative. Harry was offended at the insinuation that he’d lose control of his broom at the slightest distraction, and already had plans for the Room of Requirement when they got back to school.

He would show Draco *exactly* what he was capable of on a broom. Give him something else to fantasise over during the next Slytherin/Gryffindor match.

“It’s only fair that I get to be here the whole day, considering you’re making me share you with the rest of your friends this evening,” the Slytherin mock-pouted, and Harry laughed.

“They’re *our* friends, not mine — don’t front, you like them. Even Neville.” Harry knew better. Draco liked the heirs and he couldn’t hide it.

“They’re not as bad as I anticipated,” Draco said, which was practically a glowing endorsement.

Harry smiled at him, drifting higher, beckoning Draco to follow him. “I’ve never had a birthday party before,” he said, excitement bubbling up within him at the prospect of being surrounded by all his friends on his birthday. “Not a proper one. The closest I’ve ever come is having you and your mum over. Most of my birthdays I was just alone in my cupboard.”

Draco’s face morphed into a mixture of sadness and anger, and Harry swooped closer to kiss him again. “Hey, it’s okay,” he soothed. “I’m free of them, now.” He hadn’t told Draco much about his life at the Dursleys, but between the scars and some of Harry’s off-hand comments over the years, the Slytherin had pieced most of it together. “Better late than never, right? This is for the best, anyway — if I’d had a birthday party when I started Hogwarts, it would’ve just been Ron and Hermione.” Draco made a face in response.

“I suppose,” he relented, softening. “I promise you’ll never spend another birthday alone. Even if it’s just the two of us.” Grey eyes sparkled. “Wait until we’re old enough to legally apparate,” he declared, “I’ll spoil you rotten. As you deserve.”

Harry smiled just imagining it; Draco taking him out on some fancy date for his birthday, threatening to hex the nosy reporters that would inevitably follow Harry around in public as they always did; maybe going back to their house for a party with their family and friends.

It sounded incredible.

“And *you* wait until we’re graduated and your birthday doesn’t clash with the start of exams,” he drawled in return. He still felt guilty for not doing anything special for Draco’s sixteenth.

“One of the many reasons I’m looking forward to being done with school,” said Draco airily. He leaned in for a kiss, and when he pulled back he was holding the snitch that had been in Harry’s pocket. “Best two out of three?” he challenged. “If you win, I’ll finish that blowjob I started this morning.”

Harry’s eyes darkened, even as he had to adjust his seat on his broom. “You’re on.” That was an easy bet, and they both knew it.

.-.-.-.

At five that evening, all of them except Snape apparated to Longbottom Manor — neutral ground for a birthday party, where no one was disrupting secrecy spells. Also, it was Neville’s party too, since his birthday was a day before Harry’s.

Harry handed his best friend a wrapped gift, grinning widely. “Happy birthday, mate.”

“You too,” Neville returned amusedly, offering up a present in return. “It’s, uh, from me and Ginny.”

“Ooh, joint presents already?” Harry teased, yelping when Neville punched him lightly in the arm.

“Don’t be a dick or I’ll take it back,” Neville told him. Harry raised an eyebrow.

“You really have been spending a lot of time with Ginny this summer, haven’t you?”

That made the blond boy blush, and Harry’s eyes narrowed. They would definitely be discussing *that* reaction at a later date.

“Come on,” Neville said instead, resolutely ignoring the statement. “The party’s outside. Uh, you all can come too,” he added to the small group of adults at Harry’s back. “Gran and Amelia and the rest are outside as well. And, um, welcome to Longbottom Manor. Well met.”

With Draco’s hand in his — mostly so the Slytherin could not escape — Harry followed Neville out to the garden. It was his first visit to Longbottom Manor; it was about the same size as Seren Du, though it didn’t have the same vast woodland surrounding it. A lot of the outside space was taken up with huge greenhouses, which was not a surprise in the slightest. But over by a set of French doors off the conservatory, Harry beamed to see a huge gathering of people, and a long table set up with food. Someone had even spread twinkling magical fairy lights through the trees and bushes, though it wasn’t quite dark enough yet to see them.

“Harry!” The shout was the only warning he got before a whirl of red hair slammed into him. He coughed, winded, but hugged Ginny back.

“Hey, Gin. Good to see you.”

“Happy birthday!” The youngest Weasley beamed. “Hi, Draco.”

“Hello, Ginny,” Draco replied wryly — Harry belatedly realised that Ginny was one of the few party guests who hadn’t properly met Draco as his boyfriend. Harry held Draco’s hand

tighter, happiness flooding his belly; he was at his own birthday party, with his boyfriend, in front of the rest of his friends.

A glance at Draco showed that he'd come to that realisation as well, but was distinctly more nervous about it than Harry. Harry kissed his cheek with a reassuring smile; everyone there knew about them, they had nothing to be afraid of.

Over with the rest of the group, Daphne wolf-whistled, and Draco rolled his eyes. "I'm going to..." He trailed off, and Harry laughed, kissing him properly before sending him on his way.

"I'm glad everyone could make it," Harry said, gaze trailing over the group. All of the heirs who could risk coming to a party at Longbottom Manor — that was to say, everyone except Pansy and Millie — were there, along with partners. Cassius had even brought Oliver, who had his arm wrapped around his Slytherin's waist, looking overjoyed at being able to act like a couple in front of other people; Harry could understand the feeling. Fred and Angelina were there as well, Angelina's gaze narrowed at Draco while Fred whispered in her ear, looking amused. Of course; she didn't know about their relationship. Oops.

Over by the conservatory, the adults were clustered together, wine in hand; not just Neville's gran and Amelia Bones, but Bill and Fleur, and Tonks and Kingsley. And, of course, the group from Seren Du — Remus was introducing himself to Mrs Longbottom, as one of the few who hadn't met her through Wizengamot dealings.

"And miss an excuse to get together?" Ginny pointed out, grinning. "I'm sure as hell glad for the chance to get out of the house. Hermione's still visiting, and I'm ready to kill the pair of them."

"Does Hermione even *see* her parents anymore?" Harry asked incredulously; the girl spent most of her year at boarding school, her Christmas breaks either at school or with the Weasleys, and now she was spending most of her summer with the Weasleys too!

"She's going home for a bit after booklists have arrived, she says," Ginny replied, though she sounded skeptical. "But she'll be back to stay with us before school starts. Luckily," she continued, looping her arm through Neville's, "Mrs Longbottom thinks I am a delightful young lady and is happy for me to visit as often as I like."

"You've got her fooled, then," Harry teased, making Ginny laugh.

"Oi, Ginny's not the only one who hasn't seen you in ages, y'know," Susan mock-complained from a few feet away. "Aren't you going to say hello?"

"Hello," Harry replied dutifully, then turned his back on her, only to snicker at her shout of indignation. "Kidding," he said, heading over to hug her. "Hey, Theo. How's it going?"

"Doing well, thanks." Indeed, the Slytherin looked much better than he had when Harry had left him at the Pottery; he looked like he'd actually slept, for one.

Harry made his rounds of the group, saying hello to everyone and accepting the birthday presents offered with bashful smiles, putting them all in his Twilfitt and Tatting extended

satchel to open later. He wasn't really sure what the protocol was, but he hoped no one would mind; opening presents in front of his guardians and the Malfoys had been bad enough, he didn't want that sort of pressure.

When he saw Parvati, she hugged him tight. "Thank you for the flowers, you absolute sweetheart. You didn't have to do that."

"I got an E in Divination because of you and Lavender," he retorted, as he'd said in the card with the flowers, "you deserved them for dragging me through that class."

"I got an O in Defence, and I sure as hell wouldn't have done that without you," she argued, smiling fondly. "It's what friends are for."

"Then shut up and accept flowers from your friend," Harry teased, and she laughed.
"Congrats on the O, that's brilliant!"

"Ooh, are we swapping exam results already?" Anthony cut in, looking at them in interest.
"How'd you do, then, Harry?"

"Yes! Inquiring minds want to know," Ginny pestered, smirking. "Ron passed six, mostly As and Es. Hermione's been *insufferable* — she didn't do half as well as she expected." She rolled her eyes. "Only seven Os, three Es. A true tragedy," she said in mock dismay.

Across the circle, Draco froze, his eyes meeting Harry's triumphantly. "I told you, Potter!"

"I had one more subject, that doesn't count," Harry argued feebly, but Draco was shaking his head, then he turned to Ginny.

"Harry got eight Os," he bragged. "It *would* have been ten, I'm sure, but there was the mess with Hagrid in Astronomy and then that whole vision business in History."

Immediately there was a wave of exclamations.

"Eight Os! Blimey, Harry!" Ernie said, impressed.

"You little brainbox!" the twins chirped, beaming with pride. Harry felt his cheeks heat, and he turned to glare at Draco, even as a smile threatened to overtake his face.

"I did pretty well, I guess," he admitted. Draco laughed, and kissed him hard enough for Fred to wolf-whistle.

"Fucking nerd," he teased fondly. "Practically a Ravenclaw."

"Oi!" the four Ravenclaws in the bunch piped up, offended.

Harry looked around, desperate for a change in subject. "Alright, what about NEWTs, then? Cassius, how'd you do?" He already knew Angelina's results, and the twins would be sitting theirs at the Ministry in a week.

Cassius' pale cheeks flushed, and Oliver slung an arm around his shoulders, beaming proudly. "Five Os, one E," the Scotsman declared, kissing his partner's cheek. Belatedly, Harry noticed the gold ring shining on his left hand, and gaped.

"Ring!" he exclaimed dumbly, pointing. Cassius raised an eyebrow at him.

"I told you I asked him," he said, and Harry hurried forward, Oliver smugly holding out the hand for Harry to admire.

"You didn't mention you did it *properly*," Harry said. "You said nothing about a ring! It's gorgeous." When he looked up, Oliver was smiling like he'd won the World Cup singlehandedly, and Cassius was looking at his partner with barely restrained adoration. "This is brilliant. I'm so happy for you both."

Oliver let go of Cassius to bundle Harry in a bear hug. "Couldn't do it without you, mate," he insisted, ruffling Harry's hair. "We've not set a date, mind. But now he's given me a ring he can't change his mind," he joked, winking.

"Really? Bugger," Cassius said dryly, and Oliver just laughed.

"Hate to interrupt, but we got bored of waiting for the birthday boy to come to us." That was Bill, Fleur at his side, and Harry turned to smile sheepishly at them.

"Sorry! There's a lot of people here." Harry wasn't used to having so many people around all expecting to talk to him. Was that what birthday parties were like?

"No worries, kid," Bill teased, clapping Harry on the shoulder. "Happy birthday! Here." He held out a present, but had to wait for Fleur to finish kissing Harry's cheeks before Harry could actually take it. "And congrats on the exam results; Charlie's been bragging all week," he added with a wink. "You'd think he was your godfather, not Sirius, the way he goes on."

Harry blushed — that was news to him. He glanced over at the dragon tamer, who was chatting with Tonks. Had he really been bragging about Harry's exam results?

He didn't know how to handle so many people being so vehemently proud of him. What was the correct response to that??

Eventually, Harry just decided to continue trying to change the subject, and accept that he was going to be blushing for most of the day. Was this what it meant, having a family?

.-. .

Luckily, after the initial rush of greetings and well-wishes and congratulations, the party was a lot easier for Harry to handle; people split up into smaller groups to talk, and Harry was able to drift between them, spending a little time with everyone. He made sure to go over and talk to the adults — especially Mrs Longbottom, thanking her for hosting the party — but it was easier when everyone started to mingle; Charlie came over to congratulate Oliver on his engagement and meet Cassius properly, and Bill and Fleur joined them so Fleur could introduce Bill to her ex Yule Ball date, Cassius jokingly warning Bill to treat her properly.

Then Tonks came over too, claiming the ‘proper adults’ were less fun, and soon everyone was spread out and chatting.

At one point, the twins put on a record player with music both wizarding and muggle, and there was a little makeshift dance floor space cleared. For the first time in his life, Harry had the experience of standing awkwardly while a crowd sang Happy Birthday to him — but Neville was stood right beside him, looking equally uncomfortable, so it wasn’t as bad. They were free once they cut the cake, and Harry warily eyed the twins before taking a bite. There hadn’t been any surprises in the food yet, but he didn’t entirely trust the pair to be on their best behaviour, even after Blaise’s promise that they weren’t going to mess with his birthday party.

The sun started to set and the fairy lights glowed brighter, some of them dancing wildly when Luna came over to whisper to the little creatures, and then she was dancing too, Daphne watching on with a fond smile curling at her mouth. The music got turned up, and Harry managed to drag Draco out to dance with him. “Think of it as payback for ignoring me at the Yule Ball,” he teased, playfully shimmying beside the blond in an effort to get him to loosen up.

“I wasn’t *ignoring* you at the Yule Ball,” Draco retorted archly. “I just couldn’t go over and dance with you. Believe me, I was staring at you all night.”

Harry laughed, and kissed him, then moved to dance beside Susan and Hannah. Most of Draco’s reluctance was just for show; soon he was dancing quite happily with Harry, hands wandering a little too inappropriately on occasion. It was a constant reminder of what they had planned for *after* the party, and it was slowly driving Harry to the edge of frustration.

But there was so much else going on, he couldn’t spend too much time thinking about being alone with Draco later — his friends were there, and he wanted to enjoy spending time with them all, because he didn’t know when they would next be able to gather like this. Especially with half of them graduated now.

And with so many of them in difficult positions due to the war, but Harry tried not to think too hard on that.

Neville’s gran retired for the evening not long after the sun set, assuring that anyone who wished to stay the night was welcome to. Kingsley went home around the same time, though Tonks stayed, waving goodbye to her partner and promising to see him bright and early at work in the morning, with a wink that was so heavy-handed Harry wondered how many glasses of wine she’d had.

It seemed those two were the only ones deemed ‘real adults’, as the party got a little bit wilder after that. Considering Sirius was right in the mix exchanging prank spells with the twins, he certainly wasn’t looked on as adult supervision, and even though Remus had taught many of them he thoroughly lost the air of maturity when Sirius egged him into sharing some of his own pranking secrets. All the while, Amelia and Narcissa stood in their own corner with ever-full glasses of wine, ignoring the party entirely and occasionally startling the gathering with a burst of laughter. Wisely, no one dared interrupt to ask what the two women were talking about.

So for one night, all of them could just be stupid teenagers, dancing and drinking butterbeer — and firewhiskey, which Charlie had in a charmed flask and passed around quite liberally — chatting about school and having fun without a single mention of Dark Lords or Dumbledore or the Ministry. It was perfect.

Naturally, with the twins in attendance, there were fireworks. Longbottom Manor didn't have any neighbours for a four mile radius, so they didn't have to worry about being seen; the Weasleys' Whizbangs were in fine form, filling the air with elaborate displays of light and colour — several of which they recognised from the prank against Umbridge, and whooped at the sight of. They all stopped dancing to watch the fireworks, and Harry leaned back against Draco's chest, the blond's hands on his hips. He could feel Draco's breath catch with every loud bang or particularly impressive firework.

"That was amazing, guys," Harry enthused when the display was over, and the twins gave elaborate bows in response to the applause.

"Only the best for our favourite birthday boys!" George replied, tipping an imaginary hat to Harry.

"Even if *one of you* did wait until after we left school to put his paws all over our little sister," Fred continued, elbowing Neville gently with a smirk.

"Oh, leave him alone," Ginny grumbled.

"Anyone who was in that common room can attest that it was definitely Ginny doing the pawing, don't worry!" Parvati piped up boldly, and there was a loud chorus of 'oooohhh's at her words. Ginny just grinned unashamedly, sliding her arms around Neville's waist.

"Can you blame me?" she remarked, making her already blushing boyfriend turn even redder when she patted him on the backside. "Had to get my claim in there first."

"Our little sister's all grown up and pawing at boys," Fred wailed in mock-despair, looking at Bill.

"With the examples we all gave her, are you surprised?" Bill joked, giving a pointed look to Charlie, who was wrapped around Sirius like an octopus 'to ward off the chill'.

"On the contrary, I couldn't be prouder," George cut in, offering Ginny a thumbs up, his other hand in the back pocket of Blaise's jeans. "You get 'em, sis!"

As Ginny kissed Neville passionately to a cacophony of wolf-whistles, the music was turned back up and the party continued.

It was almost midnight by the time things finally started to wind down — Amelia had gone to bed, Remus and Narcissa went home, and even Bill and Fleur were calling it a night. Meanwhile, half the couples had buggered off to go and snog in a dark corner somewhere. Harry and Draco were one of those couples, briefly, but then they'd been found by Tonks who demanded they both dance with her to her favourite song.

There were only a few groans when Charlie tapped the record player with his wand, ending the music; everyone was tired, and no one really complained at the concept of going to bed. Only a handful were staying the night; those who couldn't floo back home easily, or travel some other way. Ginny got a bit of ribbing from her brothers when she said she was staying for the night, but none of them kicked up a real fuss. They liked Neville — and they knew better than to try and treat Ginny like a baby by now.

There were hugs all around as everyone prepared to head home, and Harry made sure to give Neville an extra long hug. "Thanks again for organising all this, Nev. And thank your gran for hosting."

"It was fun," Neville agreed, grinning. "Best birthday I've ever had, for sure. We should do it again next year if we can."

Harry liked the sound of that.

Making sure he'd said goodbye to everyone, promising to write soon, Harry took Draco's hand and walked with him over to Sirius and Charlie. Sirius had Charlie's cardigan draped around him, far too broad in the shoulders for his much slighter frame, and he grinned at Harry, wrapping an arm around his shoulders. "You ready, pup?"

"Are you two okay to apparate?" he teased, knowing how frequently they had both been drinking from Charlie's flask. Charlie laughed.

"Kid, I've appurated *far* drunker than this," he assured with a roguish grin. "We'll be fine. Good to go?"

Waving goodbye to his friends, Harry held tightly to Sirius while Draco did the same to Charlie, and with the uncomfortable squeezing sensation that Harry was sort-of getting used to, they were back at the ward boundary of Seren Du. Harry's stomach lurched a little bit, but he hadn't had much alcohol, so it wasn't too bad.

"Drink water," Sirius advised nonetheless, calling Ceri to bring each of them a large glass. He ruffled Harry's hair, leaning down to kiss his forehead. "Good birthday, then?"

"The best," Harry assured, beaming.

"Good." Sirius nudged Harry towards the stairs. "Come on, then; bed time for all of us, I think."

Harry wasn't quick enough to avoid seeing the heated look Sirius shot Charlie, though he desperately wished he had missed it.

They all headed up the stairs, and Sirius paused outside the door to his and Charlie's room. "Goodnight, you two. Keep the noise down," he said with an exaggerated wink. "Love you, Mischief."

"Uh, goodnight, guys," Harry stuttered, blushing. Charlie waved, following Sirius into their room, and then Harry and Draco were alone in the corridor. Harry felt his face heat, biting his

lip. “Should we, um.” He gestured towards his room, trying not to spill his water.

His heart was racing as he entered his room — this was it. This was the big moment.

Draco shut the door behind them, and Harry noticed his hands were trembling. Was he nervous, too? That was good. Sort of. Harry didn’t really want both of them to be nervous, but he also didn’t want to be the only one quietly freaking out.

It was ridiculous, really; they’d done just about everything else together, why did this one act have such significance? Plenty of stuff they’d already done was technically sex. But... this was different. This was the thing that people talked about when they referenced *losing your virginity*. This was a big deal.

Harry set his water down on his desk and shrugged off his jacket, unable to meet Draco’s eyes. When he sat down on the edge of the bed, he was hit with a wave of exhaustion, muscles aching from all the dancing. Draco was bent over in front of him, stepping out of his jeans, and while Harry’s cock jumped at the sight of the blond’s arse in green silk boxers, it wasn’t the overwhelming burn of lust that he anticipated. He unzipped his own jeans, letting his fingers brush against his half-hard length, trying to stir that heat. As he did, Draco’s silver eyes caught his, and they both paused.

“Should we—“

“Are you—“

They spoke at the same time, and blushed. “You first,” Draco said, walking over with his shirt half unbuttoned to stand in front of Harry. Harry’s hands automatically went to the blond’s hips, thumbs settling into the dips of his back.

“Are you...kind of... tired?” he said hesitantly, hoping he wasn’t about to ruin everything. There was a beat of silence, and then slowly Draco fell face-first onto the mattress with a soft thump, rolling over to look up at Harry.

“Merlin, yes,” he sighed, gaze apologetic. “I don’t think we thought this through.”

Harry chuckled, suddenly giddy with relief, and he kicked off his jeans and patted Draco’s thigh. “I think thinking it through too much was our problem,” he countered, lying down beside Draco, their noses almost touching. “I want our first time to be special,” he admitted, “but... putting all that pressure on it just seems a bit... much.” He’d spent half the day thinking about it, and now they were there he was exhausted just from running over every possible scenario in his mind. “There’s no rush. Hell, we’ve got half the summer ahead of us still. And it’s not like we’re sneaking around behind our parents’ backs or anything.” Draco had told him about how utterly mortifying it had been to get caught by Snape brewing lube, but thankfully no embarrassing conversations had followed.

“I want you,” Draco murmured, and as always the words sent a delicious shiver down Harry’s spine. “But without sounding like an utter *Hufflepuff*, it’s going to be special not because it’s your birthday or we’ve planned it or anything, but because it’s *you*, and I love you.” He tilted his chin for a kiss, lips moving languidly. “And being entirely honest, I don’t

think either of us are up to performing our best right now," he added, eyes trailing over Harry and pausing on the slight bulge in his underwear. Harry chuckled, grabbing the collar of Draco's shirt and pulling him into a sloppy kiss.

"I love you, too," he murmured. "And all I really want right now, is for both of us to get naked... and to go the fuck to sleep, because it has been a *really* long day." He cracked a lopsided smile. "Rain-check on the birthday present?"

"Deal," Draco agreed. To Harry's amusement, the blond didn't even bother getting back up to finish undressing; he unbuttoned the rest of his shirt while star-fished in the middle of the bed, wriggling out of his underwear in a very graceless move that the Malfoy boy would never admit to anyone but Harry. Harry tugged his t-shirt over his head, dropping his own pants and doing a wandless Tooth-Cleaning charm, then draining his glass of water just in case he did end up with a headache in the morning.

Finally, he shoved Draco over enough to get both of them under the duvet, and pulled the blond into his arms. It felt amazing, having all that naked skin against him, but it still didn't give him more than just a low hum of arousal beneath his exhaustion. He tangled his hand in Draco's soft hair, kissing him deeply, and it was perfect. No need for anything else, not right then.

"Happy birthday, Scarhead," Draco whispered, kissing him once more before slumping against him, tucking his face into the curve of Harry's neck.

They fell asleep within minutes, smiles on their faces, and Harry's last hazy thought was that it was going to take a hell of a lot to top that birthday next year.

.-.-.-.

He woke with a gasp, screams still ringing in his ears and the scent of blood lingering in the back of his throat. Draco was right there, stroking his forehead. He put Harry's glasses on his face, and the world came into focus, including those worry-filled grey eyes. "What was it?" Draco whispered with dread. Harry grimaced, dragging himself into a sitting position.

"My birthday present," he spat, squeezing his eyes shut. "Family of muggles. He..." He couldn't even say out loud what Voldemort and his Death Eaters had done to the poor family. His stomach rolled, but Harry clamped the nausea down.

"Fuck." Draco held him close. "Do you need me to get someone?"

"No, s'too late anyway." They would be long gone by now. Also, he belatedly realised they were both naked, and that would be a whole lot to explain to any of the adults in the house. "What time is it?"

"Little after five," Draco replied, and Harry sighed.

"Sorry." It would be difficult to go back to sleep for any length of time to be worth it.

"Don't be daft," Draco dismissed instantly. "You didn't ask for this."

He manhandled Harry until the Gryffindor was lying against his chest, Draco's hand stroking through his hair. Harry let his eyes fall half-shut, wishing he didn't have such horrifying images in his head when he did. "Fucking Voldemort," he growled. "I had such a nice birthday, too." Why did he have to ruin everything?

Draco had no response, and the pair lay there for a while in silence, Draco just stroking Harry's hair as the shudders slowly faded from his body. Even the goblins didn't have an answer for why Harry felt an echo of Voldemort's Cruciatus curses in visions, but it often left him with muscle spasms the morning after a vision.

At seven, Harry gave up on even the vaguest hope of going back to sleep, sitting up and stretching out his arms. "I'm gonna take a shower," he declared, pressing a kiss to Draco's lips. "I'd ask you to join me, but..."

"Visions are a bit of a mood-killer," Draco finished knowingly. "It's fine."

They got out of bed, and while Harry grabbed his dressing gown and a new towel, Draco put on just enough of last night's clothes to have the important parts covered as he snuck back to his own room.

Showered and feeling a little better, Harry went down to the kitchen. Remus and Snape were the only ones up, and they both looked at him in mild surprise. "Harry," Remus greeted. "I thought you'd have a lie in this morning."

"So did I," Harry replied bitterly. "But Voldemort decided to give me a birthday present. Nothing we can do," he added as both men tensed. "But that poor muggle family... I don't even know who they were." Likely Voldemort had some reason for choosing them in particular, but it was a mystery to Harry.

"Oh, cub, I'm sorry." Remus hugged him, and Ceri floated over a cup of tea. "I... are you sure you don't want to do the ritual with the goblins? I hate that you're having to suffer through all of these visions."

"These visions save lives, Moony," Harry insisted. "I can't give that up just so I can sleep a bit better."

Remus levelled him with a searching look, but eventually sighed, shaking his head. "There's no convincing you, is there?"

"He's a Gryffindor, Remus. Are you surprised?" Snape muttered wryly.

Draco joined them, and neither of the adults seemed surprised that he already knew about Harry's vision. Harry was too tired to be embarrassed by that.

When Sirius came down, he was grinning widely, clearly ready to start throwing around innuendo — then he saw the looks on the rest of their faces, and his smile faded. "What's wrong?"

“Vision,” Harry explained. “Apparently the Dark Lord’s idea of a perfect birthday present is torturing a bunch of innocent muggles on my behalf. No wonder he doesn’t have any friends.”

Draco snorted behind his teacup.

“Oh, pup, no.” Sirius’ face fell. “Are you alright?”

“Fine.” At least, he would be, once he could close his eyes without seeing that little girl’s terrified, bloodied face.

“Well. Moony and I had plans for you boys today, but if you’d rather postpone, that’s completely fine.”

“Plans? What plans?” Draco asked, narrowing his eyes. Sirius and Remus shared a small grin.

“We thought we’d take you to some of our old haunts, in muggle London. Obviously none of the over-eighteens places,” Sirius added quickly, eyes darting towards Narcissa. “But a couple of places we loved when we were your age. They’ve changed a bit, but they’re still worth a visit.”

Harry perked up a little — that sounded like the perfect distraction from the images swimming in his head. The prospect of showing Draco muggle London was bound to cheer him up.

“No, we can do that today,” he insisted. “I want to.”

Sirius brightened up. “Good. We’ll leave at around nine, then.”

Across the table, Snape set down his paper, eyeing Remus flatly. “You’re taking them to Infinite aren’t you,” he said, sounding resigned. Remus’ eyes twinkled.

“We are. Want me to bring you back anything? Or maybe something from the place next door?” he added teasingly.

“That dump is still in business?”

“Oi, watch what you’re calling a dump,” Sirius piped up in mock-offence. “I found some great stuff in that shop. And on second thought, please don’t ever tell me what you and Remus did or saw or bought in there, I don’t need those mental images.”

Harry had no idea what kind of shop they were talking about, but from the look on Sirius’ face, he could make a few good guesses.

Snape turned to Remus, smirking slowly. “I’ll give you a list,” he drawled, and Sirius groaned.

The ‘old haunts’ Sirius and Remus were referring to turned out to be a series of hole-in-the-wall shops in a dodgy corner of Soho, their doors covered in stickers, one of them with a rainbow flag hanging from an upper window. The first one they went into was a record shop, and Harry stared in awe at the music options available.

“I bought my first ever muggle record from this shop, when I was fourteen,” Sirius declared proudly, a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “Go have a look, see what strikes your fancy.”

Harry had very little frame of reference for what he might like, but he flipped through the record bins anyway, pausing at covers that caught his eye or band names that he recognised. Tonks and Sirius were both trying to work on his musical education, which was giving him some... eclectic tastes, to say the least.

They left the shop with a handful of records shrunk in Sirius’ bag, heading down a few doors to a place called Infinite, the sign small and showing nothing more than a rainbow infinity symbol on a black background. Harry took a quick look at the shop next door — there was a sign on the front that declared under-eighteens were not allowed in, and from some of the stickers surrounding it he confirmed his suspicions that the place was a sex shop. He flushed, tearing his gaze away.

Maybe they could come back to that one under glamours, sometime.

But Infinite was equally fascinating, and more than a little risqué itself. Sirius laughed when Draco turned bright red over a large framed drawing of a naked man, and pointedly sidled across to the other side of the shop when the boys got into browsing certain sections.

It was a much bigger shop than it looked from the outside, and Harry found his way to a small book section. There was a shelf entirely full of non-fiction books on sexuality and gender — muggle equivalents of the book George had given him once, and what looked like a newer version of the book on the gender spectrum that Remus had given him. A couple of them looked interesting, and Harry added them to his basket.

On a lower shelf was a collection of what were very clearly queer erotica novels, and Harry daringly picked one of those out, too. Draco would probably get a kick out of it.

There were some t-shirts along the back wall emblazoned with flags and slogans, and Harry grabbed a couple — both because he liked them but also to wear around Hogwarts when he wanted to piss off Dumbledore.

When he found Draco once more, the blond was staring with a sort of horrified fascination at what seemed to be a blown-glass dildo. Harry slid in behind him, kissing the back of his neck. “Find anything fun?” he drawled, feeling Draco press back against him.

“Muggles really have thought of everything, haven’t they?” the Slytherin whispered, awed. Harry chuckled.

“Just about.” He took the blond by the hand, leading him over to a display of weird-looking novelty toys. As they looked, a young woman ducked out from behind the register, smiling

brightly. Her hair was bright pink, and there were several piercings in her ears and face. She looked like someone Tonks would be great friends with.

“Hey, you two looking for anything in particular I can help with?” she asked, and Harry shrugged.

“Not really. We’ve, uh, never been here before. My godfathers brought us,” he explained, looking around for either Sirius or Remus, but they were nowhere in sight. Perhaps it was planned; giving them privacy to explore the shop without being embarrassed to have either adult looking over their shoulder.

“Aww, inducting the baby gays, I love it!” the woman cooed in delight. “Well, welcome, I’m June, and the sign on the door says we check IDs but I’m gonna be honest with you, we only have that up so the police get off our backs about *distributing pornography*,” she added with a roll of her eyes. “Let me know if you need any help or anything, okay? Also, you two are very cute together.” She grinned when they both blushed, and retreated back behind the counter.

Harry could have spent hours in that shop, in all honesty. Everywhere he looked there was something else interesting, and while a lot of it was quite sexual there was also a lot of tamer stuff that was just about being proud to be yourself, and helping to explore identities and become comfortable in your own skin. Even in the wizarding world, where homosexuality wasn’t nearly as taboo as it was with the muggles, Harry couldn’t imagine finding a shop like this.

He thought about teenage Sirius and Remus, the way he’d seen them in their pensieve memories, kicking around this place on their summers. Remus bringing Snape in when he knew Sirius wouldn’t be there, both of them enjoying the anonymity of the muggle world to be a couple, even if it was only within these walls.

It felt like a safe haven, like a hug in a shop — *come in, it said, feel welcome here, even when you don’t feel welcome anywhere else.*

“I like this place,” he murmured, and Draco hummed quietly, nodding.

“Me, too.”

They kept looking, and after June’s assurance that she wasn’t going to ID them for anything — and a quick look around to check Sirius was nowhere in sight — he added a book of gay sex positions and some flavoured lube to his basket, smirking at Draco’s blush. June rang him up without batting an eyelash; Harry imagined she’d seen all sorts of purchases, working at a place like this.

As if by magic, Sirius appeared right as Harry was putting his purchases away in his bag. “What do you think, pup?” he asked, smiling slightly. There was a knowing look in his eyes when Harry smiled back.

“It’s really cool,” he confirmed. Sirius’ grin widened. “Where’s Remus?”

“Next door, I think.”

Harry froze at the implication, then shuddered. “I should not have asked.”

Behind him, he heard June giggle quietly.

“Are you, uh, buying anything, Sirius?” Draco asked, voice a little strangled. Sirius barked out a laugh.

“Nah, don’t worry. This trip is all for you guys.” Then, because he was Sirius and he was the *worst*, he smirked lasciviously. “Charlie and I went on our own shopping trip last week.”

Harry groaned, shaking his head. “Nope, nope, don’t want to know,” he declared vehemently.

“Oh come on, Harry,” Sirius wheedled, wiggling his eyebrows, “there’s nothing to be ashamed of. It’s all perfectly natural.”

“It’s not out of shame,” Harry retorted, “it’s out of a desire to kiss my own boyfriend without ever getting mental images of what you get up to with yours.”

Sirius laughed again, ruffling his godson’s hair.

“It’s not me and mine you should worry about, it’s Remus and his,” he teased. “You still have to look Snape in the eye in class for two more years.”

“And that’s why we’re not going to talk about whatever Remus is buying next door,” Harry retorted pointedly. Before Sirius could really get going, Harry turned to June, who was valiantly holding in her laughter. “Thanks for your help. I, um, I’m sure we’ll be back sometime.”

“Glad to hear it.” She smiled, playing with her lip piercing. “Sounds like you guys have an... *interesting* family dynamic.”

Harry snorted. “That’s one word for it.” She hadn’t even heard the half of it.

“Well it’s good to hear you have a solid support network. A lot of kids aren’t lucky enough to have someone who would bring them to a place like this, let alone anything else.” June’s voice was soft, and it made Harry look back at Sirius fondly.

“Yeah, I know. I’m definitely lucky.”

Sirius slung an arm around his neck, kissing his hair. “Not letting you have the same shitty teenage years I did, Mischief,” he promised. “When I was your age, this place and your dad were the only things keeping me sane. God, it’s good to be back.”

“You sure you don’t want to look around?” Harry asked with raised eyebrows, but Sirius shook his head.

“Nah, we’ve got other places to be. Come on, let’s go pick up that lone wolf of ours.”

They bid a cheerful goodbye to June, and left the shop — at the same time, the door on their left opened, and Remus walked out, tucking a brown paper bag into his satchel. He froze, staring at the three of them for one long moment, then smiled wryly. “Where to next, then?”

Harry shared a look with Draco — yes, they were definitely never going to ask.

.-.-.

They spent most of the day in London, visiting more shops that Sirius insisted were integral to their ‘queer education’, then went over to Leicester Square to eat burgers and people-watch. Or rather, Draco was people-watching; Harry was watching Draco experience muggle life at its finest with a look in his eyes that Remus described as ‘utterly smitten’. Harry couldn’t even pretend to be annoyed about the call-out; it was true, after all. Draco’s joy and incredulity at seeing perfectly ordinary muggle things was adorable, and Harry couldn’t wait to one day introduce him to more.

When they got home, Sirius clapped them both on the shoulders and told them to let him know if they wanted him to take them back anywhere in future, then transformed into Padfoot and bounded across the grass, barking happily. Remus sighed, shaking his head in fond bemusement. “He’s sixteen all over again,” he muttered. “Silly dog. I suppose I’ll be out here playing fetch for a while. I’ll see you boys later.”

He jogged off after the shaggy black dog, and the two teenagers headed inside, making for the stairs. Harry wanted to put away his new purchases before Sirius — or anyone else — could get nosy and start snooping. He wasn’t surprised when Draco followed him to his room; both their purchases were in the same bag, after all.

“I had no idea that shops like that even existed,” the blond mused, still looking a little overwhelmed by the day’s events.

“Me neither.” Harry set his satchel on the bed, pulling out more bags than a muggle would expect to fit in such a space. “I mean, I knew they had to — I’d heard stuff, mostly my aunt and uncle talking about how *depraved* and *perverted* it all was. But I never really thought about what might be inside one.” A wave of his wand had his new clothes hanging up in his wardrobe, and his new books on his shelf. The lube he eyed with consideration, before deciding to put it in his bedside drawer.

When he turned around, Draco was holding a roll of dark green bondage tape, and Harry’s eyes went wide. “I didn’t see you buy that.”

“I can be sneaky,” Draco drawled in reply, stepping closer. “It looked interesting.”

Interesting was definitely one word for it. Harry’s throat went a little dry. “Y’know, I was thinking,” he started, voice low, “next summer, once we’ve got our apparition licenses... we could conjure up a couple of fake IDs and have a look at some of those shops we’re too young to go into. What do you think?”

Draco’s eyes darkened. “It’s a date,” he replied. The tape in one hand, Draco let his other slide around to Harry’s backside, squeezing lightly. “Now, whatever shall we do with the rest

of our evening?"

"I've got a few ideas." After the things he'd seen in those shops, Harry had a *lot* of ideas. One jumped to the forefront of his mind, blood rushing southwards. "We could... take that rain-check, if you're interested?" He waved his hand, locking and silencing the door. Draco gaped slightly.

"You want to?"

"I've kinda been thinking about it since we left Infinite," Harry admitted huskily. "I—I'm ready. If you are."

"Yeah," Draco breathed, nodding dazedly. "Y-yeah, okay then."

Harry quickly shoved his satchel off the bed, pulling his t-shirt over his head without getting his glasses tangled up. His heart thudded hard against his ribs, but he didn't have any of the nerves he'd had the day before; all he felt was excitement, and near-painful levels of arousal.

This was Draco. His Draco, the boy he'd known since they were eleven, the boy he'd loved since they were fourteen. And after a day being surrounded by erotica and phallic objects and so much *pride*, Harry felt silly for having been so worried about it before. It was a big deal, sure, but it wasn't *a big deal*. It was nothing to be afraid of, not with Draco.

He'd loved everything else they'd done together, even the things that had started out a little awkward. Why would this be any different?

They fell onto the bed, tugging at each other's clothes and grinning into open-mouthed kisses. Harry got distracted sucking a hickey onto Draco's neck, loving the breathy moans that spilled from his lips — but then Draco yanked his trousers down and gripped his cock, and Harry arched down into him with a gasp. "Easy," he warned. "Don't make me go too early." He smirked, kissing Draco, biting playfully at his bottom lip. "I want you to enjoy this."

Soon they were fully naked; a familiar sight to Harry, but still one that sent a thrill through him, had him running fingers over flawless pale skin in awe. He would never get tired of looking at Draco's body.

Reluctantly removing his mouth from Draco's right nipple, Harry reached over to the bedside drawer for the vial Draco had tucked away in there a few days ago. This wasn't anything new, either; they had used lube before, stuff that Harry had brewed in the Chamber of Secrets. They had practiced stretching each other, finding that little bundle of nerves that sent fireworks up behind their eyes.

Taking this step felt like the most natural thing in the world, now that they hadn't spent several days psyching themselves up for it.

Harry kneeled between Draco's spread knees, vial ignored on the bedsheets as he stroked the sensitive pale skin of his inner thighs, leaning up to kiss him and bucking his hips down into him, their cocks trapped between their stomachs. Draco moaned, one arm coming up above

his head, a pink flush flooding his face and spreading down his neck. “Go on, Harry,” he urged. “I’m ready.”

They had decided it would be this way, at least for the first time. Harry dropped a tender kiss on Draco’s lips, then slid down his body, tongue swiping out at Draco’s cock just quick enough to make the blond give a full body jerk. “Fucking tease,” Draco swore, making Harry grin.

He nudged Draco’s legs a little wider, grabbing a pillow to prop under the blond’s hips. The book said it was usually easier to start on all fours, but they both wanted to be face to face, even if it meant a little more discomfort to start.

Then, he reached for the vial of lube, uncorking it carefully and pouring some over his fingers. Shuffling down, he pressed a kiss to the inside of Draco’s thigh, and slid his first finger in.

Draco let out a long, low groan at the sensation, and Harry’s whole body pulsed with arousal at the feeling of the blond’s muscles relaxing for him. He’d done this a handful of times before, but this time he would finally get to feel that tight heat around his cock.

He added a second finger, moving carefully, searching out that perfect angle. When he found it, Draco’s back arched and he cried out, hand clutching against the sheets. “Fuck. Harry, please,” he gasped, the sound going straight to Harry’s groin. “More.”

Harry slid in a third finger, crooking them gently to rub over Draco’s prostate once more. Draco made the most *incredible* noises, and for a moment Harry worried he might not last long enough to even get inside him. Looking at him spread out on Harry’s bed like that, face a picture of bliss, Harry’s fingers deep inside him... Harry had to take a deep breath to steady himself.

He worked the three fingers in until the muscles relaxed a little more, and leaned down to press a kiss to Draco’s stomach. “Are you... can I...?” He couldn’t find the words, but Draco looked up at him, pupils wide.

“Yes, fuck,” he breathed. “I need you inside me, Harry. Come on.”

Harry sucked in a sharp breath. Okay, then.

He reached for the vial for more lube, slicking up his cock generously. The book always said there was no such thing as too much.

Slowly, thighs quivering already, Harry lined himself up carefully. He locked eyes with Draco, smiling slightly. He was glad he’d kept his glasses on; he wanted to see this as clearly as possible. “I love you,” he said, and Draco’s gaze darkened.

“I love you, too. Now move.”

Harry pressed against Draco’s slick hole, and ever so slowly began to sink inside. Draco stiffened, spine straightening as he tensed automatically, and Harry stroked over his stomach,

lube-slick hand wrapping around his boyfriend's cock, coaxing him through the initial discomfort. For Harry, it was the most incredible feeling in the world, that tight-hot-pressure wrapped around him, knowing it was *Draco*, he was *inside him*.

Draco gave a slight grimace of pain, and Harry froze immediately. "No," the blond urged, "keep going. It's just— weird. Keep moving."

Harry did so, going as slow as he dared, breathing steadily to stop himself from coming far too early. He was suddenly very, very glad that they had taken their time to get to this point — if they'd tried it a few months ago, he would not have been able to control himself, and it would have been over embarrassingly quickly.

When he was in all the way, he stopped, looking down at Draco with concern. "You okay?"

Draco nodded. Unable to help himself, Harry leaned down to kiss him — and as soon as he did so, Draco shouted. "What?" Harry pulled back. "Did that hurt?"

Draco shook his head, reaching up to grab Harry's shoulder and pull him back down into a sloppy, gasping kiss. "No, fuck, that's— more." He met Harry's gaze insistently. "Move, Potter. Now."

Harry snorted, lips curling in a relieved smile, and he did as asked. First with just little jolts of his hips, testing the water, then getting a little braver when it seemed Draco was enjoying it. Then, *finally*, he hit that perfect pleasure spot, and got to feel Draco clench tight around him as he bucked up against Harry, drawing him in deeper. "Fuck, just, go for it," Draco urged, fingers tightening on Harry's shoulder. "Stop holding back. I want it."

Harry eyed him skeptically, but started to push a bit harder, bracing himself against the headboard. Draco moaned with every thrust, eyes closed, one of his hands wrapped around himself, and Harry knew then he wasn't going to last much longer.

"Draco," he breathed, and the blond dragged him down into another kiss, gasping into his mouth. "Draco, I'm gonna—"

"Do it." There was challenge dancing in those grey eyes, and as always Harry rose to it with aplomb, thrusting into Draco and losing himself in the motions, the pleasure building and building. He pulled one hand off the headboard and gripped Draco's cock, determined to make his boyfriend come before he did — with one swipe of his thumb over the weeping head, Draco arched up, and suddenly Harry saw stars as Draco clenched around him with the force of his orgasm. He had no hope of lasting through that, spilling into Draco with a ragged cry, climax ripping through him with such force he could hardly breathe for a moment. He slumped down onto Draco, trying not to fall fully on top of him, Draco's seed sticky between them. His cock slipped out, still sensitive from the aftershocks, and the pair lay there breathing heavily together, Harry's face mashed against Draco's collarbone.

"Oh," Draco sighed eventually — it was a sigh of satisfaction, a sound that made Harry go boneless, warmth flooding through his body. "Was that— how was that for you?"

Harry managed to lift his head, grinning dazedly. “Fucking amazing,” he declared, kissing Draco’s chin. “You?”

“Yeah,” Draco agreed, nodding, chest still heaving. “Sweet Merlin.”

The sweat on Harry’s skin began to cool, along with other things that were cooling much more uncomfortably. Harry did as gentle a Cleaning charm as he could manage, but both of them still squirmed at the magic. He shuffled further up Draco’s body, their heads next to each other on the pillow. “I love you,” he murmured, rolling them over, pulling Draco on top of him, trying to get at as much skin as he could reach. “I— fuck. We can do that again, right?”

Draco laughed. “I fucking hope so,” he retorted. “Maybe next time we could do it the other way round, see how that feels.”

Despite his recent orgasm, the prospect sent a surge of pleasure through Harry’s veins.

Merlin, he hoped next time was soon.

Chapter End Notes

As far as I'm aware, Infinite is not a place that exists, or existed in the 90s, but I'm sure there were definitely shops something like it and Sirius would know how to find them. He just wants the boys to be happy and comfortable in their identities :3

Chapter 83

The *Prophet* were getting bolder in their attempts to defame Harry, full of quotes from Dumbledore and other ‘anonymous witnesses’ about Harry’s *concerning* behaviours at school in the past year. Luckily, according to the letter Harry had just received from Mrs Frobisher, the last issue was enough for her to send one hell of a Cease-And-Desist in their direction.

It won’t stop Dumbledore, but it’ll give you some peace from the Prophet. And Amelia and I are working on the rest. We’re handling this, Harry. Don’t worry.

It was a novel feeling, having someone so dedicated to protecting his public image. He knew it would only do so much — the damage had been done with what Dumbledore had already said — but it was reassuring to know that it would all stop soon.

Now that they were securely into August, it felt like the new school year was looming far too close on the horizon. Harry knew a month was a long time — they’d already fit so much into the first month of summer, after all — but even so, the little clock in the back of his mind was ticking ominously.

It was a strange world indeed, when going back to school felt like going into enemy territory.

Still, the rest of the household were determined not to let him get too caught up in his worries. He trained when he could, and still made time for fun things with the others — and if it looked like he was getting too stuck in his own head with all his worries, Draco was happy to drag him upstairs while their guardians pointedly pretended not to notice.

Harry had to fight the dreamy smile that threatened to take over when he thought about his boyfriend, who had become so much bolder since the day after Harry’s birthday, when they had finally taken that step. It was like Draco had been holding his breath, wondering if every chance alone would turn into *the big one*, but now they had... Harry didn’t want to say *got it over with*, but now they had reached that point and both enjoyed the process, Draco was more relaxed in the bedroom than Harry had seen him since before exams.

Though they tried not to spend every night together; not because of fears of their guardians saying anything — it was clear that everyone in the house knew that the two boys were having sex, much to their embarrassment — but because neither of them wanted to get used to falling asleep together and then struggle to separate once they got back to Hogwarts.

Also, Harry was still having visions most nights, and he wanted to make sure Draco got *some* sleep that wasn’t interrupted by his flailing and screaming.

But they weren’t completely co-dependent, and aimed to stay that way — as such, Draco and Narcissa were off catching up with everyone at Malfoy Manor for the day, while Harry was in the library with Remus. Sirius and Charlie were... somewhere in the house, and Harry did not want to contemplate that too closely.

"Hey, can you take a look at this? It looks interesting," Harry said, handing over his book open to a page about spell-chains in duelling. Remus raised an eyebrow, but obligingly took the text, his face lighting up when he started to read.

"Oh, yes! Have I not taught you this before?" Harry shook his head, and the werewolf frowned. "Hmm. I swear it was on my list." He shrugged, shuffling over so they could both read the book at the same time. "It's fascinating stuff, really; you—" But whatever it was, Harry never got to find out; Snape stormed through the door, his rage like a cloud around his shoulders, magic practically vibrating from his skin. "Severus!" Remus jumped to his feet, alarmed. "What's happened?"

Harry narrowed his eyes, too; the professor had just come from a staff meeting, if he wasn't mistaken. "What's Dumbledore done now?" he asked warily, and the Slytherin let out a growl.

"Signed my fucking death warrant, that's what he's done," Snape muttered furiously. Harry looked to Remus in wide-eyed horror.

Remus stepped up to his partner, placing one hand on his shoulder and leaning in, other hand on the back of his neck. "Calm, Severus. Start from the beginning."

Snape's back went taut like a bowstring, then all at once he slumped against Remus' form — as much as Snape could *slump*, at least. Harry felt like an intruder just sitting there, watching them like this, but he couldn't get away.

"Today, we were introduced to the newest member of Hogwarts staff," Snape declared, straightening up to look at Remus with a sneer on his face. Both of them seemed to have forgotten Harry was even in the room. "Or, rather, re-introduced. Albus has brought back Horace Slughorn."

Harry didn't know who that was, but the name made Remus gasp. "Slughorn? Merlin, I didn't know he was still kicking around. So— wait. If he's coming back, that means..." He looked at his partner with trepidation, and Snape gave a short nod.

"I have finally been *granted* the position of Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher," he confirmed bitterly.

"What?" Harry blurted, unable to help himself, and both men whipped around to look at him. Harry was too bewildered to even blush. "I mean— can he do that?"

Snape snorted. "Albus can do whatever he wants at this point," he retorted. "But yes; Horace Slughorn was the Potions professor who taught us when we were in school. He retired shortly after I gained my Mastery, which is when I took over, but it seems Albus has convinced him to come out of retirement."

"Well... that's not so bad, is it? I mean, at least we'll have a competent Defence teacher this year." Even if it would be even harder for Snape to keep his cover as a Death Eater and still teach something useful in a class like DADA. "I know the position is cursed or whatever, but... not everyone who's taught it has died. Remus is still here."

Snape's face twisted in a scowl. "Unfortunately, that is the least of my problems." He pinched the bridge of his nose. "After the staff meeting, Albus bid me to speak with him privately. It seems he has had enough time since his *incident* with that damned ring to make plans — he knows he is dying, and he knows the Dark Lord wants him dead, and he has decided to tie the two neatly together." He turned back to Remus with haunted black eyes. "He has made me take a vow to kill him, should the opportunity arise, in order to secure my position at the Dark Lord's side."

Harry's blood went cold. "He what."

"Quite," Snape murmured, glancing Harry's way. "It seems all my fantasies of permanently wiping that damned twinkle from his eyes have been offered to me. Only at the price of my soul."

If Snape killed Dumbledore, even if they could prove it was at the headmaster's instruction, the man would be vilified forever. There would be no redeeming him in the eyes of the general public. *Nothing* Harry could say or reveal about Dumbledore would make such an act in any way forgivable by the wizarding world at large, not from a man like Severus Snape.

"I won't let that happen," he declared, and Snape snorted.

"I know you manage to pull miracles from thin air on a regular basis, Potter, but even you might struggle to turn this one around. He has forced me into an Unbreakable Vow. Should Death Eaters attack the school by the end of this year — and he seems alarmingly confident that they will — I am magically obliged to murder him in front of as many people as possible, once the opportunity arises. Thus my employment will be terminated, fulfilling the curse on the position — and convincing the Dark Lord that I am loyal to no one but him."

"And perhaps if you were truly loyal to Albus Dumbledore, that might have worked," Harry countered. "But you're forgetting something — there is no way in *hell* I'm letting Dumbledore control the school for another full year." He smirked, green eyes flashing. "He's dying regardless. If I have enough people publicly losing faith in him while he's trying to secure his legacy, he'll get angry — he'll start making mistakes. He's already started doing that; his work in the *Prophet* has been sloppy at best, giving me something I can actually take legal action on. He doesn't care about Voldemort right now, he just wants me back under his control before he pops his clogs so that when I off the Dark bastard, everyone chalks it up to Dumbledore's fine mentorship of me," he said with a roll of his eyes.

"Harry, it's not that simple," Remus started, but Harry shook his head.

"I'll kill the headmaster myself before I let him force you into it, Snape," he insisted, watching surprise flicker across that dour face. He gave his best innocent, Golden Boy grin. "I'm the Boy-Who-Lived, after all."

"And if Albus has done his level best to make the public think you're the next Dark Lord?" Snape retorted pointedly. Harry just shrugged.

"Then I bring out the evidence of him turning me into his little magical puppet, bring out the Sad Orphan Face, and do my best. By that point, I'm fairly confident I can destroy his

reputation so thoroughly the country will just want to sweep the whole thing under the rug to save face.” Then he smirked. “Besides, your Vow might insist you kill him in a public manner — I’m under no such requirements. I’m sure I can make it look like an accident.”

The two men stared at him for a long moment, and then Remus shook his head incredulously. “The Slytherins really have claimed you, haven’t they?” he sighed, and Harry laughed.

“Sorry, Moony. Comes with the family magics, I suppose.” Also from training with Snape, and dating Draco, and talking to Salazar — he was doomed from the get go, really.

“I cannot ask you to kill a man to save my reputation, Harry,” Snape insisted, and Harry stared him down unflinchingly.

“You’re not asking,” he replied. “I’m telling you, it’s not going to come to that. Let my friends and I do the work — let Amelia and Mrs Frobisher do the work. We’ll have him out before exams, at the latest.” There was no way the public would let Dumbledore continue to be responsible for children once Harry was through with him.

His face softened, and he flicked his gaze to Remus, who was staring at him in astonishment. “You’ve already given so much of your life to Dumbledore’s service, sir,” he said to Snape, “I’m not going to stand back and let you give him this, too.”

One day, he and Remus would be able to stand together publicly and admit their love, and Harry would be damned if Snape was seen as a criminal by the time that day arrived. Not after everything Snape had done for him, for the Light, for the whole bloody country.

Snape stared at him, utterly silent, for a long moment. Harry tried not to fidget under the man’s scrutiny, keeping his shoulders square.

“I think,” Snape said eventually, a tone to his voice that Harry couldn’t quite place, “it is about time you called me Severus. Only when outside school, of course.”

Harry gaped at him. “I— um—“

Beside Snape, Remus smiled. “I think what Severus is trying to say, cub, is that he’s very grateful for your support, but let’s not get you set on murdering the headmaster quite so easily.” He twined his fingers with Snape’s, their shoulders pressed together. “Much can happen between now and the end of the year. But I will not see either one of you throw yourselves on that bastard’s sword.” His amber eyes flashed gold, determination written in every inch of his body. “We are a family, and we will figure this out as a family. For now, all you have to do is prepare for the new school year. Severus, you’re welcome to borrow as much of my old lesson plans as you require, if you’d like them.”

Good old Moony, reminding them what was truly important — academic preparedness.

Harry flashed a quick smile. “I, uh, for what it’s worth, si— Severus,” the name felt strange on his tongue, “I’m not sure what this Slughorn bloke is like, but I’m glad you’re going to be the new Defence teacher. If... if we’re heading into a war, the students need all the preparation they can get, and I know you won’t go easy on them.”

Snape looked faintly amused. “They will all hate me even more than they did in Potions,” he said knowingly, making Harry laugh.

“Maybe.” Snape would be just as harsh a taskmaster as he was with everything else, and even more prejudiced towards Slytherins besides. “But they’ll learn a darn sight faster than they would have with another bloody Umbridge involved.” If only through abject fear of what Snape might do to them should they fail.

A thought hit Harry, and his smirk widened. “Dumbledore’s going to expect me to be *livid*,” he realised delightedly.

“And I’m sure I will have ample opportunity to put you in detention,” Snape agreed, catching on as quickly as always. Harry laughed.

“Wonder if he’ll ever realise he just did me a massive favour.”

Dumbledore had declared war, and Harry was more than ready to meet him there.

.-.-.-.

Order meetings in the last few weeks had become an utter embarrassment, Sirius decided; it was a good thing they were a secret vigilante organisation, because if they behaved like this in a public forum, no one would take them seriously.

He glanced across the table at Remus, who looked equally fed-up by the incessant squabbling. Sirius had lost track of what this one was even about — it had started with a fairly reasonable discussion about whether the auror department could be considered trustworthy, but then derailed quite quickly when Tonks had mentioned Harry’s visions being the only decent way to get ahead of Death Eaters these days. Now it seemed there were about four arguments happening at once, all stemming from the reliability of using a teenage boy’s insight into a Dark Lord’s mind as a warning signal. It seemed Dumbledore’s pointed remarks in the *Prophet* had got to them — though the headmaster himself was being remarkably quiet on the matter.

Sirius expected nothing less; Dumbledore wouldn’t let himself be seen or heard *actively* disparaging Harry, not when he clearly still had plans to bring Harry back to heel. Every time Sirius saw him these days, the man had increasingly firm requests to see Harry prior to school returning. Every time, Sirius told him where to shove it.

He was starting to wonder if he shouldn’t just kick the whole damned Order out of his house and be done with it.

As tempting as that sounded, he knew Harry wouldn’t approve — they needed to know what Dumbledore was up to, and that meant at least some of them staying on his good side.

But as much as Sirius knew his godson meant well in wanting him to remain on semi-decent terms with the headmaster, Sirius was entirely ready to just punch the old bastard in the face.

"I think that is enough for today," Dumbledore declared over the chaos, waiting for silence to fall. "As difficult as it is to trust Harry's visions, knowing where they come from, we must continue to take advantage of this information — at least for now, while it appears to be accurate."

Sirius snarled silently; was he implying that Harry may start giving them false information, soon?

With the meeting dismissed, everyone started to go their separate ways. Sirius turned to Charlie, ready to leave — only to hear his name called in that infuriating too-calm voice.

"Yes, Albus?" he asked through gritted teeth, turning to smile at the elderly headmaster. Dumbledore reached into a pocket of his robes, pulling out a thick envelope.

"I'm afraid I had some trouble addressing young Harry's booklist, and I thought it might be easier to just hand it over in person." He chuckled quietly. "Or as close to it, with you keeping Harry tucked away so safely all summer! Here," he handed over the letter, "I trust you will make sure this gets to him in time. Please do send him my regards, won't you?"

Sirius took the letter, fingers tingling from the magic seeped into the parchment. He fought back a scowl. "I'll pass it on," he confirmed. Dumbledore smiled genially, clasping his hands together.

"Wonderful. Well, I shall see you at the next meeting, then."

He left, not even bothering to ask Sirius for a meeting with Harry, which was even more suspicious. Charlie was lingering in the doorway with concern in his eyes, and Sirius jerked his head towards the stairs — he wasn't going anywhere until he'd taken a proper look at that letter.

"Trouble addressing it my arse," he muttered, once they were shut away securely in the drawing room. "Trouble *seeing* the address, more like." Harry had no trouble getting post from anyone else; even his OWL results had made it fine. The only way Dumbledore would have had trouble was if he was trying to glean the address of the Unplottable building from the magic involved in addressing and sending school letters.

"Do I need to call Bill back?" Charlie asked, but Sirius shook his head, drawing his own wand.

"Nah, I think I know what this is." He grew up with incredibly paranoid parents; Sirius knew what tracking charms felt like.

Sure enough, a few diagnostic spells revealed at least four different trackers embedded in the letter, and with a growl Sirius dismantled them all.

Charlie edged closer, chest pressing against Sirius' shoulder as he eyed the parchment warily. "Should we open it and copy it for Harry, or...?"

"I don't think that's necessary." Sirius couldn't feel any other magic on there; if Dumbledore had any other trackers, they were nothing he'd ever seen before, and he'd seen a *lot*.

"Besides, look at that thing." He glanced down at the envelope, a proud grin sliding across his face. "If I'm not mistaken, there's a badge in there."

Charlie's eyes widened, and he leaned in to get a better look, his body warm against Sirius' back. "You think— quidditch captain?" he asked excitedly.

"Unless they've rescinded your brother's prefect badge," Sirius replied with a snort. He pecked Charlie on the cheek, picked up the envelope, and held out a hand. "Let's go give this to Harry so we can find out, yeah?"

Charlie grinned at him, fingers twining together, and together they apparated home.

Sirius didn't feel any alarm from the wards as they stepped through — not like he had at Grimmauld with those tracking spells triggering all sorts of warnings — so he assumed he'd managed to get rid of everything. He smirked to himself; take that, Dumbledore.

The sound of laughter and splashing ringing through the air made them pause in their stride, and the pair turned away from the path to the front door, heading around the back to the pool. It seemed the boys were taking advantage of the glorious sunshine, though Sirius would bet Draco had a strong Sunblock charm on that fair skin of his. Narcissa was out there too, sprawled gracefully in a sun lounger at the edge of the pool, wearing a swimsuit and reading a book while the boys tossed a beach ball back and forth.

"Well this looks like much more fun than we were having at Grimmauld," he drawled by way of greeting, smirking at the trio. "Remus and Severus not joining you?"

"Sn— Severus is brewing," Harry informed him, still tripping over the man's first name. Sirius could understand that; he still forgot half the time himself. "Moony said he might be out in a bit, but he's going down to the lab for a while first." Harry made a slight face, which made Sirius fight a smile. His poor pup, struggling with the active sex lives of the adults in his life.

To be fair, Sirius had struggled with the concept of Moony and Snape for a while, but after living with the pair for this long — not to mention all the teenage years living with Remus and learning *far* too much about his sexual preferences while drunk — he was just happy to see his friend happy, and equally happy that they kept their antics to spaces Sirius didn't frequent anyway.

Which was more than he could say for his godson and Draco, getting handsy all over the bloody house. Teenagers!

"Well, I've got a present for you, pup," he announced, brandishing the envelope dramatically. "Mayhem, did your booklist arrive?"

Draco made a face at the nickname, which he still wasn't sold on. "This morning," he confirmed, frowning slightly. "Nothing for Harry, though; it was strange."

“Dumbledore was having some trouble getting tracking charms to stick on something going to an Unplottable property,” Charlie supplied wryly as Harry hauled himself out of the water, pushing his wet hair back off his face. It warmed Sirius’ heart to see the teenager looking so healthy, even if there were all those scars on his back and legs. He was as tall as Charlie, now!

“He decided to have me deliver it personally,” Sirius added, handing it over once Harry had cast a Drying charm on himself. Wandless, too, the little powerhouse. “Don’t worry, I dismantled all the charms before I came home.”

“I could’ve just copied off Draco’s list, it’ll all be the same,” Harry said, frowning slightly. “You should’ve just burned the damn thing.”

Sirius smirked to himself. “Don’t be so hasty, there, kiddo.”

His suspicions were correct — as Harry peered into the envelope, his eyes went wide, and he dug out the small red Quidditch Captain badge with a look of awe.

“I— but— it should be Katie’s!” he protested, staring at the badge.

“What is it?” Draco asked, getting out of the pool and striding over. “Oh.” He looked at the badge, then grinned. “Congratulations, Scarhead. You won’t need me to sneak you into the Prefect’s bathroom anymore.”

Sirius could have done without hearing that.

“But it should be Katie’s, she’s been on the team longer. I was *banned* last year!” Harry protested.

“Only because of Umbridge,” Draco pointed out, rolling his eyes. “Maybe Katie turned it down. Look, there’s a letter in there, too.”

Sirius watched Harry properly empty the envelope, tossing aside the book list — which Charlie caught, pocketing for later — and focusing on another piece of parchment attached.

“It’s from Professor McGonagall,” Harry explained, shock still in his voice. “Well, it’s from Katie, passed through McGonagall. She says McGonagall offered her the captaincy but she turned it down to focus on her NEWTs, and—” He looked up, smiling slightly. “She says getting into pro quidditch will be easier if I have two years as captain under my belt, rather than just one. But she’s happy to help me out with it all if I end up really busy with all my other stuff again.”

Sirius wasn’t the only one who snorted — *all his other stuff*, that was an understatement to say the least.

“You’ve earned that badge, Harry,” Draco insisted. “You’re the reason Gryffindor wins as often as it does. You deserve it.”

“He’s right, kid,” Charlie piped up. “I’ve talked enough quidditch strategy with you to know you’ll be a brilliant captain. And if you ever need advice, well; you can take your pick from

me, Ollie or Angie.” He gave that dimpled smile that Sirius loved, and Harry grinned back.

“Quidditch Captain,” he murmured, looking down at his badge. Sirius clapped him on the shoulder.

“Proud of you, kiddo,” he said, heart squeezing fondly at the way his godson’s face lit up. “And hey, now I’m a free man I’ll be able to come see you play.” He hadn’t watched Harry in a quidditch match since that disastrous game in his third year where the dementors had swarmed him.

“Really?” Harry asked hopefully, and oh that broke Sirius’ heart a little bit, that he seemed so surprised that Sirius might actually want to come and support him like that.

“Every game Dumbledore will let me,” Sirius vowed earnestly.

With any luck, he’d have Harry’s whole career to watch him play quidditch, but he wanted to start as early as possible. He’d missed enough as it was.

.-.-.-.

After the booklists arrived, it was decided that Harry and Draco would take separate trips to Diagon Alley, for safety reasons. Harry couldn’t really argue with that; he and Sirius got stared at enough as it was, without adding Draco and Narcissa to the mix. Diagon was a dark place these days, and Harry just wanted to get in and out as quickly as possible.

So he went first, with Sirius and Remus, apparating into the alley on a slightly grey afternoon. There wasn’t much Harry needed, really; Snape — *Severus*, Merlin, he’d never get used to that — had assured them he would take care of both boys’ potions ingredients, and Harry could have owl-ordered all the books and writing supplies he needed. But he needed new Hogwarts robes thanks to what he suspected was his final growth spurt, and that could only be done at Malkin’s.

Besides, Remus said it would be good for morale if people saw Harry out shopping for his school things.

Now that he was in Diagon, Harry wasn’t so sure about that.

The alley was certainly... different. The first thing Harry noticed was how empty it was; the few people who were there walked quickly and kept their heads down. No one stopped to chat, or called cheerful greetings.

Then he realised how many of the shops were empty. He’d heard, of course — the twins had told him about Fortescue closing up only days before someone smashed the shop up, and it had been in the *Prophet* when Ollivander mysteriously vanished one night. Even Luna wasn’t sure where her great-grandfather was, and Harry knew the Ravenclaw girl was worried about him. The further down they walked, the more it seemed shop owners had decided not to risk staying open in case Voldemort and his people took offence to that.

“It’s the first war all over again,” Sirius murmured grimly, a hand on Harry’s shoulder as they hurried towards Flourish and Blott’s. Luckily the bookshop was still open, though the only other customers seemed to be Hogwarts students.

They bought Harry’s new books quickly, then headed over to Malkin’s to get him measured up. The usually chatty witch was almost silent as she worked, her face lined and her eyes darting fearfully towards the doors. She didn’t look Harry in the eye, not once in the entire time he was in there.

It was something Harry was beginning to notice — though there were far fewer people in the alley than usual, all of them seemed wary of him. It hurt, realising how deep Dumbledore’s claws had gotten into all of them, how easy it had been to convince them that Harry was under some sort of mysterious dark influence.

Harry tried not to let it bother him — he had plenty of people supporting him, after all — but it still weighed on him inside. It was going to be another difficult start to the school year, if everyone thought he was dangerous again.

To cheer them all up, and to kill time while Madam Malkin made Harry’s robes, the three of them headed to Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes. It was easily the busiest shop in the entire alley; there was something to be said for seeking laughter in a time of fear.

The twins seemed a little star-struck at having both remaining Marauders in their shop at once, practically tripping over themselves to show Sirius and Remus some of their new products. Harry hung back with Angelina near the till, watching in amusement.

“Congrats on the badge by the way, Captain,” she said teasingly, grinning at him. Harry blushed.

“Katie told you?”

“When she gave the letter to McGonagall to pass to you, yeah. Made us all promise not to tell you ’til you got the badge.” Angelina winked. “Didn’t want to ruin the surprise.”

“I’m just glad I get to play again full stop, let alone captain the team!” Harry had truly been worried that the Ministry would have found a way to keep Umbridge’s ban in place, just to spite him for making them look bad.

“You’ll do great,” Angelina assured. “You’ve got a lot of work ahead of you, but at least you’re not rebuilding the entire team.” He still had Katie, and Vicky, and even Ginny. “I have every faith you’ll keep the Gryffindor win streak going.” Her gaze grew devilish, and she smirked. “You’ll have me and Ollie to answer to if you don’t.”

Harry snorted. “Aye, Captain.” He would do his best.

“Just do me a favour and don’t put those idiot beaters from the Ravenclaw match back on the team,” Angelina added, making a face.

“I might not have much choice.” If no one even halfway decent tried out, he’d be screwed.

Angelina was saved having to come up with some kind of sympathetic reassurance by the return of the four troublemakers to the till, Sirius with a basket full to bursting with prank goods while Remus had his own much more manageable stack.

Harry stared at the pile as the twins began to ring everything through, his eyes round. “I am so glad I’m heading back to school soon,” he declared, and Sirius barked out a laugh.

“What do you mean, pup? This is all just stuff to get you and your boyfriend with before you leave again.” His grey eyes danced even as he attempted an innocent face, and Harry eyed him warily.

“You sure that’s a war you want to start, Padfoot?” he asked. Sirius’ smirk widened.

“Try us, Mischief.”

Well, he couldn’t say Harry hadn’t warned him. The green-eyed Gryffindor turned to the twins, who were watching the exchange with poorly-veiled glee. “Okay, boys, help me out here. Give me your best stuff.”

He was met with identical smirks, and as George grabbed him by the arm and dragged him into the back room, Harry was sure he heard Sirius cursing, while Remus just laughed.

.-.-.-.

Despite the regular night-time trips into Voldemort’s head, Harry was starting to enjoy his routine at Seren Du; with Sirius free and no one expecting Harry to spend part of his summer elsewhere, it was turning out to be the best one yet. The Death Eaters even seemed to be slowing down their assaults, frustrated with how quickly the Order managed to mobilise against them every time. These days, most of Harry’s visions were of the Dark Lord torturing his own servants.

Of course, not everything could go to plan; not for Harry Potter. So when he saw the owl speeding towards him as he and Draco finished playing quidditch, his stomach sank.

“I know that owl,” Draco said, narrowing his gaze. “Whose is it?”

Harry looked up at the approaching bird, frowning; it was definitely familiar, but not one he immediately recognised. It was only when the owl was hardly a few feet away that Harry recognised it, and his stomach sank. “It’s Sully’s,” he realised, holding out an arm for the owl to land on. It was only a small thing, and it tried to be as gentle as possible, though it held its burden out with urgency. Why was Sullivan writing to him?

He opened the letter, dread building with every line.

Harry,

I need help. My parents have joined Him. They don’t want me Marked yet, but they want me doing His bidding, and are to present me to him tomorrow. Can you get me out of here? ASAP? I’m worried what will happen if they take me to Him, everyone knows I’m friends with you.

Sully

“Fuck,” he muttered, looking up at Draco with panicked eyes. “We have to get him out of there.” If Sullivan’s parents took him to Voldemort, the Dark Lord could rip through his Occlumency barriers and learn all about Harry’s plans.

“How?”

The owl stayed on Harry’s shoulder as the two boys hurried back towards the house, clearly expecting a response.

Harry knew that Tonks was the only one home; Sirius and Remus were out on Order business, Snape and Charlie were both working, and Narcissa was over at Malfoy Manor. Tonks wasn’t even supposed to be there long, just hanging out after a training session so the boys could fly without breaking the rules.

“Tonks!” Harry called, hoping the auror wasn’t getting ready to leave. “Tonks, where are you?”

Tonks came hurrying out from the direction of the kitchen, his wand raised warily. He blinked at the sight of the two teens and the owl. “What’s the matter?”

“The Fawleys have turned Dark,” Draco told him grimly.

“You know my friend Sullivan?” Harry pressed, and Tonks nodded, “he just wrote; he needs sanctuary, as fast as possible. His parents want to take him to meet Voldemort tomorrow.”

Tonks swore, and Harry could practically see him mentally switching to auror mode, his shoulders tightening like he was about to duel. “Bugger. Right. We can’t go in and get him ourselves, not without risking making everything worse.” He sent a warning look at Harry, who couldn’t even be completely offended — going in and rescuing Sully in person *had* been on his list of options. “Is that his owl?”

“Yeah. Waiting for a reply.”

Tonks nodded, and looked frantically around the hallway. Then he dug into his pocket, pulling out a chocolate frog card. “Portus.” The card glowed, and Tonks held it out to Harry. “Send him this; it’ll take him to the Pottery wards when he says your name. I’ll take you over there to wait for him.” He glanced at Draco. “Are you okay to wait here? The others will worry if they come home to an empty house.”

Draco gave a short nod. Harry summoned writing supplies, scrawling out a quick explanation and tucking the card securely into the envelope. He attached it to the little owl’s leg, hurrying over to the still-open front door. “Fly quickly,” he murmured to the owl, watching it take off into the bright blue sky.

He turned back to the others, frowning; he had no idea where Sully lived, no idea how long that might take. “We should eat something and head over there,” he suggested, and Tonks nodded.

"I was just about to call you in, anyway; Ceri made lunch," he replied. Turning for the kitchen, Draco reached out, catching Harry's hand and bringing it to his lips.

"Be careful, won't you?" he said, and Harry smiled.

"We'll be fine."

He trusted Sully not to let the portkey fall into the wrong hands.

.-.

Harry and Tonks waited outside the gates of the Pottery for hours. Harry was a little surprised that Tonks didn't switch back to his usual female form, but he didn't ask; if he was comfortable, that was all Harry cared about.

They chatted while they waited, though both were regularly checking their watches, shifting anxiously from foot to foot. At last, there was a burst of colour, and Sully appeared with the chocolate frog card clutched in his hand, a backpack slung over one shoulder. He was pale, dark eyes full of stark relief. "*Thank you,*" he gasped, grabbing Harry in a tight hug. Harry hugged back, feeling the younger boy practically collapse against him.

"You're safe," he promised. It took a few moments for Sullivan to gather himself, stepping back with a deep breath. The Ravenclaw looked around.

"Tonks?" he checked, and the auror grinned. Sullivan's eyes widened just a fraction, trailing over his masculine form. "You look great."

There was a strange edge to his tone that had Harry tensing, but the look in Tonks' eyes was almost... sympathetic?

"Where are we?" Sully asked, peering around in confusion. Of course, he couldn't see the house.

"Oh. The Pottery can be found on the northeast edge of Thetford Forest," Harry told him. At once the boy let out a gasp, whipping around to stare at the manor through the open gates that had suddenly appeared. "Come on, let's get you settled in."

"The Goldsteins have turned, too," Sully told him as they headed down the drive. "Anthony's pretending to be a sleeper agent. He won't get Marked, not when he can pretend to be on the Light side. I wouldn't have either, but... Anthony's better at Occlumency than I am. And he knows less. I talk to Luna a lot," he added in explanation. Harry nodded in understanding, though the knowledge still sat sour in his belly. Anthony might know less than Sully, but he still knew enough about Harry's personal life, and his history with Dumbledore.

Harry just hoped Voldemort didn't feel the need to truly press the Ravenclaw for information.

"So be careful what we say around Anthony in future," he finished with a grimace. Sullivan nodded. A sudden thought struck Harry. "Do the Death Eaters know you know about the Goldsteins?" If they were hoping to use Anthony as a sleeper agent, they would not be

pleased if they realised Sully had spilled the beans. They might give Anthony a different task, or do something far worse.

Luckily, Sully shook his head. “No, I don’t think so. Anthony sent me a letter because he overheard my dad talking to his dad about Death Eater stuff.”

Keep treating Anthony as normal, then. Right. They would have to get the word out discreetly. Harry wondered if Draco still had any of his password-protected ink, or if he’d have to ask the twins for more — Anthony’s idea to lie low and play Death Eater was a noble one, but Harry needed to make sure his friend knew he had other options.

The residents of the Pottery were surprised to see Harry, but Tinker quickly appeared, then went to retrieve Theo. The Slytherin, as Harry’s closest friend amongst the residents, had become the unofficial welcome-wizard for any new arrivals.

“Sullivan,” he said in surprise at the top of the stairs, hurrying the rest of the way down to meet the trio. “What happened?”

Sully gave a quick explanation, and Theo scowled. “He’s going after the peripheral families, then. Means he’s run out of known Dark families to ask.”

Harry doubted there was that much *asking* involved. “That’s not a good sign.” How many other kids at Hogwarts would find their families turning to Voldemort, would find themselves caught up in it all?

“I’ll send Susan a letter. She’ll know what to do,” Theo said resolutely. Sully perked up.

“We can still write to people from here?” he asked hopefully. To Harry’s surprise, it was Tonks who answered.

“As long as you trust them,” he confirmed, then winked. “You can still write to me, don’t worry.”

Since when did Sully and Tonks write to each other? Sure, Harry might have seen the pair of them chatting for a while at his birthday party, but… he shook his head — that was beside the point, and none of his business.

“I need to get back before people start to worry,” Harry said, checking his watch; Sirius and Remus would probably be home by now. And if he didn’t get back soon, Draco might come after him himself, apparition license or not. “Theo, are you good to show Sully around?”

“Yeah, no problem.” Theo clapped the Ravenclaw on the shoulder, offering a small smile. “Come on; you look like you could do with something to eat.”

Some of the tension began to seep from Sullivan’s shoulders, and he offered Harry a grin that was only a little bit strained. “Thanks for all this, Harry. I… I don’t think I could do what Anthony’s doing.”

“Happy to help,” Harry said with a shrug, “and we’ll figure out what to do about Anthony later. See what Susan says.” Harry was happy to defer such decisions to her; she was the

strategy master of their group, after all.

They said their goodbyes, Tonks ruffling Sully's hair fondly, and then the pair of them headed to the edge of the wards to apparate home.

"I didn't know you and Sully were friends," Harry commented, and Tonks smiled.

"Sully's a good kid," he replied. "Needs a bit of help figuring some things out. But we're getting there."

Harry blinked at him, then shook his head slightly, leaning into Tonks' side ready to apparate home.

Again; none of his business.

.

There were five cauldrons simmering at once, and Severus went over his mental checklist, wondering if he had time to start anything else before lunch.

"Remind me again why you're doing this and not Slughorn?" Remus asked from his usual chair in the corner, brows drawn together in amusement. Severus scowled.

"Because Horace has been retired for fifteen years and I don't trust his ability to brew more than one cauldron at a time," he retorted evenly. This was all the regular stock for the Hospital Wing, and he wanted to make sure it was up to standard. Especially with the year ahead looking so fraught.

He anticipated a lot of his Slytherins ending up under Pomfrey's care, and he'd be damned if he let them take inferior medication.

Remus snorted quietly. "Albus might make suspect decisions, but I'm sure he wouldn't hire Slughorn back to teach Potions if he wasn't still competent."

"Debatable," Severus retorted, levitating some powdered bicorn horn with his wand, making sure the exact amount entered every cauldron at the exact same time, turning the liquid inside a vivid red. He reversed the direction of the stirring rods, keen eyes watching every cauldron. "I don't believe that getting me into the Defence position was Dumbledore's only reason for hiring that old social climber."

He saw Remus' gaze narrow. "What do you mean?"

Severus paused, wondering how best to word things so he didn't unnecessarily alarm his partner. "There are other Potions Masters who would quite happily take a position teaching at Hogwarts, even under the current political climate. Ones who wouldn't be quite as... high maintenance as Horace Slughorn." The face Remus made had a soft snort escaping Severus; they both remembered all too well what Slughorn was like, trying to ingratiate himself with any student he thought might have a future in something he could profit off. He was a passable brewer, but Severus knew better. He certainly knew better Masters who would not insist on collecting students like trophies.

“But what could Albus gain from having Horace back?” Remus paused. “You think his Wizengamot seat, perhaps?”

“That is likely some of it,” Severus agreed, adjusting the heat of the flames beneath his cauldrons. “However... Horace taught for a very long time before his retirement. Almost as long as Albus, even.” His lips thinned. “Long enough to have taught young Tom Riddle.”

Remus, ever quick on the uptake, looked at him in alarm. “You think he knows something?”

“I think Albus suspects he knows something.” Albus was horcrux-hunting now, the incident with the ring had made that clear. Bringing back Horace Slughorn was no coincidence. “And I think Albus is hoping the chance to teach Harry Potter himself is enough to loosen the man up enough to share his knowledge.”

A faint growl emerged from Remus’ throat, sending a prickle of something not quite fear but not quite arousal down Severus’ spine. One of these days he would have to address his inappropriate reactions to his partner’s wolf-noises, perhaps.

“Should we be worried about Harry?” came Remus’ immediate concern. Severus shook his head.

“I’ve told him to try and keep in Horace’s good books. Find out whatever it is Albus is after, if he can. But he’ll be fine — he’s got sensible friends, even if he defaults back to an idiot Gryffindor.” He smirked slightly. “Draco will keep him in line.” Severus wasn’t worried about Harry Potter; not as far as Horace Slughorn was concerned, at least.

Remus chuckled. “I suppose. Poor bugger, having to deal with the Slug Club,” he teased, laughing at the reflexive shudder of disgust Severus gave just hearing the name. So much of his school time wasted while that odious leetch tried to draw him into some *lucrative* potions scheme or another.

“If it gets us a step above Albus, it’ll be worth it.” Harry could handle it. He was used to people trying to manipulate him for his fame.

Finally, Severus was able to add his last ingredients to the cauldrons, using a tricky bit of magic to make sure everything was added in perfect intervals, identical in every one. He could feel Remus’ gaze on his back, still impressed even after he’d seen Severus do this a thousand times by now. And yet it still made pride flutter in Severus’ stomach, just a little.

“I still don’t see why you’re taking on this workload,” the werewolf sighed. “You’re the Defence teacher now, this isn’t your responsibility.”

“Technically it is,” Severus countered, striding over to lean against the wall beside Remus. “Albus left providing for the school *optional* in Horace’s contract — I suppose the old slug refused to spend his summer slaving away in a lab.” He sneered to himself. “Anything Horace chooses not to brew is passed on to me. And, as you can see, Horace chose not to brew anything at all.”

Not that Severus would have let him brew for the school anyway — as he'd told Remus, he didn't trust the man to make so much as a Pepper Up in bulk.

"Bastard," Remus muttered with a faint scowl.

"Merlin forbid I have anything else to do with my summer," Severus agreed wryly. Remus smirked, arm sneaking out to latch around Severus' waist, pulling him over until the Slytherin was stood in front of his seated partner.

"Little does he know," Remus teased, amber eyes dancing. "How much longer do these have left?"

Severus didn't even bother looking back at his cauldrons to check how they were doing. "Twelve minutes." He raised an eyebrow at his lover, one hand resting on the back of Remus' neck, leaning over him just a little. "You don't have to stay down here if you're bored."

"I'm not bored," Remus assured, arching into the touch. "But no one else is home, and I was quite hoping to use that opportunity to do something other than watch you brew." His gaze turned intent, and Severus swallowed.

"We have the house to ourselves for at least another two hours." For once, everyone else had scheduled things to do all on the same day. Severus bent down just enough to plant a whisper of a kiss on Remus' eager lips. "Be patient, wolf," he drawled, eyes alight. "I assure you, it will be worth it."

Remus let out a tiny whine as Severus pulled back, chasing his lips hopefully. Severus resisted the urge to give in — if they got distracted now, the last hour and a half of work would be wasted.

Eleven minutes. They could control themselves for eleven minutes.

Chapter 84

It was one of the rare times Harry and Snape were training together, without Draco or anyone else involved. They were only a few days away from returning to school, and the Slytherin was pushing Harry to his limits, making absolutely sure they had done everything they could. Not that their lessons would end when school began — Harry was fully expecting a slew of detentions in his future — but there were certain spells Snape wouldn't risk even in the Chamber of Secrets.

But after a full summer of pushing himself, Harry was very much starting to see the benefits; these days, duelling against Snape had him winning just as much as he would lose.

This was not one of those times, though; Harry blinked his eyes open to discover himself lying on the floor, Snape stood over him with a faint smirk on his face. Harry huffed, but accepted the hand to pull him to his feet.

"That frustration will get you nowhere," Snape warned him. While Harry was getting better at using the man's first name out loud, he would still only ever think of him as Snape.
"Remember, your duel with the Dark Lord is not likely to last as long as I have been training you for."

"But how many people will I have to fight to get to him?" Harry retorted, running a hand through his hair.

"Should the battle go as planned, not nearly as many as you seem to expect." Snape shot him a pointed look. "We are not sending you out onto a battlefield alone, Potter."

Harry knew that, but he also hated the idea of any of his friends throwing themselves between him and a Death Eater's wand. "It still doesn't feel like enough," he insisted. "I mean, I know you're one of Voldemort's best, but if I can't even guarantee a win against you..." He clenched his teeth in frustration. "He's going to be so much more ruthless than even you will be." He knew Snape was duelling him as he would were he a loyal Death Eater, but the man couldn't deny he was still treating this as a training setting, not a proper battle. He never threw anything that would actually kill Harry before they got a chance to reverse it.

"Look at me, Potter." Harry's gaze snapped up automatically, conditioned by years in the classroom with this man. Snape's dark eyes were intense as he stared Harry down. "You are capable of defeating the Dark Lord." His voice was clear, curt, with absolutely zero doubt to it. Harry gaped at him. "You may have seen him duelling Albus Dumbledore and been impressed, but we both know neither of them were truly aiming to kill in that duel. They were aiming to intimidate. You have seen the way the Dark Lord fights when his emotions get the better of him; he is sloppy. Foolish. Far too arrogant — there is a reason he surrounds himself with so many powerful, competent fighters. Those fighters will be busy elsewhere when the final battle comes." The man smirked slowly. "If nothing else, letting the Dark Lord know you have destroyed all his horcruxes will surely cause him to lose his composure long enough for you to finish him off."

Harry wished he could have the same level of confidence. “Provided we *have* destroyed all his horcruxes by then,” he retorted. “We don’t even know how many are left.”

“As I told you, I suspect Albus knows the answer to that. Or at the very least, he knows someone who might.” Snape had already shared his suspicions of Slughorn with Harry, and Harry had absolutely no idea how he was supposed to make this man like him enough to share such sensitive information. Snape seemed to be confident it would be easy for him.

“That’s the other half of my problem, though,” Harry burst out, “Dumbledore has been trying to get at me all summer, and I’m walking right back into his clutches! He’s going to be making my life hell enough as it is without me trying to suck up to Slughorn right in front of him!”

Snape didn’t look bothered in the slightest. “Albus is dying,” he said bluntly. “He knows his time is limited. The only manipulations he cares about now are the ones that will set his legacy in stone — not with the Wizengamot, or even as headmaster of Hogwarts, but as the mentor of the Boy-Who-Lived, defeater of the Dark Lord. His rumour-mongering in the *Prophet* is all to paint himself as the kindly, concerned guardian trying to pull back a poor young man from the clutches of the Dark. Either he will *succeed* — in that you will kill the Dark Lord — or he will fail, and the public will rally behind him in the face of a new threat; you.”

Harry’s stomach churned at the thought of Dumbledore manipulating the public so thoroughly that they truly believed Harry would turn Dark. Sometimes he felt like they were already halfway to that belief.

“But surely he knows I’m not just going to stand back and let him claim he mentored me?”

“No, he expects you to die in the battle in order to release that horcrux in your skull, remember?” Snape retorted sharply. “Then he can claim whatever the bloody hell he likes before he dies. Worse, if he dies at my hand — which he fully expects to do — he won’t need to claim *anything* because the public will create the story for him.”

“I’m not letting that happen,” Harry retorted automatically, earning a glare.

“Yes, because the story that will come from *you* killing Albus is so much better.”

“No, but the story that comes from me telling the public everything he’s done to me *is*,” Harry insisted, not backing down. He had more optimism than Snape, at least with regards to changing public opinion on Dumbledore. Amelia and Mrs Frobisher were working on it.

“As long as you are careful, Harry,” Snape said, and Harry never knew what to do when the man’s voice softened like that — the same voice he spoke to Draco with.

“I will be,” he promised. “But being careful with Dumbledore won’t get me very far if I can’t defeat Voldemort when the time comes. Duel me again.”

Snape stared at him for a moment, then sighed, but obligingly drew his wand.

....

Lying under a blanket on a conjured futon in the back garden of Seren Du, staring up at the stars with Draco curled up beside him, Harry was fairly sure he'd found the definition of perfection.

It was a beautiful cloudless night, still surprisingly warm even with the sun long since set. The whole thing was Draco's idea — teasing Harry about his Astronomy grade, saying he spent too much time indoors to even recognise stars anymore. So they had set up their little haven, with hot chocolate delivered by Ceri; the closest they could get to a date night while cooped up in Seren Du.

Harry pressed a kiss to Draco's hair, hand running gently up and down the blond's side. "This was a really good idea," he said softly, feeling Draco smile against his collarbone.

"It was, wasn't it?" he agreed, only a little smug. His fingers curled slightly around Harry's hip, just beneath the hem of his t-shirt. "I'm glad the weather worked out for us. I was worried we'd only have cloudy days before we had to go back to Hogwarts."

Harry sighed quietly; school was approaching far, far too close on the horizon for his liking. "I don't want to go back," he confessed. "I wish we could just stay here until I turn seventeen." Then he would have his full adult power, could finally take on Voldemort and Dumbledore both. But there was work to do in the mean time.

"Quit being such a pessimist, Potter," Draco scolded lightly. "This year won't be nearly as bad as last. No Umbridge, no awful exams, and a reason to put two fingers up at Dumbledore. Not to mention, we won't have to pretend to hate each other any more." Thanks to Narcissa's bold moves over the summer, everyone knew that the Malfoys were on the side of the Light — and that Narcissa and Sirius had reconnected as family.

"I'm looking forward to that part," Harry agreed with a slight smile, pulling Draco up gently to kiss him. "Maybe we'll be out properly before the end of the year." He wanted that, so very badly, but not at the expense of Draco's safety.

"Mm, we'll see how it goes," Draco agreed, their foreheads pressing together. Harry's glasses dug into his cheek a little, but he didn't care. "There are a lot of good things ahead. Even Dumbledore can't ruin that."

"I suppose." It was hard for Harry to remember all the things he was worried about when Draco was winding his fingers through his hair, lips skating down Harry's jaw.

The conversation was derailed as they kissed languidly, Harry slowly turning boneless beneath his boyfriend's fingers. Their touches weren't designed to arouse — they might feel alone out there, but they were both aware their guardians were still in the house and perfectly capable of looking out a window — but Harry arched up into Draco regardless, wishing it were somehow possible to get even closer, to surround himself with the blond's scent and warmth and love. Draco removed Harry's glasses so he could kiss him better, and the Gryffindor grinned playfully.

“How will I see the stars, now?” he asked, making Draco snort.

“You gave up on the stars ages ago,” he teased. “But if you want to go back to them, by all means...”

Harry whined, kissing the smirk off those pale pink lips.

They did eventually settle back down to look up at the stars, not wanting to waste such a gorgeous night. “I’ll admit,” Harry said after a long silence, “I’m glad that this time I’m leaving Sirius a free man. He won’t be trapped alone in Grimmauld.” That had been one of his biggest worries the year before, carefully watching the shadows in his godfather’s eyes whenever they spoke in the mirror.

“Even if he were still on the run, he wouldn’t be alone,” Draco pointed out. Harry hummed; that was true. Narcissa and Remus were planning on sticking around. And, of course, there was Charlie.

“Even better.” He smiled, thinking of Sirius and Charlie, how he’d been so perplexed by the unlikely couple at the beginning of summer. Now, he couldn’t imagine either of them with anyone else. They just *worked*. “I never thought I’d see him as happy as he is with Charlie.”

“They are certainly smitten,” Draco agreed. “The only worry you should have about leaving your godfather to go to school is the pair of them eloping while you’re gone.”

Harry laughed quietly. “Padfoot wouldn’t do that. He’d never miss an excuse for a party.” When he and Charlie got married, it would be an *event*, not an elopement.

Draco hummed, conceding the point. “Well, it’s one less line for you to provide an heir for, at any rate,” he remarked. “Which can only be a good thing, considering how many houses you’ve got to your name.”

Harry tensed, ever so slightly. He hadn’t thought about it like that; of course, any kids Sirius had would be more direct Black heirs than Harry. “Oh.” He bit his lip anxiously, staring up at the twinkling stars. “I mean... it wouldn’t be so bad to have enough kids for each house, would it?” His hand settled on the small of Draco’s back. “And the Malfoy line, of course. Four is a pretty reasonable number. Five if Sirius and Charlie don’t have kids.” Not that he could see that happening; Charlie wasn’t shy about voicing his hope to be a father in future.

“That’s four times we’d have to find someone willing to carry for us,” Draco pointed out. His tone was frustratingly even. Harry tilted his head, looking the blond in the eyes.

“But would you want to? If we could?” They’d never spoken about kids before, not really. Harry held his breath, waiting for a response.

“I... I hated being an only child,” Draco said eventually. “Father was only interested in securing an heir; once he did that, he was satisfied. And most pureblood families have trouble carrying to term these days — all the in-breeding, I suppose. Mother’s pregnancy with me was difficult, I don’t think they wanted to risk a second.” Harry saw Draco’s throat bob. “I

always expected to be married off to someone who would only want the same. An heir to the Malfoy line, and nothing else.”

“I’d have a whole quidditch team of kids if we could manage it,” Harry blurted, unable to hold it in any longer. He turned his gaze back to the stars, not wanting to risk seeing Draco’s judgement. “I know we probably won’t — though I bet there’s plenty of women who would happily carry for the Boy-Who-Lived, but... I don’t care about heirs or lines or any of that. I just... I love kids, Draco. Can we—I mean, do you—“

Draco cut him off with a firm kiss, and the knot of tension in Harry’s chest began to unravel. “As many as you want, Potter,” he promised, grinning against Harry’s lips. Harry sucked in a sharp breath.

“Really?”

“We can certainly afford it,” Draco pointed out. “I... the only thing I know about being a father is what *not* to do, but I’ll learn. I want to learn.” He pulled back, smirking slightly. “I’d have more kids than the Weasleys with you, if we could.”

“Maybe we could adopt some,” Harry suggested. “Orphans. Like I was.” Like Tom Riddle had once been. Kids who deserved to be shown what a family really was.

“Magical orphans with no other family are rare, but I’m not adverse to it,” Draco replied. “And Pansy has already agreed to carry at least one for me. Granted, we made that deal when we expected to be betrothed to each other, but she’s told me she’ll still honour it. As long as I agree to father a Parkinson heir for her should she manage to avoid marrying. Not the traditional way,” he added hastily, seeing the alarm on Harry’s face. “With spells.”

“Oh.” Harry frowned, confused. “Does Pansy not think she’ll get married, then?” Harry didn’t know much about Pansy, but he knew she wasn’t dating anyone.

“If Pansy marries, it’ll be out of expectation, or financial security,” Draco replied. “She doesn’t do relationships, or sex, or anything like that. The muggles have a word for it, she told me. Ar...Ae... Asexual, I think she called it.”

Harry remembered seeing books and things with that in the title, back at Infinite. “Oh. But she’s always so flirty?”

“She thinks it’s fun. And it’s a power play thing,” Draco dismissed with a vague gesture. “People will do a lot for you if they think they’ll get something in return — especially if they think they might get sex out of it. I keep telling her it might backfire on her one day, but she’s not bothered. Her mother taught her a Castration charm when we were teenagers and adult men started leching on her.” Harry shuddered. “She would’ve been happy to marry me, if we’d been forced into it — I wouldn’t expect anything from her like that. And she likes the idea of being a mother. So we agreed that unless she was forced into another betrothal contract, I would father the Parkinson heir for her to raise unwed. A bit scandalous, but not the end of the world.”

"Is she likely to be betrothed to someone else?" Harry asked in mild horror. He knew marriage contracts were a pureblood thing, but they seemed utterly barbaric to him.

"If her father manages to survive the war with his reputation in tact, yes," Draco replied. "He's determined to marry her off as soon as she graduates."

Harry's nose screwed up in disgust, and he made a mental note to keep an eye out for Mr Parkinson on any future battlefields. "That's awful. None of our children are ever getting betrothed," he declared firmly. Draco gave him a fond smile.

"Yes, dear," he agreed obediently. "Though not all betrothals are bad. Millie's been betrothed to some German boy since they were twelve — he goes to Durmstrang — and she's absolutely head over heels for the bloke."

Harry hadn't known that, either — he really had to get to know Draco's friends better. Though it was difficult, with both girls still pretending to be loyal future Death Eaters.

"Well I'm glad for her, but we're still not forcing our kids into anything they don't want."

"Absolutely," Draco confirmed, all teasing gone from his voice. "Our children will be able to love whomever they please, or no one at all if that pleases them too." He dropped another kiss on Harry's lips, and pulled back smiling. "All twelve of them, or however many we manage to gather."

Harry laughed, and suddenly the blanket was tangling around their legs as he rolled them over, pinning Draco to the futon, stars utterly forgotten about. "I love you," he whispered, heart so full he thought it might burst. Draco smiled back, then paused.

"We can wait until I've finished my healer training though, right?" he checked, suddenly looking wary. "I'm not sure I can handle fatherhood and that at the same time."

Snickering, Harry nodded. "We can wait," he assured, stroking Draco's temple. "We'll have all the time in the world."

With a future so bright to look forward to, Harry would do anything to make sure they could have it. No matter how many Dark Lords or controlling headmasters stood in his way.

.-.-.-.

They should have seen it coming.

It was the last day before school was due to return, and the occupants of Seren Du were gathered for one last family dinner. Ceri had outdone herself, cooking all of Harry and Draco's favourites, and even Snape was in good spirits — as much as Severus Snape would ever express positive emotions, even in front of family.

Then, before they could even get to dessert, a huge silver lynx burst through the wall. Harry jumped to his feet abruptly — that was Kingsley's patronus. "The Ministry has fallen. We have Amelia at the Den. Medical help required."

The lynx faded, leaving behind a horrified silence. Then, Snape stood.

“I’ll get my kit,” he declared. “Charlie, Remus, I’ll need you two with me.”

“I need to go to the Manor,” Narcissa said, frowning. “Draco, darling, you too — we may have some new arrivals and I could use an extra wand.”

Draco nodded, following his mother without hesitation.

“I’ll go to Grimmauld; the Order is bound to gather once they realise what’s happened,” Sirius decided. “Sorry, Ceri; looks like cake will have to wait.”

The house elf’s ears drooped slightly.

“Remus, I’m coming with you guys,” Harry insisted, turning plaintive eyes on the werewolf. “I’m not sitting here all alone. I can be useful.” Kingsley had said *we*, but not said how many that counted. Or how many were in need of medical care.

Remus frowned at him, then gave a short nod. “Fine, I don’t have time to argue with you. But if it looks like there’s going to be *any* danger, you apparate back here, okay? I know you’re capable of it.”

Harry nodded; he wasn’t stupid.

Snape didn’t look completely surprised to find Harry striding out of the house alongside them, merely adjusting his satchel on his shoulder and disappearing as soon as he hit the ward boundary. Remus grabbed Harry for the trip — Harry had never actually been to the Den.

It was the name they used for Remus’ cottage, not that the werewolf had lived there for quite some time now. But it was a good stopping point for people who did not know the secret of Grimmauld or the Pottery, and could not be trusted to Seren Du. Though Harry wasn’t sure why they’d gone there instead of Longbottom Manor. Susan would want to know her aunt was safe.

Harry’s stomach churned as he hurried down the path behind Snape, unsure what they might find in there.

Kingsley met them at the door, looking grim. “This way,” he directed, heading straight into a cosy living room. Harry walked straight into Charlie’s back as the dragon tamer stopped dead in the doorway.

“Percy!”

Wide-eyed, Harry peered past Charlie; sure enough, Percy Weasley was lying on the floor, dangerously pale and holding a blood-soaked rag to his side. Beside him, Amelia Bones was unconscious, with strange black marks like veins stretching across her face and neck. Snape swore, going straight to the woman, opening his satchel. Remus went to his side, waiting for instruction, and the movement jolted Charlie out of his stupor — he hurried to kneel at his brother’s side.

“What the hell happened?” Harry asked, glancing at Kingsley. The bald auror didn’t look too worse for wear, though his robes were singed in several places and there was a thin cut on his head sluggishly dripping blood behind his left ear. Harry gestured to it, and the man grimaced, healing himself.

“No one was expecting it. I’m not exactly sure how it began; one minute I was in Amelia’s office discussing dementor sightings, the next someone’s running down the corridor yelling that the Minister’s dead and You-Know-Who is in the building. We were over-run with Death Eaters before we could even raise the wards.” Kingsley’s mouth turned in a disgusted scowl. “Tonks and I were the only aurors actually fighting on behalf of the Ministry.”

“Where is Tonks?” Harry asked worriedly, looking around as if the other auror might pop up out of nowhere.

“She went to Headquarters to muster the Order,” Kingsley assured. “There’s little good they can do now, but Dumbledore will suspect if we don’t go straight to him on the matter. But Tonks is fine, only a few bruises.”

Harry slumped in relief, looking back at the gathering on the floor. Whatever Snape was doing seemed to be working; the black veins had mostly receded, though Amelia was still unconscious while Snape waved his wand and murmured over her, Remus feeding potions carefully into her mouth. At least Percy’s injury seemed an easier fix, Charlie carefully directing his wand to knit the wound back together.

“How did Percy end up with you?” Harry knew from a few cryptic comments made by Charlie and Bill that the redhead’s devotion to the Ministry was not all it seemed, but he couldn’t see how that may have led to this.

“I was trying to escape the Death Eaters that killed the Minister,” Percy piped up. “And smuggle out some files at the same time. I bumped into Auror Shacklebolt and Madam Bones right as Madam Bones was hit with whatever spell made her unconscious. I carried her so that Aurors Shacklebolt and Tonks could keep fighting our way out of there.” He spoke clinically, like he was delivering a report on the subject, but Harry could see the fear in his eyes. “I—we didn’t expect them. Minister Scrimgeour just had a meeting with Augustus Rookwood. I knew he was a Death Eater, but I didn’t—I wasn’t expecting this to happen. There was nothing I could do. I had to get the files out safely.”

“Why, to stop Scrimgeour being exposed as a fraud after his death?” Kingsley asked sharply. Percy glared at him.

“I couldn’t give a fuck about Scrimgeour; those files are the only paper evidence we’ve got of Dumbledore bribing Ministry officials!” he retorted hotly. Harry wasn’t the only one who gaped at that.

“Easy, Perce,” Charlie soothed, squeezing his brother’s shoulder. “It’s alright. No one’s going to hurt you here, or turn you in; Bill and I can vouch for you.” He looked up at Kingsley, daring him to argue. “And I bet Amelia would love to see those files of yours, once she’s awake.”

Percy looked mildly offended that his brother was somehow on first name terms with Amelia Bones. Nonetheless, he reached into a pocket of his robe, pulling out a stack of shrunken files. “I hope I didn’t bleed on them,” he fretted, setting them aside to resize. His hands shook violently, crumpling the parchment. “They’re in a shorthand form I created. I’ll have to translate.”

“You can do that later,” Charlie scolded with a smile, ruffling Percy’s short curls. “Once you’ve had some sleep. Hey, Harry, can you see if there’s a Blood Replenisher in Severus’ bag?”

Harry hurried to kneel by the bag, digging through for the familiar crimson potion without disturbing Snape’s actions.

“Why did Severus come with you, anyway?” Kingsley asked, eyeing the man as he finally lowered his wand, flexing his shoulders. “I thought you were all at home.”

Harry froze, meeting Charlie’s panicked gaze. “He’s Draco’s godfather,” he blurted, thinking quickly. “He came to have dinner before school starts back up.”

Kingsley frowned slightly, but nodded.

“She will live,” Snape declared, sitting back on his heels. “She will be weak for the next few days, and should avoid doing too much magic. But she will live.”

Kingsley visibly relaxed. “Thank Merlin. We can’t lose Amelia, not after losing Scrimgeour too. Thank you, Severus.”

Snape just nodded. “Mr Weasley, do you have any other injuries?”

Percy became a deer in the headlights under Snape’s gaze, but he shook his head. “Uh, no, sir.”

“Good.” The Potions Master got to his feet, picking up his satchel. “I should get to Headquarters. Albus will want to know why I was not *informed* of this development,” he said with a sneer, giving Remus a quick glance that spoke volumes before he squeezed past Kingsley and left the room.

His words triggered something in Harry’s mind — or, rather, pointed out the glaring *lack* of something. “I didn’t feel it,” he realised, heart sinking. “This whole time — I didn’t have a vision or anything. And I can’t feel his emotions.” Voldemort would be happy — happier than he was even when he had broken his most loyal out of Azkaban. And yet there was no overwhelming feeling of triumph in Harry’s chest, not even a buzz of satisfaction. His scar didn’t ache, his head wasn’t pounding, his vision wasn’t blurring like he was about to drop into a vision at any time.

Nothing.

“Perhaps he’s finally started blocking you?” Remus suggested, mouth a thin line. “You haven’t had any sort of vision in a while, now, have you?”

Thinking back, Harry realised the man was right; it had been at least a week since his last vision. In his determination to be prepared for school to return, he hadn't noticed; merely been thankful for getting decent amounts of sleep.

"I... what does that mean?" Harry asked helplessly. Voldemort had known about the connection between them since he had used the false vision to try and lure Harry to the Ministry — had it taken him this long to realise that Harry could see into his mind even when uninvited? Was he using the same methods as Harry, now, to keep his side of the connection closed?

Did he know what the connection meant?

"It means I need to call Bill," Charlie declared, blue eyes daring Harry to argue with him. "We're taking you to Gringotts. Tonight."

Harry opened his mouth to protest, but his words quickly died; if Voldemort was going to block him out so thoroughly, what was the use in maintaining the link?

"Charlie's right, cub," Remus said, squeezing his shoulder. "If he knows how to block you, he might figure out the rest. We can't have that. Best to cut the link now to avoid the risk." He looked at Harry knowingly. "You couldn't help anyone anyway, if he's blocking you out now. The only things you'll see are things he wants you to see."

Harry's shoulders slumped; they were right, and he knew it, but it still felt like a failure to admit it. His visions had been the one thing that made him feel like he wasn't completely useless in this fight, tucked away behind the wards of Seren Du.

"I'm not going to ask what you're talking about," Kingsley cut in, frowning slightly. "It's not my business. But if you need to talk to Bill, you'd best move quickly; Merlin only knows what Albus will ask of the Order in the wake of all this."

Charlie nodded. "Perce, have you got somewhere safe to go?"

"I have my flat," Percy started, but Charlie shook his head.

"You live alone, that won't slide with me, kid. Come on, you can crash with Bill and Fleur for the night."

Charlie hauled his younger brother up to his feet, and the pair of them left the living room; a few moments later, Harry heard the whoosh of the floo.

There was silence, and then Kingsley let out a long sigh, sinking down into a nearby armchair. "Well, I think it's safe to say I won't be going in to work tomorrow," he remarked, and Harry let out a snort, even as fear tangled in his belly.

Voldemort finally had control of the Ministry. Where did they go from there?

It wasn't long before Charlie returned with Bill, both of them grim-faced. They had left Percy to be fussed over by Fleur, it seemed.

Harry expected Remus to come with him, but the werewolf shook his head. "I'm going to get Amelia back to Longbottom Manor," he explained, carefully lifting the unconscious woman. "I can explain everything to Susan and Augusta, so they know how to look after her." He looked up at Charlie, eyes serious. "Be careful out there. Bring him home as soon as you're done. I'll let Sirius know where you've gone."

Charlie nodded, hand settling on Harry's shoulder. "We'll keep him safe, Moony," he promised.

"I'll keep both of them safe," Bill assured with a small grin. "Come on, then, kids."

Bidding goodbye to Kingsley and Remus, Harry followed Bill and Charlie through the floo. They arrived in a part of Gringotts Harry had never seen before; an office block type room, full of goblins and humans alike. Their entrance drew some raised eyebrows, and one goblin hurried over.

"It's time for the ritual?" he asked in a voice like ground gravel. Bill nodded.

"As soon as possible. I'll get him prepped."

The word sent a shot of alarm through Harry — he was led down a narrow corridor and into a small room, empty but for a single metal wardrobe. Bill reached inside, pulling out a sleeveless grey robe. "Put this on," he urged. "Take everything else off, even your pants, and your glasses. We won't look," he added with a wink, him and Charlie both making a show of covering their eyes and turning around. Despite the seriousness of the situation, Harry snorted. His heart raced a mile a minute as he fumbled with the buttons of his shirt, but soon he was dressed in nothing but the robe, his clothes in a pile on the floor.

Bill nodded in approval, and rummaged through the cupboard a second time, coming out with a small clay pot. "Okay, now stand still. This might burn a bit."

With that ominous warning, Bill began to daub some kind of ointment on Harry's face. It did tingle, a little like the muscle balm he sometimes used after quidditch, but the sensation was bearable. It took a few moments to realise that Bill was drawing runes on him, rather than just swiping the stuff on at random. Harry tried not to even twitch, not wanting anything to smudge. Bill drew the runes all over his face and arms, then nodded again. "Good. Okay, you're ready. But... I'm going to need you to trust Charlie to look after your wand for a bit."

Harry's stomach lurched — surrender his wand? When Death Eaters had just taken the Ministry?

"I'm sorry, but it'll interfere with the ritual," Bill told him, crystal blue eyes sympathetic. "I'll be there the whole time, I won't let anything happen to you. Besides," he added with a smirk, "from what I've heard, you hardly need that wand to do damage."

He had a point. Harry squared his shoulders, then offered his wand to Charlie, who took it with gentle hands. “I’ll keep it safe,” he promised, tucking it securely into his breast pocket.

There was a knock on the door, and Bill opened it to see a stern-faced goblin, who took one look at Harry and nodded.

It was time for the ritual.

The Gringotts ritual room *hummed* with magic. Harry could feel it dance along his skin, the crystals embedded in the stone walls glowing with an ethereal light, making the polished stone floor glitter with a riot of colours. It was beautiful, but Harry could hardly focus; not just because he’d left his glasses behind in the other room.

In the centre of the room was a cluster of people, and Harry could make out a ritual circle drawn on the ground. It was too fuzzy for him to see the details, but he would hazard a guess to say it was the same circle that he’d found in the book in Salazar’s library; or at least based off that circle.

Bill led him to the centre of it, where two more humans were waiting with a goblin. “Harry, all we need you to do is sit down in this spot,” the eldest Weasley directed, helping Harry to sit exactly in place. “Hands on the floor — there you go, perfect. You don’t have to do anything to participate in the ritual; sit still and let us do the work. Just, y’know— if it feels like it’s trying to latch on, give it a bit of a shove for us, yeah?”

His jovial tone wasn’t enough to hide the undercurrent of worry, but Harry pretended it had, grinning back. “Will do.”

Hopefully after all his meditation and practice with recognising foreign magic due to Dumbledore’s compulsions, he would be able to feel the horcrux and give it a hand on its way out.

Harry heard a quiet squeaking noise, and craned his neck to see one of the other humans in the room bringing in something that looked like a small metal box. It squeaked louder, and Harry realised in horror that there was some kind of animal in there; a rat, or something similar.

Of course, the ritual had described transferring the horcrux from one living host to another.

“You ready, Harry?” Bill called. Harry tensed, then gave a hesitant nod. Butterflies swarmed furiously in his stomach, and he swallowed them down resolutely. He would be fine. Bill was confident this would work.

All at once, the room filled with murmurs of a language Harry didn’t recognise, and the ambient magic seemed to *sharpen*, focusing on Harry. Harry breathed deeply, sinking into the best meditation he could manage in such a nerve-wracking situation, making sure not to fight the magic as it washed over him. It felt like ants beneath his skin, searching, converging on his scar with an unbearable itching sensation. But Harry had endured worse, and Bill had told him not to move.

The chanting curse-breakers grew louder, the ants grew more vicious. Harry grit his teeth against the urge to cry out as he felt something start to *tear* inside his skull.

Bill was right that the magic would try and latch on. The horcrux had been in place for almost fifteen years, and it was not giving up without a fight — but Harry was ready, and he was stronger than this pathetic little scrap of Voldemort's soul. He gathered his own magic, shoving it alongside the ritual magic, forcing the soul out of his body. He could hear screaming — his own, perhaps, or maybe the horcrux's — and then there was a blinding wave of pain, like his head was about to split in two.

And then silence.

Harry sucked in a sharp breath, blinking his eyes open. He didn't dare move, in case the ritual wasn't over. He could hear footsteps, and the rat in the cage was screeching up a storm.

Then someone slid Harry's glasses onto his face, and the world came into focus; Bill stood in front of him, grinning, sweat glistening on his brow. "Hey, kid. How you feeling?"

"My head hurts," Harry replied, his voice raspy — maybe it had been him screaming. Bill chuckled, helping him to his feet, bracing him when he wobbled and almost fell over.

"Yeah, sorry about that. But you can take a potion when you get home, that should help. Hey, stand still a second for me, yeah?"

Bill moved away, and Harry planted his feet while the redhead checked him over with his wand. A huge smile broke across his face. "It's gone," he confirmed. "No trace of it left." He turned to one of his coworkers, calling something in what sounded like Arabic, and Harry was scanned a second time by an older man with a salt and pepper beard. The man frowned, doing another set of spells, then gave a decisive nod.

"No foreign magic," he confirmed, speaking English for Harry's benefit. "The horcrux has gone, and as far as I can see it has not left any damage behind. Bill, you will monitor his progress, yes?"

"As best I can while he's at Hogwarts," Bill confirmed, stepping in to sling an arm around Harry's shoulders once more. That seemed to satisfy his coworker, who nodded and went to help the rest of the team clear up.

"Snape can help with monitoring," Harry offered. "If there's any specific spells you need to use or anything."

"I'll get in touch with him about it," Bill confirmed. "We're not really worried, but considering none of us have done this before... it'll just be to make sure there's no lingering effects on your own magic. It was part of you for a long time, after all." He squeezed Harry's shoulder at the green-eyed teen's alarmed look. "Don't worry, magic is resilient — your magic especially. You've a strong core, I'm sure it'll plug the gap in no time."

He turned, directing Harry over to the side where someone had set the metal cage. It was indeed a rat inside; a huge grey one, its beady eyes staring at Harry as its tiny body heaved

with panicked breaths. “Guess we’ve just got to dispose of this little bugger and then it’s another one ticked off the list.” The redhead glanced at Harry. “Any preferences?”

“As long as it’s definitely dead, I don’t care.” Harry just wanted it *gone*.

“Fair enough. Step back, then. Might as well make sure it’s done properly.”

Harry did so, and Bill raised his wand, blue eyes narrowed in concentration. The rat stared back, like it was aware of what was to come.

“*Fiendfyre*.”

...-.-.

Charlie and Harry appeared at the edge of the wards to Seren Du, and immediately Sirius lunged forward, wrapping them both in a hug. “How did it go? Are you okay?” he asked urgently, pushing back Harry’s hair to survey his forehead. The scar looked fresh and raw, like it did after one of his visions, but Bill had told him the wound would probably heal for good now the dark magic was gone. Harry would have to keep a glamour up, if he didn’t want Dumbledore to realise what he’d done.

“I’m fine. It’s gone,” Harry confirmed, leaning into his godfather’s touch. Merlin, he was exhausted. “How are things at the Ministry?”

“ Fucked, but there’s nothing we can do about it,” Sirius answered with a grimace, arm slipping around Harry’s waist to help him back towards the house. “He’s claimed the building, so anyone who works there will either follow orders or just not go back.”

“What do we do now?” Fear gripped Harry’s chest — if Voldemort had the Ministry, would it even be safe to go back to Hogwarts?

“We get you to school tomorrow, because as much as I hate Dumbledore, that snake-faced bastard won’t touch you if you’re in the castle.”

“What about everyone else?” Harry pressed — what about all the Ministry workers who *didn’t* support Voldemort?

Sirius’ face turned grim. “We’ll worry about that later.”

When they stepped inside the house, Draco was right at Harry’s side, grey eyes worried.

“I’m fine,” Harry assured, stepping out of his godfather’s embrace and into his boyfriend’s. “I’m just tired. The ritual took a lot out of me.” Even his *magic* ached, though he wasn’t sure how that was even possible.

“Go on up to bed, cub,” Remus urged — Harry hadn’t even realised the werewolf was there. He looked up, blinking, to find the entire household was gathered in the entrance hall, staring at him with varying degrees of concern. “It’s late, and you’ve got to go to school tomorrow.”

Harry coughed a laugh — it was hard to imagine something as mundane as riding the Hogwarts Express when the Dark Lord had just stormed the Ministry.

For once, he trusted the adults when they said there was nothing he could do. And he *was* tired. “Okay. I’ll, uh, see you all in the morning.”

“Come on, Scarhead,” Draco murmured, helping him towards the stairs.

Harry grinned. “You’ll have to think of something else to call me when this heals,” he retorted playfully, and Draco rolled his eyes.

“I’m sure I can think of something.”

He walked with Harry to the Gryffindor’s bedroom, deft hands unbuttoning Harry’s shirt, gently running over his shoulders as he eased the garment off. Whatever the stuff Bill drew runes on him with was, it had disappeared by the end of the ritual. Harry let Draco undress him, and crawled into bed to watch the blond strip down to his underwear, shuffling in beside him. “Won’t be able to do this when we get back to school,” Draco sighed, leaning in for a kiss. Harry hummed sadly — that was the worst part about going back, in his opinion. He’d grown entirely too used to having Draco around to cuddle all the time.

After a Headache Reliever followed by a Tooth-Cleaning charm and half a glass of water, Harry sank back against the pillows with a relieved groan, snuggling into Draco’s side.

“I expected to feel it missing,” he admitted quietly. Draco stroked his hair, humming.

“Maybe you will, once the dust has settled,” he murmured. “But maybe you won’t. It was never truly part of you, after all.” Dry lips pressed to Harry’s temple. “I’m just glad it’s gone. I hated the thought of him having access to your mind. Hated even more having to watch you get pulled into his.”

Harry burrowed closer, wrapping himself around Draco so excessively it made the blond huff with laughter. “I just hope I don’t regret it.” Whatever Voldemort did next, there would always be a small part of Harry wondering if he could have stopped it, if he’d kept the horcrux for just a little bit longer.

But he couldn’t let himself go down that path; not if he wanted to keep his sanity. Whatever was coming would happen, and they would face it the best they could.

Chapter 85

No one at Seren Du was particularly thrilled about taking the trip to King's Cross the next morning. Snape left before anyone else, as he would be heading to the castle directly; he dropped the *Prophet* in disgust and stalked from the kitchen, Remus following hot on his heel, and when the werewolf returned ten minutes later the Potions Master did not come with him.

Harry didn't blame Snape for being too angry to continue reading the newspaper; he himself almost set it on fire accidentally. The front page, naturally, declared that Minister Scrimgeour was dead. However, it also talked about Voldemort's take-over of the Ministry as if it were a mere staffing change; it was clear the Death Eaters had control over the newspaper, too.

There went any form of reputable national news — though the *Prophet* had been barely reputable to begin with.

With little information to go on, Harry was half expecting the aurors to come for him at Platform 9&3/4, to drag him kicking and screaming to Voldemort himself under some bullshit arrest warrant. On the contrary, the platform was quiet — far quieter than it should have been. It seemed like there were a fair number of students who had chosen not to return — or, Harry realised with sickening clarity, had not survived the summer.

Only Sirius and Narcissa came with them to the platform, Remus and Charlie saying their goodbyes at the house. The two boys garnered some looks, arriving together, but Harry ignored them; people would soon find out that he and Draco had been friends all along.

"Stay safe," Sirius murmured, pulling Harry into a tight hug. Harry hugged him back, desperately wishing that Sirius' first time seeing him off to school was under better circumstances.

Next year.

"You, too," Harry replied, giving his godfather a warning look. "Keep me updated on anything important."

"Will do, kiddo." Sirius reluctantly let go, kissing him on the forehead. "Love you."

"Love you, too."

Harry let Narcissa kiss him on the cheek, the Malfoy matriarch warning him to be careful and take good care of her son. That got a small smile out of him, and a sincere nod.

Harry saw a cluster of redheads approaching — much smaller than usual, just Mrs Weasley, Ron and Ginny, with Hermione walking alongside them. Harry wondered how Mr Weasley was taking the whole Ministry situation. At least thanks to Bill, they knew he'd made it out unscathed.

Mrs Weasley caught sight of them and sent a glare to Sirius, and the dog animagus rolled his eyes. “I think we’re gonna get going. Call me soon,” he added to Harry, squeezing Draco’s shoulder. “See you both at Yule, if not sooner.”

The two boys headed to find a compartment, and Harry smiled when they found Luna, Daphne and Blaise waiting for them in their usual spot. “Morning, gentlemen,” Blaise drawled in greeting. “Finally going public, are we?”

“Just as friends,” Harry explained, hoisting his trunk up into the rack. Daphne snorted.

“For now, at least,” she remarked. Harry didn’t have it in him to argue; she wasn’t wrong.

They didn’t have to wait long for Ginny and Neville to find them, Ginny letting out an exaggerated sigh of relief as she dropped into a seat. “Thank Merlin I can finally spend several months with people who are not Ron,” she announced, making Harry laugh.

“I’m sorry I left you to the wolves this summer,” he joked, “but at least you had Neville. And Susan.”

Ginny glanced at her boyfriend, who blushed faintly. “Yeah, and the twins were always willing to let me hang around, even if Mum went mental at the idea of me being in Diagon with things as they are.”

The train started to move, jolting Harry against Draco’s side.

“How’s Amelia doing anyway, Nev?” he asked, and the other Gryffindor’s smile faltered.

“She was awake long enough to say goodbye before we left, but she wasn’t up for coming to the station,” he relayed. “Gran’s called a healer friend of hers to come check on her, though.”

That was good; Snape might know a hell of a lot about both Dark Arts and Potions, but he was not a trained professional, and they didn’t want to risk missing something.

The questions prompted an explanation to the others about what had happened the night before; they only knew what they’d heard from the *Prophet*.

As with last year, the journey to Hogwarts was interspersed with visitors, several of whom looked taken-aback to see Draco sat so companionably beside Harry. Though truthfully, there weren’t many of their friends who didn’t know the truth by this point — far too many of them just looked smug at the sight of the pair.

Susan and Theo were some of their first visitors, Susan’s face a little drawn. Harry shuffled over, making room for them to sit. “Neville said your aunt woke up?”

Susan nodded. “I hated leaving her like that, but she said she feels okay, just tired. I suppose I have Professor Snape to thank for that.”

“I think he’d rather you never mention it again, in all honesty,” Draco drawled, making Susan giggle.

"We have some other news," Theo said, his hand in Susan's and his hazel eyes bright. "I got a letter from my family solicitor this morning. My father was one of the people killed in the Ministry yesterday."

Harry tensed. What could he say to that? Theo seemed to sense his dilemma, as he gave a sharklike grin. "Don't apologise; he was a piece of shit and he deserves to be dead. But the better news is, once I turn seventeen in January, I'll be free. And, like most idiot Death Eaters, his will handed both my guardianship and the house proxy over to Lord Malfoy — which in his absence goes to Lady Malfoy." He turned his grin on Draco. "Looks like we're foster-brothers until January."

Draco laughed. "Congratulations. Welcome to the family, I suppose."

"I can go back home, when this is over." The awe in Theo's voice was palpable.

"I'm happy for you," Harry said sincerely. Theo nodded to him.

"I wouldn't have lasted this far without your protection, Harry," he said solemnly. "I'm in your debt."

"There are no debts between friends," Harry corrected, smiling. Theo blinked. Then, slowly, he smiled too.

"Okay, then."

"Have you heard from the girls?" Blaise cut in, frowning. Theo shook his head.

"Got a letter from Millie a week into summer, nothing since. Ever since Draco and I defected, I think her dad is reading her letters."

Harry felt Draco's shoulders tighten at his side. "I hate that we've left them to put up with Crabbe and Goyle, and Tracey Davis."

"You and me, both," Theo agreed. "But they're safer that way. We all are. The Dark Lord needs to feel like he's got some kind of foothold in the school."

"Did Susan tell you about...?" Harry trailed off, and Theo nodded.

"Doesn't surprise me the Ravenclaws got turned first. They've always been closest to Slytherin."

"We'll have to keep an eye out." There were bound to be more students in all houses with parents who had turned, and possibly even some students who had turned entirely independently of their families. Harry wasn't so naive to think that Voldemort's rhetoric wasn't appealing to certain types of people.

Namely, people who were sick of Albus Dumbledore's bullshit.

This year, Harry would change that. He would offer an alternate option to both, and perhaps he could save a few souls from being Marked.

Susan and Theo left when the trolley came around, promising to pass everyone's regards on to the Hufflepuff contingency. Harry didn't miss the way both of them had their wands out when they returned to the corridor.

It was a sad day when even the train to school felt like a potential battleground.

Most other visitors didn't stay long, just sticking their heads in to say hello — there were no questions about peoples' summers, or joking complaints about resuming classes. Everyone knew that their summers had been grim, and after what had happened at the Ministry they all had bigger problems than classes. Harry hated how many of his friends had hardened gazes these days, tight smiles and slightly hunched shoulders.

Lavender was the most cheerful of the bunch, thanking Harry for the flowers he'd sent her and congratulating him on his OWL results. Harry had almost forgotten about the whole thing, it felt like so much had happened since then.

A few people stopped long enough to ask Harry about the HA, but he had very little to offer them — he wasn't supposed to know about Snape being the new DADA teacher, and he wasn't sure what his schedule was going to look like, so all he could say was 'we'll see'. He was starting to get a little sick of it all, and was just considering putting a privacy ward on the door when there was a knock and Sully stuck his head in. "Hi, guys," he greeted, smile flitting across his face. "I, uh, how is everyone?"

"You look like you have something you want to say, Sullivan," Luna said airily, ignoring the question, and Sully laughed.

"Never could get one past you," he sighed, running a hand through his hair. "But yes. I, uh — I've been talking to Tonks a lot this summer. About some stuff. And I think... I'm not a boy." Sully bit his lip, looking anxious. "Or a girl. I... I'm somewhere in the middle."

"...Okay," Harry said slowly, eyeing the fidgeting Ravenclaw. "So... do you want to switch pronouns sometimes, like Tonks? Or are you okay with he but just wanted us to know?" The books he'd bought from Infinite had a lot of information on the subject of gender, and Harry was amazed at how varied things could be, at how little he'd really considered it himself.

"I—I want to use they/them pronouns. So you say they and theirs instead of he or his," they added at Neville and Ginny's confused looks.

"Sounds good," Draco agreed, turning back to his book. Sully blinked, startled.

"I—that's okay?"

"Of course!" Luna beamed at them. "We just want you to be happy."

"I've never really heard of that before, but I'll try my best to remember," Ginny added. "And if anyone gives you shit for it, send them my way, yeah?"

Sully's frame visibly relaxed, a wide smile crossing their features. "Thanks. I—just... thanks."

"I've got some books back home you might like, if you want to borrow them," Harry volunteered, then glanced at the rest of the compartment. "Or if any of you want to take a look. To understand things a bit better."

"That would be great, Harry," Neville said, quietly relieved. He looked up at Sully. "Like Ginny said, I don't really know what that means, but I'll do what I can to make you happy. And I'll apologise now if I slip up or say something I shouldn't."

"Oh, no, it's fine," Sully assured quickly, going wide-eyed. "It's unusual, I know, it'll take some getting used to. But... I've never felt comfortable, being a boy. I didn't really know why until I met Tonks. And I'd like to see if this feels better." They laughed. "I still slip up sometimes, I'm not expecting you all to be perfect!"

"Then I'm glad you and Tonks met," Harry said with a grin.

"Me, too," Sully said softly. "And... thanks for getting me out of my parents' house. I... they sent a howler, once they realised I was gone. It was pretty brutal."

All of them frowned, and Ginny, as the closest to Sully, reached out to squeeze their arm. "That's rough, I'm sorry," she murmured. Sully shrugged.

"It's about what I expected — how I've let the family down, I should be smart enough to recognise what the winning side is, all that."

"You are smart enough," Daphne remarked, smirking. "That's why you're here with us."

Sully grinned back. "That's exactly what Theo said."

All of a sudden, there was a knock on the door, and a timid third-year Hufflepuff girl peeked in. "Hi. Sorry. I'm uh, supposed to give these to Harry Potter and Neville Longbottom," she said breathlessly, awe in her eyes as she handed parchment to Harry. Then she glanced at Draco, and squeaked. "Oh." Her wide brown eyes trailed the whole compartment. "Wait. Are you Blaise Zabini?" Blaise nodded, looking baffled. "There's one for you, too." She handed over the scroll, then disappeared.

"Well," Sully murmured. "On that note, I'm out before I get dragged into any of your weird shenanigans. See you later!" They left before any of the crowd could protest the shenanigans comment.

Harry frowned down at the scroll, opening it. As he read, his heart sank.

"So it begins," Draco murmured amusedly, kissing his cheek.

"Who's Professor Slughorn?" Neville asked, staring at his own scroll in confusion. "What does he want?"

"New Defence professor?" Blaise presumed, and Harry grimaced.

"Not quite. Potions."

The dark-skinned Slytherin's head snapped up. "Does that mean...?"

"Yup."

Neville groaned quietly. "Just when I thought I was rid of him," he said in despair. Harry chuckled.

"He's not all bad."

"You have to say that, you're dating his godson," Ginny retorted mutinously. "Well, have fun at your *lunch date*, boys." She kissed Neville, then shoved him to his feet.

Harry very much did not want to go, but he had promised Snape he would try and get on Slughorn's good side. So he pecked Draco on the lips, and the three of them left the safety and peace of their compartment, heading into the train corridor.

Harry had expected the staring. The whispering, the not-quiet-enough comments about his sanity or him going Dark or his supposed feud with Dumbledore.

He had not expected the giggles.

"Looks like you've still got fangirls, mate," Neville teased as a group of fourth year Gryffindor girls giggled and fluttered their lashes at him.

"Hello, Harry," one girl said boldly, her friends giggling even harder. "I'm Romilda Vane. You should come sit with us."

"Sorry, places to be," Harry replied breezily, hurrying past the compartment. He glared at Blaise and Neville when they snickered.

They weren't the only ones in Slughorn's compartment when they reached it; Marcus Belby from the Slytherin quidditch team was also there, as well as — much to Harry's dismay — Cormac McLaggen. Perhaps he was about to hear some of the bragging about Tiberius Ogden that Vicky had complained about.

"Ah, Harry, my boy!" Slughorn greeted jovially, as if they were old friends. He was a portly man, mostly bald and flushed in the cheeks, though surprisingly sprightly considering how old he must be to have taught Tom Riddle. But wizards aged differently, Harry supposed. "Delighted to finally meet you, I've heard so much about you!" He shook Harry's hand enthusiastically. "Come in, come in. Ah, and you must be Mr Zabini — you look just like your mother — and Mr Longbottom, of course! Glad you could all make it to my little party!"

The only one who looked even remotely happy to be there was McLaggen, which did not bode well. Harry shuffled in, taking a seat between Blaise and Neville. It seemed Slughorn had come prepared; there was a small buffet lunch laid out, and the new professor urged them all to take plates and napkins. "Please, help yourselves! I don't know if you know these fine gentlemen joining us—" Slughorn introduced Belby and McLaggen, neither of whom was particularly impressed by Harry or his friends.

Harry picked at the food while Slughorn continued his conversation with Belby; though it ended quite abruptly when Belby confessed he didn't have much contact with his apparently famous uncle. There was one person who likely wouldn't be getting an invite to the next gathering.

If only Harry could be so lucky.

McLaggen was happy to brag about some hunting trip he'd taken with his Uncle Tiberius, though it went south soon after he mentioned that Rufus Scrimgeour had also been on the trip. An awkward silence followed, until Slughorn cleared his throat.

"Well, then. You, my lad, need no introduction!" he announced as he turned to Harry, chuckling to himself. "The Chosen One, they're calling you now. Well, some of the time, at least. Seems the *Prophet* can't quite make their minds up about you!"

Harry gave a false smile, stabbing a little too hard at a piece of pheasant. "Of course, the *Prophet* has been known to print mistakes in the past," Slughorn continued. "But after what you and your little friends got up to at the Ministry, well—you just have to see how quiet they kept that to know there's a real story behind it!" He looked hopeful, like Harry might tell him that story. Harry cleared his throat.

"We stopped the Ministry getting taken. It's just a shame they tried again," he said, watching Slughorn's smile faltered.

"Yes, yes. Terrible business, truly terrible. But the rest of the stories about you; so sensationalised! Truly, I do wonder about them sometimes. But I asked Albus about you, of course, when I realised I'd be teaching you! Very fond of you, the headmaster — he believes with the right guiding hand you'll go very far indeed!"

Harry gritted his teeth, still smiling. Dumbledore had said that, had he? Well, he was mistaken if he thought Harry would ever let him or Slughorn be that *guiding hand*.

Luckily, Slughorn seemed to realise he wasn't going to get much out of Harry, then; he moved on to Blaise, asking about the Italian boy's mother with keen eyes.

It was an excruciating way to spend an afternoon, made only slightly better by Blaise's quiet snarky commentary whenever Slughorn wasn't paying attention. Harry had almost cursed the man when he'd started pestering Neville about his parents, despite how clearly uncomfortable the blond boy was with the subject. At last, when the setting sun began to stream through the train windows, Slughorn blinked owlishly.

"Goodness me, look at the time! You had all better go change into your robes!" He ushered them out with a genial smile, promising to lend McLaggen a book and assuring Harry and Blaise that his office door was open to them any time. It seemed Harry had passed the first test — and Neville had not, which seemed just fine by him if the look of relief on his face was anything to go by.

"Thank Merlin I'm not doing Potions anymore," Neville remarked, and Harry groaned quietly.

“Lucky bastard.”

The rest of their friends had already changed into their robes by the time the three boys returned, and they rummaged through their trunks for their own robes. “How was it?” Draco asked, shifting over so Harry could sit down once he had changed. Harry huffed.

“About as awful as expected. Apparently Dumbledore’s told him I need ‘the right guiding hand’,” he added, making a face. Draco sneered.

“Charming.”

“Isn’t he just.” Still, Snape thought it was important to be nice to Slughorn, so Harry would hold his temper.

They didn’t get any other visitors for the rest of the journey, and soon the train was pulling into Hogsmeade station. Before they opened the compartment door, Harry slid an arm around Draco’s waist, kissing him firmly.

“Merlin, give it a rest, you two!” Ginny exclaimed, poking him in the shoulder. “Godric only knows how the pair of you managed to keep this secret for so long.”

Harry grinned, unrepentant. “*Some of us* can’t snog our boyfriends in the middle of the common room,” he retorted pointedly. “It’s my last chance for a while, give me a break.”

But all the same, he reluctantly let go of Draco, and followed Neville out of the compartment.

Already, people were whispering about the pair of them sitting together for the train ride. As they headed to the thestral-drawn carriages, Harry spotted Ron and Hermione glaring daggers in his direction.

Seeing the castle looming on the horizon made something tighten in Harry’s chest — he hated feeling that way, when before the castle had been the one place he could truly relax.

He hated Dumbledore, for *making* him feel that way.

Discreetly, Draco squeezed his knee, gaze knowing.

The pair of them walked shoulder to shoulder into the castle, only stopping when they got to the door of the Great Hall. While Harry wished he could take a leaf out of Luna and Daphne’s book and kiss his partner goodbye, he had to settle for squeezing Draco’s shoulder before they parted for their house tables — and that was enough to set off a wave of whispers through the hall. Harry sat between Ginny and Neville, keeping his head down. He really didn’t want to know what people thought of him, these days.

Further up the table, Katie was sat with a few of her year mates, and she gave him a discreet thumbs up, tapping her chest where on Harry the Quidditch Captain badge was pinned proudly. Harry grinned back at her; Merlin, he was looking forward to playing quidditch again.

He looked up at the head table, trailing his gaze over the gathered staff. Snape looked as dour as always, back in full Hated Professor mode. Hagrid hurried in just as Harry was frowning at the half-giant's empty seat — he caught Harry's eye and offered a cheerful wink. A few other professors were staring back at him, too, he noticed, though none of them reacted.

He wondered what they thought of Dumbledore's insinuations in the *Prophet*.

The headmaster himself looked as delighted as ever at the start of a new school year, twinkling blue eyes surveying the gathering students. He didn't look Harry's way — did he still think Harry had Voldemort lurking inside his mind? Harry smirked to himself; if only he knew.

Once everyone was settled — a much smaller crowd than usual; there were definitely a high number of students absent this year — McGonagall led in the latest batch of first years ready for Sorting. They looked like a smaller crowd, too. Harry felt a pang in his chest; it couldn't be easy, starting Hogwarts at such a fraught political time.

He would do his best to keep them safe, however he possibly could.

The heartbreak cut a little deeper each time the Sorting Hat called Slytherin and a look of abject fear crossed the face of whichever child sat beneath it. Even those with names Harry recognised from historically Slytherin families looked uneasy at joining the silver and green table. Harry glanced across at Draco and Blaise, who both nodded fractionally.

Slytherin House would not fall prey to prejudice, not again. Not this year.

With so few first years, the Sorting didn't take long at all, and Dumbledore stood to welcome them for another year.

Harry's eyes went straight to the man's left hand, and he knew he wasn't the only one. Snape had *vastly* understated the condition of the headmaster's arm — the whole hand looked like it had withered and died, the fingers withered and black. It went right up beneath the sleeve of his voluminous purple robe; all the way to his elbow, Snape had told them. It had reached that far before the Potions Master had managed to dispel the curse magic.

What on Earth had possessed Dumbledore to put on that ring??

Dumbledore acted like he didn't notice half the school staring at his hand, sitting down again just as the tables filled with food.

"What happened to him?" Ginny asked, horrified. Harry pursed his lips.

"Looks like some kind of dark curse, I'd wager," he said evenly. The redhead narrowed her gaze at him, but wisely didn't ask anything more.

As they ate, it seemed everyone had an opinion on Dumbledore's gnarled hand; Harry heard everything from a duel against Voldemort himself to some sort of ritual gone wrong, to Harry himself having cursed the headmaster in retaliation for his words in the *Prophet*.

That last one made Harry snicker. “Should I be flattered that people think I know that kind of magic?” he asked Neville in an undertone.

“I don’t know, Mr Eight Os, would it really be such a surprise?” came Neville’s amused retort.

“Hey, Potter!” The call came from behind him; it was Zacharias Smith, at the Hufflepuff table. “So what’s the plan with the HA this year?” He dropped his voice a little, but Harry still saw several heads swivel in their direction. Harry bit back a sigh.

“Don’t know yet,” he replied, as he had done to everyone else. “Give me a few days to get my bearings, yeah? I don’t even know what my schedule is yet. But don’t spread it around, yeah? I don’t want things getting out of hand.” He didn’t want the entire school hearing about the HA and deciding it sounded like fun.

Zacharias didn’t look impressed, but merely sniffed, turning back to his food.

“You’re going to have to do something,” Ginny told Harry quietly, reaching past him as dinner vanished and was replaced by dessert, her gaze set on a decadent looking chocolate trifle. “People got way too much out of the HA to want to stop now, especially with the Ministry the way it is.”

“I know,” Harry agreed, grimacing. “I’ll figure something out.” He wanted to continue the meetings — Snape wasn’t going to be able to properly prepare everyone while still playing his role — but it was more difficult this year, with things the way they were. Many of the HA members would likely think that with Umbridge gone they could be open about the club, like it was as harmless as the Gobstones Club or Debate Society.

Harry doubted Dumbledore would let it continue that way, not if he thought Harry was turning Dark.

Then again, he might be delighted with the idea of his prize pawn training all his other pawns up, ready to die for the cause.

He shuddered, suddenly no longer as eager to eat his treacle tart as he had been a moment ago.

When dessert ended, Harry sat back to listen to Dumbledore give his usual welcome speech — and tried to act as surprised as the rest when it was announced Slughorn was taking over Potions, rather than DADA. The hall filled with the buzz of conversation, and Dumbledore let it go on for a few moments before clearing his throat pointedly.

“Now, as you all know,” he said, face turning grave, “the Ministry of Magic is now under the control of Lord Voldemort and his Death Eaters.” There were several gasps throughout the hall, and more than a few flinches. “These are difficult and dangerous times we live in, and I cannot emphasise enough how important it is to remain vigilant here at school. We may be safe from outside forces within these wards, but there is always darkness lingering within, and we must be careful.”

Several sets of eyes turned to Harry, who resolutely did not react.

“Luckily, the rather... independent nature of the school means we can continue as normal despite the interference at the Ministry, though I will ask that you all please do not fight any restrictions your professors or prefects may impose on you — we are doing it for your benefit, even if it may seem unfair at the time. And please, if you notice anything suspicious or unusual, do not hesitate to notify a member of staff as soon as possible.” He smiled warmly. “The staff and I will endeavour to keep you all as safe as possible, but that requires your cooperation. I trust you will all conduct yourselves appropriately, as I know you are all capable of.”

Harry grit his teeth — it was utterly galling, that the man could stand there and smile and assure the students he’d keep them safe, and not even *offer* for students who were in danger of falling under Voldemort’s thumb to speak to a teacher if they felt threatened or worried. Was he expecting the heads of houses to cover that? Or did he just truly not care which students he lost, as long as the *right* students did what he expected of them?

How many students would not have been sat in this hall if not for Harry or Narcissa offering sanctuary?

That seemed to be all Dumbledore had to say; he bid them a cheerful goodnight and stepped back from his podium, the cue for the prefects to begin herding first years. Harry glanced over at the Slytherin table, where Draco and Pansy were directing the new fifth year prefects to do their duties.

Ginny hooked an arm through his, dragging his gaze away. “Come on, loverboy,” she murmured under her breath, smirking. “Let’s get upstairs.”

Harry sighed, but did as bid. His bed in Gryffindor Tower was going to feel even colder than usual, tonight.

They went up to the tower within a larger huddle of Gryffindors, all sleepy and full of food and most of them too tired to care about whether Harry was secretly evil or not. In the common room, Harry smiled to himself; despite everything, it was good to be back. It felt weird, though, with all his older friends except Katie gone.

Even weirder, to look around and see how small the younger years seemed, how many there were that Harry hardly recognised. He was a sixth year, now; almost top of the pecking order. It made him feel ancient, looking at all those wide-eyed first and second years staring at him.

Stifling a yawn, he turned to head up to the dorm and get an early night — and almost walked right into Ron Weasley.

“You’ve got some nerve, y’know,” the redhead declared. Harry raised an eyebrow.

“Do I?”

Ron scowled at him. “Coming back to school, after hiding all summer like a *coward*.”

“I wasn’t *hiding*, I was at home,” Harry retorted waspishly. “Where were you all summer, then? Out fighting Death Eaters?”

Ron’s ears reddened. “I’m not the one they’re after!” he countered. “How many people died because You-Know-Who was looking for you, hmm?”

“What do you want me to do, walk up to Voldemort and hand myself over?”

Ron flinched at the name. “You could at least listen to Dumbledore, rather than just abandoning the war! He spent all summer trying to talk to you, Mum said, and you never left your bloody house!”

“I am doing more for this war effort than Albus Bloody Dumbledore,” Harry roared, temper snapping. “I’m not *abandoning* anything — I’m sixteen, Ron; I’m letting the adults handle things because I’m not even fucking old enough to use magic outside school! And I know exactly what Dumbledore wants to say to me, and quite frankly I don’t want to hear it.”

To Harry’s surprise, Ron’s gaze lifted up, just for a few moments, fixing intently on Harry’s scar. “Maybe he’s right about you, after all,” the redhead spat, “maybe you have got You-Know-Who inside your head.”

“If I did, we’d all be screwed,” Harry retorted hollowly. Then he pushed past Ron, sidestepped an indignant-looking Hermione, and stalked up the stairs to the dormitory, ignoring the eyes that followed.

He couldn’t shake the way Ron had looked at his scar — it wasn’t fearful, not like it was when he thought Harry was possessed after the incident with his dad and the snake.

It was *knowing*. Disgusted.

Exactly what had Dumbledore told Ron and Hermione, over the summer?

Chapter 86

Harry and Neville — and by association, Ginny — made sure to get down to breakfast early the next morning. Both to avoid the incessant gossip in the common room, and to make sure they gave Professor McGonagall plenty of time to sort out their schedules. The housemistress had to confirm with every sixth year that they had gained the necessary OWL grades to continue their chosen classes to NEWT level, and both boys had things they needed to confirm.

McGonagall looked a little stressed already by the time she reached them, the boys catching the tail end of a discussion with Lavender about the Divination NEWT and how Firenze would be taking the sixth years; it seemed Lavender wanted to learn from both Firenze *and* Trelawney this year. Or, rather, she wanted to learn from Trelawney and ogle Firenze. Harry smiled to himself at hearing her huff as she walked off to her first class.

“Ah, Mr Longbottom. Congratulations on your Herbology grade, I know Professor Sprout will be delighted to have you continue her class,” she greeted, making Neville smile bashfully. “I did want to discuss some of your other choices, however — while I’m very impressed that you managed an Exceeds Expectations in Transfiguration, I do have to ask if you’re absolutely sure about wanting to continue the subject. The coursework is quite intense, and being perfectly honest with you, Longbottom, I think you might struggle as the year goes on. Have you considered continuing Charms instead? Professor Flitwick has always been impressed with your work, and from what he’s told me you seem to enjoy the class far more than I can say you’ve ever enjoyed mine.”

There was no judgement in her tone, but Neville flushed.

“Gran says Charms is a soft option,” he mumbled, and McGonagall huffed.

“But you, Longbottom? What do you think?”

I— I like Charms. Um. Better than Transfiguration? Sorry, Professor.”

McGonagall’s lips twitched with faint amusement. “My class is not for everyone. Now, you could always continue both—” Neville shook his head in mild alarm, “I thought not. I suggest you continue Charms, and I will remind Augusta that just because she failed Charms, that does not make it a *soft option*.” Her gaze turned pointed, and Neville gaped. Evidently, his gran had not shared *that* part of her opinion on the subject.

“Y-yeah, that sounds great. Thanks, Professor,” he stuttered, shoulders slumping in relief. Harry grinned encouragingly at him; they both knew that only his determined studying with the heirs had brought his Transfiguration grade up from an A to a low E, and Neville had spent half the summer worrying about taking the NEWT and failing dismally.

McGonagall tapped his schedule with her wand to rearrange it, and handed it over. Then she turned to Harry, who straightened up under her gaze. There was pride shining in those dark

green eyes, and he fought back a grin. “Mr Potter. Your OWL grades were as I expected they might be, very well done.”

“Thank you, Professor.”

She looked down his schedule, frowning. “This is going to be quite the busy schedule for you, Potter. Are you sure you want to continue seven subjects?”

“I, ah, was actually thinking about dropping Herbology. Sorry, Nev,” he added sheepishly, but his friend just waved him off.

“I’m ditching you in Potions, it’s only fair,” he joked.

McGonagall nodded in approval. “Sensible. Six is still a large course load, but considering your performance in recent years I can’t see you having a problem with it. Professors Babbling and Vector have both seen your OWL papers, and are very much looking forward to having you in their class.”

Across the table, Hermione Granger choked on her drink. “He what?” she spluttered, wide-eyed. “But— Professor, are you saying he’s taking Arithmancy *and* Ancient Runes for NEWT? But he didn’t even take the OWL classes!”

McGonagall narrowed her eyes, unimpressed. “Mr Potter self-studied for his OWLs in both subjects, which is a perfectly reasonable pathway. He has achieved the grade requirements for both classes.”

“But he’ll be so behind, he won’t know any of the things we worked on last year!”

“As they were OWL level projects, I daresay he won’t need to,” McGonagall retorted primly.

Hermione turned to Harry, brown eyes imploring. “Harry, don’t be ridiculous, really; you’ll just fall behind, they’re really difficult classes!”

“I got Os in both of my OWLs, Hermione, I’m sure I’ll be fine,” he replied evenly. That, if possible, made Hermione’s eyes widen even more.

“You— you got Os? But… but that’s not possible. I only got an E in Ancient Runes!” she screeched, and Harry had to pull on all of his Slytherin training to avoid smirking right in her face.

“Then I suggest you worry about your own class performance and leave me to mine.” He turned back to Professor McGonagall, who once again was pointedly not reacting to the conversation. “Six subjects sounds great, Professor. I’m excited to start NEWT Transfiguration.” He wished he could show her his animagus form. Perhaps later, once he knew she was truly trustworthy.

She adjusted his schedule and handed it over, a small smile crossing her features. “Glad to hear it, Potter. Oh, and by the way, I have a list of hopefuls for the Quidditch team, whenever you’re ready to organise tryouts.” She turned, facing the pair across the table. “Now, Mr Weasley — I thought you wanted to be an auror?”

Harry turned back to his breakfast, listening with half an ear as McGonagall gently harangued Ron into continuing Potions, since Slughorn accepted E students. The redhead didn't look thrilled by it, but obviously his desire to be an auror won out — and the hope that Slughorn might be less awful than Snape.

Harry looked down at his schedule; he had Ancient Runes first period. Annoyingly that meant dealing with Hermione all in a tizzy, but on the bright side he knew Draco would be in that class.

Bidding goodbye to Neville, who had a free period first thing, Harry set off. Unsurprisingly, Hermione hurried after him. "There's no way *you* got Os in both Runes and Arithmancy," she declared, and Harry kept walking, unfazed.

"Well, that's what my results said, so I guess I did," he replied.

"There must have been some sort of mix-up," Hermione insisted. Harry shrugged.

"If there was, we'll soon find out, won't we?" he said. "But again, I suggest you focus on your own classwork — it won't make any difference to you how well I'm doing, will it?"

Then he picked up his pace, grateful for his growth spurt giving him longer legs to get away from her nagging.

.-.-.-.

Runes was a much more enjoyable class than either Divination or CoMC had been, and Harry was excited to be able to study the subject properly rather than just working on summers and over the mirror with Sirius and Remus.

Draco was mostly just entertained by Hermione Granger glaring daggers at the pair of them through the entire thing.

The homework load was a little daunting, but Harry set the stack of books inside his satchel, thankful for the Feather-Light charms. Hermione kept looking at him as if expecting him to burst into tears at the prospect of so much reading and a fifteen inch essay on the first day. Harry ignored her, pulling out his schedule to compare against Draco's. "Hey, look, we've both got free periods this afternoon," he said cheerfully. "Library?"

"Works for me. I'm sure this won't be the only homework we've picked up by then."

The crowd outside the DADA classroom was much larger than the one for Ancient Runes. Harry and Draco joined Neville and Susan, both of whom had expressions of mild dread on their faces. "How bad are we expecting?" Susan asked grimly. Harry shrugged.

He wasn't going to lie and say that Snape would be even remotely bearable. "I mean, hopefully fewer explosions than Potions class?" he said instead, making Neville choke on a laugh.

No one had a response — the classroom door opened, and the sixth years filed in.

Harry was glad to see that every member of the HA in his year was present in the class, as well as a few other students.

Snape began his class with an appropriately worshipful speech on the Dark Arts, complete with picture examples of what could befall those who did not treat them with the correct respect. The fear in the room was palpable — good, as far as Harry was concerned. They needed to be scared. They needed to take things seriously.

One thing was for sure; this year, they would not have a teacher who would coddle them, or hold their hand as they explored the darker parts of wizarding life. Snape would make damn sure all of them knew exactly what was waiting for them outside the castle — what life would become, should Voldemort win.

He would just be saying it in a way that made it sound like he was excited for the prospect.

“...you are, I believe, complete novices in the use of non-verbal spells,” the man drawled, robes billowing as he paced around the classroom. As he mocked Hermione for her textbook-perfect answer, Harry felt the atmosphere shift, ever so slightly. Several of his classmates were hiding smiles, relief on their faces.

They were not quite the novices Snape expected them to be, thanks to Harry.

As tempting as it was to pair up with Draco, Harry turned to Neville instead; his friend had never quite got the hang of non-verbal casting. And no matter how much Snape glared and sneered at Harry and made disparaging remarks in his direction, they all knew Harry would have no problem with the kind of *mental focus* involved.

So the class got to work, Snape catching out every instance of a quietly-muttered spell — unless of course it came from one of his Slytherins. Harry kept one eye on Neville while the blond boy tried to cast a non-verbal jinx, while his other surveyed the classroom, pride filling him at the sight of the HA members picking up the exercise quickly.

Suddenly a Jelly-Legs jinx came shooting towards him, and Harry silently raised a shield in an instant. He grinned at Neville, offering a thumbs up. That was much faster than usual, for him!

Snape didn't seem to know how to handle the majority of his class succeeding within the first fifteen minutes. He strode through the pairs, dark eyes narrowing with every silent jinx or shield performed. The only members of the class who were struggling were those Harry had not taught — including, to his amusement, Ron and Hermione. Ron was purple in the face with the effort of trying to raise a shield, and while Hermione had managed a non-verbal Stinging hex, it was so weak Ron hardly even noticed it.

The professor suddenly appeared looming over Neville's shoulder, and Harry saw Neville's hand begin to tremble. Snape sneered. “Pathetic, Longbottom. Here, let me show you—“

He raised his wand quickly, but Harry was just as fast; his non-verbal shield leapt into action against Snape's Burning hex, which was strong enough to push both casters back a little. Harry's eyes widened.

“That wasn’t a jinx!” he protested indignantly. Snape’s eyes flashed.

“That wasn’t a jinx, *sir*,” he corrected pointedly. Unable to help himself, Harry smirked.

“There’s no need to call me sir, Professor.”

Several people gasped quietly. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry caught Neville’s horrified gaze — and behind him, Draco biting his lip to contain his laughter.

Snape’s eyes narrowed, and Harry braced himself for the fallout. “Detention!” the tall man snapped. “Saturday night, my office.” That had been easy enough. “Watch your mouth, Potter, or you will find yourself removed from my classroom. I’m sure the *Prophet* would have a *field day*,” he added in that dangerously smooth drawl. Harry schooled his face into something vaguely resembling contrition.

“Well,” Snape said curtly, striding back to the front of the room. “It seems that for once in your lives, some of you have actually come *prepared* for your class. We shall see how long that lasts.”

Harry glanced around, catching the eye of several pleased-looking HA members. It wasn’t often anyone got one over on Professor Snape — with any luck, that would continue. If it meant Snape got the perfect excuse to push them all even harder, well, that was a bonus in Harry’s eyes.

.-. .

“Did you see the look on his face when we all started casting?”

“Bet he wasn’t expecting that!”

“But did you see his face when Harry said that!”

The class barely waited for the door to shut on Snape’s classroom before they were muttering eagerly to one another, grinning and snickering. It was a far cry from the despondent, angry faces Harry was used to seeing after a DADA class.

“Do you have a death wish?” Draco asked quietly, sidling up to him. Harry laughed. “I’m serious — talking back to him in front of the whole class like that, are you mad?”

“It just sort of happened,” Harry confessed, unrepentant. “You know me — sometimes my mouth does things before my brain can tell it not to.”

Draco’s eyes dropped to Harry’s lips for the barest of moments, and he scowled, glaring at Harry with a clear ‘*don’t flirt with me in public*’ face.

Harry just laughed again.

He was interrupted by Jack Sloper, delivering a message from Dumbledore and asking Harry about quidditch trials. Harry grimaced — he’d have to arrange that soon, before Sloper and his friend got their hopes up about continuing on as Gryffindor’s beaters.

“Ooh, perfect timing,” he murmured to himself, reading Dumbledore’s request to meet him that Saturday evening. Snape’s detention was proving even more useful already!

Hermione was just as furious with Harry’s presence in the Arithmancy classroom as she had been at Ancient Runes — more so, even, after Professor Vector gushed over his OWL result, playfully scolding him for keeping his talent hidden from her for so long.

Luckily, Daphne and Padma were also taking the class, so Harry had some friendly faces to sit with.

Harry was glad when his first free period arrived, he and Neville heading back to the common room. It was the time slot for Care of Magical Creatures, which Draco was taking because it would look good on his healer application, so the two Gryffindors went up to work on their homework for Snape together.

“Here goes any hopes that there would be less homework than last year,” Neville sighed, unrolling some parchment. Harry hummed in agreement.

“At least this year we’ve got free periods to work in.”

Indeed, knowing there were breaks within his schedule was a relief to Harry, even though he was sure they wouldn’t feel like breaks once the year fully got going.

At the very least, it would make meeting with the other heirs much easier to organise.

. . .

After lunch, Neville was far too smug about returning to the common room with Parvati and Lavender while Harry headed down to the dungeons for Potions. Unsurprisingly, it was a fairly small group; a dozen of them in all. Ron didn’t look happy about being there, and his scowl deepened when Harry stood to wait with Draco, Blaise and Theo.

“Glad you can finally stop throwing shit in my cauldron, now?” he asked his boyfriend teasingly. Draco smirked.

“I don’t know, I might do it anyway. Keep you on your toes.”

Harry snorted, and Slughorn opened the door, happily welcoming them all in. To their surprise, there were already cauldrons bubbling away inside; four of them, each filled with something different. Harry sat with the three Slytherins, feeling bad for Pansy Parkinson as she was forced to sit with the three Ravenclaw boys — and feeling equally sorry for Padma and Ernie, who were left sharing a table with Ron and Hermione. Slughorn looked surprised by the arrangement, his gaze lingering on Harry for several seconds, a frown beneath his enormous moustache.

Did he think Harry’s *guiding hand* needed to direct him away from Slytherin House?

When Slughorn directed everyone to get their books and potion kits out, Ron stuck his hand up hesitantly, explaining his dilemma. Slughorn just smiled. “Not to worry, not to worry! You can use ingredients from the store cupboard today, I’ll get you set up. And we’ve got a few

spare copies of old books that will do you quite nicely until you can get your own. Ah, Harry, my boy, would you mind grabbing Mr Weasley a copy of *Advanced Potion Making* from that cupboard over there while I find some scales he can borrow?"

Harry was the closest to the cupboard, so he slid off his stool and headed over. There were only two copies of the book, and both of them looked fairly battered. Harry picked up the one on top, flicking it open to see what state it was in; Ron would whine eternally if he thought Harry had purposefully given him the worse copy.

To his surprise, the pages were absolutely covered in handwriting — the previous owner had taken issue with practically every potion in the book, crossing things out and adding their own instructions, or writing tips in the margins.

It was very familiar handwriting, to Harry — the same handwriting he'd seen scrawled all over the notes in the lab at Seren Du, and on the labels of all the bottles in their Potions cabinet. Similar, but more rushed, to the handwriting that had littered Harry's Potions homework for the last five years.

His eyebrows rose, and Harry quickly tucked the book into the inner pocket of his robe, grabbing the other book; a flick through it proved it to be slightly dog-eared but otherwise unmarked, so Harry was happy to hand that copy over to Ron.

With everyone prepared, Slughorn began the lesson, proudly showing off the potions he'd brewed as an example of a successful NEWT education.

Harry very much hoped Slughorn would be keeping a keen eye on these cauldrons — Veritaserum and Polyjuice Potion would cause absolute chaos if they were snuck into the school population.

Hermione was in fine form answering questions, preening with every smile and chuckle she drew from Slughorn at her prompt responses. Harry had to crane his neck to look at the third potion, the one he didn't immediately recognise — as he did, the steam rising from the cauldron drifted his way. At first, Harry didn't recognise much of a change in smell; there was an underlying aroma of treacle tart, but it wasn't all that strong. Then he realised that the combination of the woody scent of broomstick polish and the familiar spicy notes of Draco's aftershave were not actually coming from the boy sat beside him, but from the cauldron of what was definitely Amortentia — as confirmed by Slughorn, chuckling over Hermione's enthusiasm.

Harry inhaled a little deeper; indeed, the steam made him feel like he had his nose pressed into the curve of Draco's neck, as he often did when they were curled up together. He felt the blood rush to his cheeks, and glanced aside, meeting Draco's gaze and raising one eyebrow slightly.

Draco's pale face flushed pink, and he nodded, the movement hardly noticeable as he watched Slughorn, pretending to pay attention. Under the table, Draco's knee bumped against his, just for a moment.

Harry grinned to himself, attention turning back to the professor — he *knew*, of course, but having confirmation like that made his stomach flutter happily.

“Ugh,” Blaise muttered under his breath, glaring at them both. Harry winked at him.

“I’m sorry, Blaise — I’m sure the smell of fireworks is going to make it really hard to tell whether your cauldron is burning today,” he replied quietly, snickering as Blaise’s glare intensified.

.-.-.

Potions class with Slughorn was far more relaxed than Potions with Snape — or perhaps it was that everyone in the room had chosen to be there.

Or maybe, it was because Harry was brewing using the altered instructions in Snape’s book, and it made the Draught of Living Death an absolute *breeze* to brew. Even Draco kept looking over at his cauldron in amazement. “Tell you later,” Harry promised quietly, stirring his cauldron — with the additional clockwise stir Snape recommended.

The result was a cauldron of flawless Draught of Living Death, which had Hermione — wild-haired and flustered after her frantic brewing process — glaring daggers at him across the classroom when Slughorn sung his praises, handing over the small vial of Felix Felicis.

“Inherited your mother’s talent, to be sure!” the old professor declared excitedly. “My, my, well done indeed, Harry my boy!”

Harry slipped the book carefully into his bag on the way out, already mentally rearranging his evening.

“How did you do that?” Hermione cornered him as soon as they were outside the classroom. “You— your potion was *perfect*, that shouldn’t have been possible in the time allotted!”

“I guess I just got lucky,” he replied, utterly straight-faced. Hermione glared at him, huffed loudly, and stormed off, dragging Ron along with her. When she was gone, Draco chuckled.

“No, really, how *did* you do that?” he asked, bumping Harry’s shoulder. “Don’t get me wrong, I know you can brew. But that was something else.”

Seeing Blaise and Theo looking equally curious, Harry beckoned them into an empty classroom and pulled out the book, showing it to them. “I found it in the cupboard when I grabbed a book for Ron. Whoever owned it last made some adjustments to the instructions,” he explained. “I just followed them, and it worked out well.”

“I’ll say,” Theo murmured, brows knitting together as he studied the spidery writing. “Well, that’s much less interesting than you suddenly developing incredible potion-making abilities.”

“Sorry to disappoint,” Harry replied with a chuckle, putting the book away. “I’ll share, if you like.”

“It’s fine,” Blaise dismissed, waving him off. “Better instructions won’t help when exams roll around. But if there are any other useful tips in there, let us know.”

“Will do,” Harry promised, glad his friends didn’t seem to be jealous or annoyed. Of course, they were Slytherins; they were all for using whatever resources you had at your disposal.

Blaise and Theo bid them goodbye and headed back to Slytherin, while Harry and Draco made their way up to the library. “You know who that book belonged to, don’t you?”

“Of course I do,” Harry replied amusedly. “Lived with him long enough, haven’t I? I can’t believe he just left it in a cupboard somewhere.”

“Thank Merlin Weasley didn’t find it, he’d be insufferable,” Draco agreed. Harry grimaced. Yes, Ron Weasley suddenly developing a talent for Potions was not something they needed.

.-. .

That evening, Harry snuck down to Snape’s quarters under the invisibility cloak just before curfew, earning raised eyebrows from the man. “If you have come to gloat about stealing my first lesson away from me in your little defence club, you needn’t bother; I have plenty more to torture your classmates with.”

Harry laughed, shedding the cloak. “No, no, I’m not here about that. Although you’re welcome, by the way. And thanks for the detention — I got a note from Dumbledore asking me to meet him then, so now I’ve got a great excuse to skip.”

Snape frowned at that. “You cannot avoid him forever.”

“I can sure as hell try,” Harry returned. Then he reached into his pocket, pulling out the battered copy of *Advanced Potion Making*. “*Half-Blood Prince* sound familiar to you?” he drawled teasingly. Snape’s eyebrows rose.

“Where did you get that?”

Harry explained the events of Slughorn’s class to the man. “I can’t believe you left this just *lying around*, but I’m glad you did; I won a bottle of Felix Felicis because of you.”

“Horace always was fond of bribery to win friends,” Snape muttered dryly. “I did not leave that *lying around*, I assure you. The last I saw of it, it was on my shelf, right here.” He gestured to the very bottom corner of his bookshelf, where Harry could see a couple of other tattered-looking schoolbooks.

“Then how did it get into the classroom cupboard?” Harry blinked, perplexed. Snape’s lips turned in a scowl.

“Who do we know with access to my personal quarters during the summer, and a vested interest in Ronald Weasley feeling superior to you?”

Harry stared at him. “You think Dumbledore left it there for Ron to find?” That seemed unnecessarily convoluted — and exactly the kind of plan Dumbledore might go for. Harry

snorted. “Well, that backfired on him, didn’t it?” He looked down at the book, flicking through the heavily-edited pages. Some of the recipes were so heavily altered Harry could hardly read them.

He held the book out to Snape. “I suppose you want it back, then?” He knew how much Snape valued the few things he had left from his teenage years; most of them had previously belonged to his mother.

“Keep it, for now,” Snape insisted with a shake of his head. Then he smirked. “You could use all the advantages you can get, since I am no longer able to teach you. Besides — this is a sure way to get you right to the top of Horace’s favourites list. My talent, and your fame? He won’t be able to resist.”

“He— he said I’d inherited my mother’s talent for Potions,” Harry said tentatively, watching Snape’s face soften.

“Lily and I often adjusted recipes together. While the notes in that book may be my writing, some of them were her work.” His smirk returned, much fonder this time. “She could never quite beat me where it mattered, however.”

“Remus once told me she nearly did.”

Snape snorted. “And had she, he never would have let me hear the end of it,” he agreed. “Keep the book, Harry. But look after it. You do not want to know what I will do to you should that text become damaged.”

Harry gulped, nodding seriously.

“There are more than just Potions notes in there, too,” Snape added. “Some spells I created, you may recognise. If you do not recognise it, do not attempt them without asking me first. I was a ruthless little shite when I was your age — many of those spells are not safe for use.”

“Yes, sir.” Already, Harry was keen to give it a proper read through — even more so now he knew his mother had a hand in it, too.

. . .

For the rest of the week, Harry continued to be Slughorn’s new favourite student; much to Hermione’s outrage. One evening where he wasn’t drowning in homework, Harry carefully copied out every one of Snape’s notes into his own, newer copy of *Advanced Potion Making* — all the notes that were to do with Potions, at least. He wrote the spells in his own private notebook, sure that Snape’s warning had not been an exaggeration.

It was easier to decipher, in his own handwriting, but it also meant he could give the original copy back to Snape in his detention on Saturday. “I didn’t want to risk a cauldron exploding onto it or anything,” he explained as he handed the battered book over. “Also your handwriting was even worse then than it is now.”

Snape let out a quiet snort, though Harry could tell he was glad to have his book back, his long-fingered hands running fondly over the cover.

“Thank you,” he murmured, pocketing the book. “Now, the matter of your... *detention*.”

Harry grinned at the challenging smirk on the Slytherin’s face. It was time to get to work.

.-. .

Harry had almost forgotten about the meeting with Dumbledore he’d skipped, until the headmaster approached him at breakfast on Sunday morning with a disappointed frown. “Harry, my boy,” he greeted, “I was expecting you in my office yesterday.”

“Oh, sorry, sir. I had detention with Professor Snape,” Harry returned blithely. Dumbledore’s frown deepened.

“I asked Severus to rearrange that detention.”

“Oh. Well no one told me anything, so I just went.” All around them, Harry’s friends were watching the exchange warily. Dumbledore’s lips pursed.

“I suppose I can forgive the miscommunication, my boy. I really must speak with you, though — perhaps this afternoon?”

“Surely I haven’t been back at classes long enough for you to have anything to talk to me about, Professor?” Harry played oblivious, trying not to smirk as the twinkle in those eyes disappeared.

“It’s not about your classwork, which I’m sure is quite fine. Well done on your OWLs, by the way; I was very surprised to see your results.”

Wasn’t that just the most back-handed compliment Harry had heard? His smile tightened. “Sorry, sir, but my lawyer has advised me not to visit with you alone, after everything you’ve said in the *Prophet*. If you really need to speak to me, I’m sure Professor McGonagall would be happy to accompany me, as my head of house.” The woman in question was already on her way over, no doubt curious about what Dumbledore was up to. “Won’t you, Professor?”

Dumbledore straightened up, turning to offer a smile that didn’t quite reach genuine. “Now, Harry; Professor McGonagall is incredibly busy; there’s no need to add to her schedule just so the two of us can have a little chat.”

“Busy? Nonsense, Albus; I’m perfectly capable of rearranging things if there is a problem with one of my students. What did you need to discuss with Potter? Surely he isn’t in trouble already.” She eyed Harry suspiciously, and he gave his best innocent face in response.

“No, no trouble at all. I merely had some things I wished to discuss — truly, Minerva, your involvement is not necessary.”

“Mrs Frobisher has strongly recommended I not speak to you without another teacher present, sir,” Harry said, feigning apology. “She’s worried I might get misconstrued in the

Prophet, again. And Sirius said if you had anything regarding the war to talk about, you should pass it on to him.”

Over Dumbledore’s shoulder, Harry saw McGonagall’s lips purse. “Mr Potter is a minor, Albus; if his guardian — and his legal counsel — have instructed against him meeting with you, I’m afraid as his housemistress I must abide by that. If you must talk with Potter, let me know and I will clear my schedule. Otherwise, I suggest you send a letter to Lord Black.”

There was nothing Dumbledore could say to that without causing a scene; even more of a scene, considering half the hall was watching at this point. Dumbledore smiled tightly, and bowed his head.

“If that is how you feel, Mr Potter, I can only oblige, though it saddens me to do so. If you change your mind, you know where to find me — I believe you will find what I have to say very enlightening indeed.”

Then he continued up to the head table. Harry glanced to McGonagall with a thankful look, but she said nothing, merely nodding and carrying on with her day. Finally able to turn back to his breakfast, Harry sighed, looking at Susan.

“I didn’t think he’d try something so blatant,” he mused in an undertone. Opposite him, the Hufflepuff hummed thoughtfully.

“Maybe he was hoping social pressure would get you. You wouldn’t want to look like there’s a rift between you in public.”

Harry snorted. “If he didn’t want that he shouldn’t have spent half the summer slandering me in the paper.”

“Well there’s no worry of that now,” Padma remarked, the morning’s copy of the *Prophet* open in front of her. “It’s even more of a Ministry mouthpiece than it used to be, these days.”

Several of the heirs shared a grim look — a Ministry mouthpiece was a Voldemort mouthpiece, now.

“Is there anything useful in there, or . . . ?” Neville trailed off, and Padma shook her head.

“More of the same. They’ve suspended Wizengamot meetings until further notice — probably because more than half the seats were absent for the last.”

With Voldemort in charge of the Ministry, it would be as good as suicide for anyone who did not support him to walk into the building. Harry was suddenly very, very glad that Lucius Malfoy had died in the Department of Mysteries back in June; had the Malfoy seats still been under the control of the Dark, it would have been just enough to keep the Wizengamot open and able to pass laws, with a bit of threatening of a few neutral seats.

Narcissa placing the seats firmly out of Voldemort’s reach was the only thing keeping the Dark from having true control of wizarding Britain. For now, the Death Eaters might have

control of the Ministry buildings and its departments, but no new laws or regulations could be passed — it wasn't an ideal situation, but it could have been a whole lot worse.

"Oh, look, Harry," Sully piped up, pointing at a section of the open paper. "They've put a price on your head already."

Harry frowned, reaching for Susan's abandoned copy of the paper to take a look for himself. Sure enough, there was a small article declaring that a reward of five thousand galleons would be offered to anyone who could capture Harry Potter, on suspicion of '*conspiracy against the Ministry*'. Harry snorted.

"Good to know how much I'm worth, I suppose."

"Can they even do that?" Parvati asked, wrinkling her nose. Harry shrugged.

"Probably not, but it's Voldemort; he's not exactly playing by the rules. Not like they can send aurors to the school for me." Or, rather, not like they would try; not with Dumbledore and a school full of students in their way.

Harry would just have to be careful in Hogsmeade, and when wandering the school alone. But he doubted any of the students would try anything with him.

"I just hate that we don't have a single source of unbiased news in this country," Susan muttered, scowling. "It's alright for us; we've got people in the know, and we've got Harry — we know the truth. Everyone outside the school, however..."

It was like the year before, but much, much worse.

"Why don't you bring the *Quibbler* into the mix, hun?" Daphne asked Luna, but the blonde Ravenclaw shook her head.

"I would like to help, but something awful will happen to Daddy if he gets involved. The nargles have told me."

Several of them grimaced; they knew better than to go against Luna's creature warnings, especially ones that were quite so explicit.

"It'll be fine, for now," Harry assured, sounding far more confident than he felt. "They don't have enough manpower to kill everyone at the Ministry who doesn't actively support them, not without running the country to the ground. Let them try and convince people to their politics — we'll get them, when the time comes."

Just under a year, until Harry turned seventeen. They could handle things until then.

.-.-.

There was one more person at the school Harry had yet to greet properly now he was back — after breakfast, with a promise to spend time with Draco after lunch, Harry snuck down to the Chamber of Secrets, happily greeting Salazar's painting; and immediately launching into a summary of everything that had happened since he'd last been in the office.

“Well, you certainly have been busy,” the man hissed amusedly. *“And you said this is your sixth year; now? The year you and your friends will begin to turn seventeen?”* He had an odd sense of urgency lighting his eyes, and Harry frowned at him.

“Yes. Why?”

Salazar shook his head. *“The castle is keen,”* he said, as if that was an answer. *“You are a particularly powerful group, this year; I believe it is eager to have such a surge of adult magic.”*

Harry continued to eye the painting suspiciously — that definitely wasn’t the full story. But he knew trying to get secrets from Salazar was like trying to draw blood from a stone, so he let it slide; from the sounds of things, he’d find out sooner or later, regardless.

“*How is your search for my unworthy heir’s horcruxes going?*” the painting asked, and Harry frowned.

“Well, the ritual we found in here worked. The one in my scar is gone.” He explained what had happened with the Ministry, and why they’d decided to get rid of it. Salazar looked pleased; at the end of the last school year, he had been one of the most firm advocates for removing the horcrux as soon as possible.

“The problem is, now we don’t know how many others there are, or where to find them. If there even are any others.” It could well be that Voldemort’s snake was the only remaining horcrux.

Salazar frowned in thought, stroking the head of his pet snake. *“I wish I could help, but I confess I’m in the dark as much as you are, lad. But do not fear — with how many of the rest have fallen into your path, it seems like the universe is on your side. I’m sure that luck will continue.”*

Harry wished he could have that sort of optimism.

Chapter 87

Even with free periods thrown in the mix, Harry felt just as busy with classwork as he had at the start of his OWL year. Now that everyone in the room was there by choice — and by achieving a certain level of competency — all the teachers seemed to have much higher expectations. Snape wasn't the only one insisting on the use of non-verbal magic; all of their spellcasting classes encouraged such, with the warning that they would be marked down in their NEWTs for any verbal casting.

On the bright side, Slughorn was fairly sure Harry was the greatest student he'd ever had the pleasure of teaching, thanks to Snape's notes. It was odd for Harry to have Potions become one of his best subjects so rapidly, but not unwelcome. On the whole, Harry was just glad that he was actually *coping* with the NEWT-level course load, especially with six classes. Part of him had worried his OWL results had been a fluke, just a product of excessive studying. But he was keeping up just fine, even if the homework was stressful. He was certainly doing no worse than any of his peers — a lot better than many of them, in fact.

It was a heavy burden, but not heavy enough for people to stop pestering Harry about the HA. Nor for the heirs to turn their study meetings into *actual* study groups, not just yet.

The free periods did make it easier for them to meet, however; with Cassius graduated, Luna and Sully were the only non-sixth-years in the group. So they met during the free period that was designated for History of Magic, which literally nobody took at NEWT — self-study was a much better route than listening to Binns for another two years.

"There's not much we can do, is there?" Anthony remarked flatly, leaning back in his chair. He seemed to be taking it remarkably well that his parents were now Death Eaters, and he was technically pretending to be one as well. Harry supposed it helped that most of his friends knew the truth; and the ones that didn't were oblivious anyway. "You-Know-Who has the Ministry — even when we turn seventeen, we can't take our seats."

"There's nothing we can do politically," Susan agreed, "but that doesn't mean we're dead in the water. It just means we need to change our approach." She turned to Harry, gaze knowing. "We're all yours, Potter. You promised me a clear path to the Wizengamot by graduation, so; what's the plan?"

For a moment, Harry could only stare. Susan was entirely serious — with the same sort of determination and Hufflepuff work ethic that she had previously dedicated to her future Wizengamot career, she would now do whatever he directed in the fight against Voldemort. Looking around, she was not the only one with that steadfast, expectant look in their eye.

This was not a room full of people who expected him to take down Voldemort for them, like Harry was used to. This was a room full of people ready to *help him* take down Voldemort.

How had he gotten so lucky, to have friends like that?

“Well,” he started, clearing his throat. “I’m aiming for it to happen in the summer. I need—I’ll have my best chance if I’m fully of age when I face him, with my whole family magic behind me.” Around the table, everyone was nodding, as if that made perfect sense. No one pointed out that his birthday was a long way away, that all manner of awful things could have happened by then. “There are a couple of things I need to take care of before we can reach that point, as well.”

“So as it stands, we’re looking at a summer battle,” Susan said, nodding resolutely. “At least it won’t mess with classes.” Harry snorted; that was one way to look at it.

“There’s nothing we can do about the world outside the castle,” Daphne cut in bluntly. “As much as we’d like to, we can’t. There are adults out there who can — adults we can actually trust — and we’re best leaving that to them. While I hate to admit it, with Dumbledore here, the Dark Lord isn’t likely to come after the school. No matter how badly he wants to get his hands on Harry.”

“So what can we do?” Ernie asked, puffing himself up indignantly. “Because I’m sure as hell not going to just sit around and wait for the battle to come!”

“We can train,” Harry said firmly, before an argument could arise. “Give me til the weekend to get my schedule sorted, then I’ll get the HA back together. Some of our older members might have graduated, but we can work with the ones we’ve got. The more capable fighters we have when the battle comes, the better.”

“But what if You-Know-Who comes before you turn seventeen?” Parvati asked worriedly. Harry’s brow furrowed.

“We’ll deal with that when the time draws closer. We know he’ll be too busy reorganising the Ministry for at least the next few months, that’ll buy us some time. I’ll be honest, guys; it’s not going to be easy. It’s going to be a hell of a long year. But we’ll do what we’ve always done — prepare ourselves the best we can, and keep trying to undermine both Voldemort and Dumbledore in the eyes of the students.”

Admittedly, Harry’s plans for destroying Dumbledore’s reputation were going to be a lot harder now Amelia and Mrs Frobisher couldn’t set foot in the Ministry, or leak anything to the *Prophet*.

But that was his problem, not the rest of his friends’. All they had to do was keep themselves safe.

.-.-.-.

With what felt like half of Gryffindor house pressuring him to hurry up, Harry managed to organise Gryffindor quidditch team tryouts for the second Saturday of term, right after breakfast. He and Katie met on the pitch in their training gear, brooms in hand — and Harry stared wide-eyed out at the crowd in the stands.

“Please tell me they’re not all here to try out,” he croaked, and Katie laughed.

"No, not all of them. Half of them aren't even Gryffindors, look," she said, gesturing to a cluster of Hufflepuff third years. "Pretty sure they're just here to ogle you. Mr Chosen One," she teased, winking. Harry groaned.

"Really?" he whined. "I thought I was back to being an evil head case again?"

"You were for a while," Katie told him, shrugging, "but then you came back after the summer and everyone remembered how hot you are, so I guess they're back to fawning over you again."

Harry felt his cheeks turn as red as his quidditch uniform, and Katie laughed, shoving his shoulder gently. "Get used to it, Harry. Now come on, let's see what they're made of."

Despite practically being his co-captain, and having been on the team for longer than Harry had, Katie insisted on trying out with the other chasers.

And, despite Katie's insistence that most of the crowd were just there to drool over Harry, most of them were also there to at least *pretend* to be interested in quidditch.

It was clear Harry was going to have to revise his plans a little bit. "Okay," he called, his voice magically louder. "Here's how this is going to go!"

Splitting the crowd into groups of ten helped; seeing whether they could actually fly before he got into anything complicated. Seeing whether they were even in Gryffindor House to begin with. He could hardly believe how many people were willing to pretend they wanted to play quidditch, just to flirt with him!

At last, Harry could start chaser trials. While he had agreed to give everyone a fair shot, it was obvious to him that Katie and Ginny were in a class of their own — along with them he chose a fourth year girl, Demelza Robbins, who had a lot of potential.

There were plenty of complaints from the rejected fliers, insisting he was just picking his friends for the team, but quite frankly he had little patience for them. "I'm starting the beater trials, and if you're still in the way, I'm not responsible for how many bludgers hit you," he declared bluntly, which served to clear the pitch fairly well.

To Harry's sheer relief, there were more options to choose from than just Kirke and Sloper. Not near as good as Fred and George, but Jimmy Peakes and Ritchie Coote were certainly better than the two boys who had played in the Ravenclaw match last year, and anyone else on the pitch. A glance to Katie saw her nodding as well, so Harry was confident with his choice.

At last — once all protesting beater rejects had been cleared from the pitch — it was time for keeper trials. Much to Harry's dismay, Ron was giving it another go. Cormac McLaggen was there too, as promised, looking far too confident in himself. Vicky stood further down the line from both boys, jaw clenched in determination, and Harry forced himself not to grin at her. He had to look like he was being fair.

One by one, he sent the applicants up to the goal hoops, while Ginny, Katie and Demelza tossed the quaffle around, Katie getting Demelza used to their flying style. Harry was immeasurably glad he still had her on the team; he wouldn't even know where to begin having to train a whole new team by himself.

The turn-out for keeper was, on the whole, as mildly disappointing as the chaser and beater crop had been. The first five had little success, heading despondently up to the stands where most of the rejected players — and plenty of students just looking for some entertainment — had made themselves comfortable.

Every time Ron looked at the crowd, he went a little greener. Harry remembered Angelina's description of his try-out the year before — as long as no one was watching, he did fine.

Well, plenty of people were watching.

Harry sent Vicky up next, offering a discreet nod of encouragement. The dark-haired girl positioned herself in front of the hoops, and Harry blew his whistle, signalling the chasers to begin.

The three girls didn't hold back. Vicky saved the first three without any effort at all, and even a tricky fourth shot from Katie was firmly blocked. Then, on the fifth, Harry watched wide-eyed as all of a sudden Vicky veered sharply in the opposite direction, letting the quaffle soar through the hoop. Ginny stared in shock at the goal she'd just scored. A low '*oooh*' rumbled through the crowd.

When Vicky landed, she stumbled. Harry walked up to her, intending to ask what had happened — and then he noticed how dazed she looked, her eyes unfocused. He narrowed his gaze.

"Hey, Vicky, stand still a second," he requested. She did so, though she swayed slightly on the spot, her head cocked curiously. Harry waved his wand over her, and cursed. "She's been Confunded," he announced, his voice still enhanced from the *Sonorus* charm. Gasps rippled around the stands.

"There's no need to make excuses, Potter," McLaggen drawled pompously. "Just because your favourite didn't do perfectly."

"It's not an excuse, I'm telling you, she's been Confunded." Harry was familiar with the signs; Snape had made sure of it, after everything he'd been through with Dumbledore.

Rage burning through him, Harry turned up the volume of his voice. "I don't appreciate sabotage of the Gryffindor team, and if I find out who's responsible you can be damned sure I'm going to McGonagall!" He made sure to glare at everyone in the stands who looked like they might have been in a position to cast as far as the goal hoops. His gaze lingered on Hermione, sat behind the hoops by herself, her jaw clenched tightly.

He had no proof, but he certainly had suspicions.

Standing Vicky to one side to shake off the spell, he sent McLaggen up next, and shot off a Patronus up to the castle that had several people in the crowd clapping. The girls were equally ruthless, but the blond boy saved all five shots, and landed with a smug smile on his face.

“Ron, you’re up,” Harry said, gesturing for the redhead to take off. Ron looked like he might be sick, being the last candidate and having all eyes on him.

He did fairly well despite his nerves, but missed the fourth shot — and then, thanks to his embarrassment, missed the fifth as well. He was blushing as red as his hair as he stalked off the pitch.

“So the position is mine, then?” McLaggen drawled. Harry grit his teeth.

“No, because Vicky was Confused. We’re not done yet.” As he spoke, he saw a white-clad figure bustling across the pitch, and smiled. “Thanks for coming, Madam Pomfrey.”

“I have to say, it’s been a while since I’ve been summoned just for team try-outs,” the medi-witch muttered, shaking her head. “Someone’s been Confused, you say?”

“Vicky Frobisher,” he confirmed, an arm around Vicky’s shoulders as he brought her towards Pomfrey. The older woman studied the way the Gryffindor girl walked unsteadily, and waved her wand in the same test Harry had used.

“Yes, definite interference here,” Pomfrey confirmed in disapproval. “Not to worry, I’ll have her back to rights in just a moment.” She reached into her bag, tutting quietly. “Honestly, the lengths some people will go to for quidditch!”

She had Vicky drink a potion, and within moments the girl’s eyes were sharp once more. She was furious as she looked at Harry. “You’ll give me another shot, right?” she begged, and Harry squeezed her shoulder.

“Of, course, yeah. Are you up for it now?” Vicky nodded, and Madam Pomfrey confirmed that she should be in perfect mental faculties, so Harry sent her back up to the hoops.

Madam Pomfrey stayed just in case of any further problems, and Harry was glad — hopefully whoever had Confused Vicky the first time would think twice about trying again with a member of staff present.

Luckily, Vicky was back on fine form; she saved all five shots, and was grinning when she returned to the ground.

Harry eyed Vicky and McLaggen — he would love to just give the position back to Vicky, but he knew he’d never hear the end of it if he did. “Okay, both of you get up there. We’ll keep alternating penalties until someone misses.”

McLaggen gestured for Vicky to take the first attempt with a smarmy grin, and Vicky glared at him, heading to the goal hoops. Harry mounted his own broom, wanting to be sure he could properly see everything that was happening.

Katie took both first penalties, and both keepers saved them. Demelza went next, a little nervous, but still making good shots — still, neither made it through the hoops. Harry watched Ginny fly towards Vicky in goals, wondering how much longer this was going to drag out; they were already late for lunch.

Three penalties each, there was still no winner.

Katie lined up for the fourth round, feinting to the left before throwing at the right hoop — Vicky didn't fall for it, catching the quaffle on her fingertips. McLaggen was looking a little annoyed by the time he got in position for his turn.

Katie flew up, feinted to the right — and stuck with it, throwing at the right hoop while McLaggen lunged to the left. Katie had scored.

Vicky got to remain the Gryffindor keeper.

"I demand a retry!" McLaggen exclaimed as the whole team landed. "You only gave her a second round because she fumbled the first, I should have won from that!"

"She fumbled because she was *Confunded*, McLaggen," Harry bit out, resisting the urge to hex the idiot seventh year. "Madam Pomfrey confirmed it herself. Unless you think you know better than her?"

Madam Pomfrey put her hands on her hips, eyeing McLaggen expectantly, and suddenly the blond boy was all out of arguments.

"Right, then. That's the results, anyone who doesn't like it can bugger off!" Harry called, making sure he was heard by everyone in the stands. There were a few groans, but everyone began to take their leave. Harry turned to his new team, finally ending his *Sonorus* charm. His throat was scratchy, and he coughed. "Merlin. I'm glad that's over. Well done today, everyone; I'll let you know when first practice is once I've figured out what your schedules are like."

He shouldered his broom, and blinked in surprise when a small red sweet was held out towards him. "A cough drop, Mr Potter," Pomfrey declared wryly. "You sound like you could use it."

He grinned in thanks, popping the sweet into his mouth. Within moments, he could feel it soothing his sore throat. "Thanks. And I'm sorry for summoning you like it was some kind of massive emergency; I just didn't know what else to do. I'd have had a riot on my hands if I'd rescheduled try-outs after all that."

"No, no, you did the right thing," Pomfrey assured, falling into step beside him on the way back up to the castle. "I'm impressed you could spot the signs, and knew the test for it. That spell isn't on the Hogwarts curriculum."

"Draco wants to be a healer," he told her, the excuse coming easily. "He was practicing some medical spells recently, and thought that one would be useful. I helped him out, so I became pretty familiar with it."

"Indeed — I had heard the rumour that you and Mr Malfoy have buried the hatchet," Pomfrey remarked. "I didn't believe it at first; not after the number of times one of you has ended up under my care due to the other."

Harry laughed, running a hand through his hair. "Yeah, I can see how it would be a surprise."

"I hope this friendship with the Slytherins means I shall see less of you, Mr Potter. Though I will admit you did very well at avoiding the need for medical care last year." She narrowed her gaze at him shrewdly. "Or at least avoiding coming to me for such things."

Harry's stride faltered. "I, uh—"

"That awful Blood Quill should never have entered this school," Pomfrey continued. Relief filled Harry — she wasn't talking about any of the other issues he'd gone to Snape for, just his punishments at Umbridge's hand.

"Oh. Yeah, I— none of us wanted to get you in trouble, if you had to report it or anything," he said, shrugging helplessly. "We handled it ourselves. You were needed for everything else."

Pomfrey's gaze softened, and she patted his arm. "I understand, and I thank you, though I wish you had not been put in that position to begin with." They approached the open front doors of the castle, and Pomfrey paused on the threshold. "Look after yourself, Mr Potter," she said, a hint of fondness to her tone. "And if Mr Malfoy is truly planning a career in the healing arts, tell him I would always welcome an assistant, when he has free time. If he is interested, of course."

Harry grinned at her. "He will be. I'll pass on the message. Thanks, Madam Pomfrey."

She nodded, and the pair parted ways, Harry heading up to Gryffindor to shower and change out of his quidditch training gear.

He had a team. That was one problem solved. Thank Merlin he only had to do that once.

.-.-.-

The gates of the Pottery were wide open, and Sirius paced in front of them, a scrap of parchment in hand. Andromeda had warned him she was bringing a new family in need of sanctuary, and he was worried they'd been waylaid somehow.

At last, there was the crack of apparition. Sirius whirled around, seeing his cousin stood with a pair of women who were clearly related, sharing the same curly auburn hair and round freckled cheeks. The older woman was wide-eyed and slightly green in the face, while the younger looked barely old enough to be out of Hogwarts. "Good, you got my message," Andi said in greeting, her arm around the older of the pair. "This is Helen Ashford, and her daughter Niamh, recently graduated from Ravenclaw. Niamh believed herself to be muggleborn up until last week — an Inheritance test at Gringotts has revealed her to be the Rosier heir."

Sirius nodded in understanding; there was only one way a muggle woman would birth a Rosier heir, and it was not pretty. No wonder Helen Ashford looked so scared.

“I’m Sirius Black, it’s nice to meet you both,” he said, nodding at the pair. “Please, read this for me.” He held out the parchment, on which Harry had written the address. The younger Ashford read it first, and sucked in a sharp breath as the house came into view. Her mother squeaked when she suddenly became able to see the enormous manor house. “This is the Pottery,” Sirius said with a sweeping gesture and a slight smile, doing his best to put the two women at ease.

“I— like Harry Potter?” Niamh asked hesitantly. Sirius nodded.

“It’s his ancestral home, yes. Due to the extensive wards on the place, he’s turned it into a bit of a safe house for the time being.”

Niamh seemed to relax at the knowledge, and squeezed her mother’s hand. “It’s okay, Mum,” she assured quietly. “We’ll be safe here.”

Sirius led them up the drive, already thinking over which of the families there might be willing to help the Ashfords settle in. They had a couple of other muggles in residence; parents of muggleborn Slytherins who would be considered a disgrace to their *noble* house. And the two women would have to share a room, but that would be fine.

They would make it work. For their safety, they would have to.

. . .

Despite Hagrid’s insistence the year before that he didn’t begrudge Harry dropping his class for NEWTs, Harry still wanted to make sure there was no bad blood between them. So, after he’d changed and eaten lunch following the endless quidditch trials, Harry went back outside, heading for the hut at the edge of the forest.

He knocked on the door, raising his eyebrows when it only opened a crack, one dark eye narrowing at him. Then it opened all the way, revealing Hagrid’s smiling face. “Oh, it’s you! Come in, come in,” he urged, gesturing Harry inside. The half-giant was wearing a flowery apron, and seemed to have something cooking on his grill.

“Who did you think it was?” Harry asked in bemusement, scratching Fang between the ears as the dog lolloped over to him. Hagrid huffed.

“Thought it might be Ron and Hermione. Got a bit of a bone to pick with them. Neither of ‘em are in my class,” he added at Harry’s look.

“I’m not in your class, either.”

“Yeah, but you apologised for it, didn’t yer?” Hagrid retorted. “Those two, not a word! After I asked ‘em to help me with Grawp and all!”

Harry had no idea who or what a ‘Grawp’ was, and by the end of the explanation his jaw was practically on the floor. “You kept a *giant* in the forest for half of last year?” he said

incredulously. “No wonder you were always covered in bruises!”

“‘E’s my little brother, I couldn’t just leave ‘im there!” Hagrid reasoned. “We was doin’ fine, right up until that Umbridge woman interfered. An’ then I asked Ron and Hermione, I told ‘em all they had to do was go and check on ‘im once in a while, see ‘e didn’t get lonely, maybe work on ‘is English if they were up to it. But they didn’t go see ‘im once!”

Harry shook his head in dismay, though in Ron and Hermione’s position he likely would have made the same call. “I’m sorry, Hagrid. But I’m glad you’ve managed to get him set up somewhere better, now.”

Hagrid brightened at that. “Yeah, the cave Dumbledore found is great for ‘im.” He fussed with whatever he was cooking. “I s’pose I’m not really mad at ‘em for dropping my class. It’s always a small one at NEWTs; not many careers involving creatures. I’m more upset they left Grawp on his own for so long.”

“Well I’m still not exactly on speaking terms with either of them, so I’m afraid you’re on your own with that one,” Harry said with a slight grimace. Hagrid looked him over in consideration.

“Aye, I suspected as much. What’s this I hear about you an’ Draco Malfoy bein’ friends?”

Harry fought a smile. “It’s a bit of a long story,” he admitted. “We’ve been friends for a while, just in secret. His dad… well, you can imagine how that would’ve gone if he’d found out.” Hagrid nodded, face darkening. “After Lucius died, and Narcissa made it clear where the family stood, Draco and I decided it was a bit pointless pretending to hate each other when we had no reason to. And Sirius and Narcissa are cousins, so I saw a lot of the Malfoys over the summer.”

“Well, I can’t say I’m too fond of him, but he did apologise for the trouble with Beaky an’ all. And he’s behavin’ himself in my classes, so far. Still can’t believe he’s actually takin’ Care for NEWTs.”

“Just give him a chance, Hagrid,” Harry asked earnestly. “He doesn’t deserve to be judged for the things his father made him do.”

“Aye, that’s fair,” Hagrid agreed, nodding.

A strange sort of squelching noise came from the corner, and Harry looked over at a barrel he hadn’t noticed before. It was full of huge white maggot-looking creatures. Harry’s stomach turned. “Uh— what are those for, Hagrid?” he asked, wondering if he should be warning Draco about the successor to the Blast-Ended Skrewt.

“Oh, I got ‘em to feed to Aragog.”

Harry frowned in confusion — and the next thing he knew, Hagrid was slumped in the chair opposite him, sniffling into a handkerchief. “He’s dying, ‘Arry. He got ill over the summer an’ nothin’ I do seems to help…” He sobbed, huge shoulders shaking, and Harry scooted over to pat him on the arm. “Dunno what I’ll do if he… we’ve been together so long!”

"I'm so sorry, Hagrid," Harry murmured — he couldn't feel any grief himself at the idea of the giant spider who had tried to eat him finally passing on, but he knew Hagrid had had Aragog for most of his life. It was never easy, losing a pet, no matter how bloodthirsty.

Hagrid took a big sniff, wiping at his eyes. "Circle o' life, innit?" he said morosely. "Not much I can do but just... keep him comfortable."

"I'm sure he appreciates it."

The foil-covered tin in Hagrid's grill began to smoke lightly, and Hagrid cursed, getting up to deal with it. Under the foil were a dozen blackened rock cakes. "Oh, bugger it," Hagrid muttered, scowling. "Lost track o' time." He tossed the tin in the sink, cakes and all.

"Is there, ah, anything I can do?" Harry offered a little helplessly. Hagrid sighed, shaking his head.

"Nah, I'll be fine. Is what it is." He tugged at his beard. "You can tell me one thing, though, 'Arry." Hagrid sat back down, watching him with an unusually serious gaze. "What's goin' on with you an' Professor Dumbledore? I been readin' the *Prophet* all summer, and... sounds like he's more than a bit worried about you, kid."

Harry scowled despite himself. "Dumbledore... he had a plan, for how things were going to go," he said slowly, not sure how much to give away. Hagrid idolised Dumbledore so much, Harry couldn't risk the half-giant taking his words back to the headmaster even if it was out of concern. "He thought he had it all figured out, but his plan involved... well you know how at the end of almost every school year I've had some sort of confrontation with Voldemort in one way or another?" Hagrid flinched, but nodded. "That was him *training me up* for my final sacrifice. As I've gotten older, I've decided I really don't want to be a pawn in his game, Hagrid. I've got other people who care about me; *actually* care, are willing to protect me and to teach me how to protect myself, so that when I do have to fight Voldemort — because we all know it's going to be me eventually — I might actually stand a chance at winning. Dumbledore never gave me that. And now he's acting like my refusal to play his games is due to me secretly going Dark. He thinks I've got Voldemort in my head, controlling me, making me into a younger version of him."

"That's bollocks!" Hagrid roared. "I knew You-Know-Who when he was your age, and you're nothin' like him!"

Harry smiled fleetingly. "Thanks, Hagrid. I know I don't have him in my head, but Dumbledore just seems so convinced that me not being friends with Ron and Hermione, and doing well in my classes, are all signs of me going evil. I... I'm worried what he'll do if he thinks I have more Voldemort than me in there. What lengths he'll go to get him out."

He was putting it on, just a little bit, but he couldn't help himself; he wanted to give Hagrid something to think about, without telling him the full truth about the compulsions.

He wanted Hagrid to have the other side of the story if Dumbledore tried to get Hagrid to do something to Harry for him.

"It's gotten worse, over the summer. I don't know if it's to do with whatever happened to his hand, or... he *really* doesn't like me being friends with Slytherins. Even though none of my Slytherin friends are Death Eaters, or even have family who are Death Eaters." Not now Theo's dad was dead, anyway.

"I dunno what happened to his arm, to be honest with yer," Hagrid said, frowning. "It could be... He's a great man, Dumbledore. Done some great things in his life. But, well — still human, ain't he? Still makes mistakes. Maybe he'll come 'round, once he realises you're still the same old Harry as always."

He sighed again, then forcibly brightened up. "An' on the subject of you doin' well in classes — an O, in Care! Made me so proud, you did!" He reached out with a grin, patting Harry on the shoulder with considerable force. Harry smiled back, ignoring the slight pain.

He didn't have the same faith as Hagrid in Dumbledore's ability to see the light, but that was fine. Harry wasn't about to press the subject any further.

.

Harry hoped he might be able to spend the evening with Draco, but clearly the universe was against him — before he could even reach dinner, he was accosted by Slughorn with an invite to an evening gathering, and Harry had no decent excuse to say no. So after eating dinner at the Hufflepuff table with a completely unsympathetic Susan, Harry headed up to Slughorn's quarters, bracing himself for a long and tedious evening.

It was a much larger group than it had been on the train; obviously Slughorn had had time to get to know the students a little better, and choose his prime candidates.

Harry was surprised to see Ginny in the mix, wearing the dangerous sort of smile that meant she was two steps shy of hexing someone. That could have been because Cormac McLaggen seemed to be trying to chat her up. "Harry!" she exclaimed at the sight of him, relief plain on her face. "Good, I was hoping you'd be here tonight!"

McLaggen was clearly still sore about the quidditch decision, as he glared at Harry and disappeared quickly. "Oh, thank Merlin," Ginny muttered. "He's spent the last ten minutes telling me every quidditch match he's ever played with his posh cousins, and how it's an absolute disgrace that he didn't make the team."

"Wanker," Harry replied, and Ginny snorted. "Why didn't you go chat with Blaise?" The dark-skinned Slytherin was stood by the buffet table, staring coolly at anyone who dared approach.

"I was trying to, but Slughorn was talking to him up until a minute ago." The pair of them sidled over to Blaise, and Harry quirked his lips in a rueful grin, reaching for a plate.

"He got you too, did he?"

"Seems to think I'd be willing to introduce him to my mother," Blaise drawled. "Even if she were looking for husband number nine, I don't think he'd like being chosen."

Harry snorted. “Anyone else worth rescuing in here?” If they all stood together, maybe Slughorn would think they were networking and leave them alone.

Taking a mouthful of some rather excellent chocolate mousse, Harry surveyed the room. Belby had not made the cut, it seemed, nor had Neville — which Harry was surprised by, considering Potions Masters were always looking for good deals with Herbologists. Perhaps Slughorn hadn’t spoken to Sprout about her best student. There was a Hufflepuff girl in the year below Ginny whose name Harry didn’t know, and a pair of Ravenclaw boys Harry thought might be brothers. And over talking to Slughorn was Hermione — not a surprise at all, with how enthusiastic she was in his classes. Hermione seemed to be taking advantage of having a teacher who hadn’t had five years to become weary of her need for academic approval.

Slughorn extricated himself from the conversation with her as soon as he spotted Harry, beaming at the green-eyed boy. “Harry! Wonderful, wonderful, glad you could make it — ah, Mr Zabini, I didn’t know you and Miss Weasley knew each other! How marvellous.”

“He’s dating one of my older brothers,” Ginny volunteered, almost daring Slughorn to react poorly. On the contrary, his bushy eyebrows rose, and he grinned.

“Ah, one of the infamous Weasley Twins, I assume? Yes, I’ve heard all about those boys — visited their shop, too! Some excellent products they’ve got there, very inventive indeed. Why, I’m quite disappointed to have missed teaching them by only a year! I’m sure they were a delight to have in class.”

Harry wasn’t sure Snape would have used such a description, and by Blaise’s smirk, he agreed.

“Have you tried the tiramisu, Harry? It’s simply divine — I had missed the Hogwarts elves’ cooking!” Slughorn grinned, patting his rotund belly. “Though perhaps not as much as I ought to,” he added with a chuckle. “Anyway, Harry, my lad; now you’re here, I have a book I’d quite like to show you — a young Potions prodigy such as yourself will find it very interesting, I’m sure!” With surprising strength for a man his age, he steered Harry away from his friends, chatting away quite happily about some friend of his who was the author of the book he wanted to show Harry. Harry glanced over his shoulder, gaze begging Ginny and Blaise for help. Blaise just smirked, while Ginny waved coyly at him, and turned to select a large portion of tiramisu.

Whatever Slughorn might know about Tom Riddle, Harry desperately hoped he figured it out soon so he could decide how to go about asking. He wasn’t sure how much more brown-nosing he could stand.

Chapter 88

On Sunday evening, Harry put his wand to the silver plate on the bottom of his HA inkwell for the first time that year.

On Monday morning, half his year mates — and plenty in the years above and below — had a certain kind of glint in their eye when they met Harry's gaze at breakfast. They were more than ready for another meeting, at last.

And with Dumbledore out of the castle most days it seemed, Harry couldn't think of a better time to start.

They were back in the Room of Requirement now — no reason to head down to the Chamber, not now they didn't have Umbridge trailing their every steps. Only a few faces looked disappointed; most people seemed relieved not to be in Salazar's enormous underground hideaway.

"It's good to see you all," Harry greeted, once he was fairly sure the whole group had arrived. "I'm glad you're all back. It was... a long summer." Several sympathetic nods and grimaces answered him. "You've probably noticed we've got a few new faces with us. I can promise you, they're all trustworthy — most of them were getting HA training in secret one way or another last year."

He gestured with an arm to the cluster of Slytherins stood behind him. Draco, Theo, and five of the kids from the Pottery. With their allegiances now known, there was no point in keeping things secret. Unfortunately not all of his Slytherin allies could be so open; especially not since he'd burned the HA contract at the end of the previous year.

"Just how long have you been befriending Slytherins in secret, Potter?" Terry Boot asked, looking more amused than anything else. Harry shrugged sheepishly.

"Longer than most of you would expect." He admitted. "And I'm sure none of you will be surprised that these aren't the only Slytherins I'm friends with. There are plenty more who aren't able to be quite so open with their friendships, so don't start assuming that everyone who isn't in this room is a Death Eater."

Several people snorted, Blaise being one of them, his lips quirking.

"So," Harry continued, "I know this group started as a way to make sure we all passed our exams. And I know we kept it secret because we didn't want Umbridge on our backs. But things are bigger than that now. There's a war coming."

Every face looking back at him was dead serious, determined. Harry resisted the urge to smile. "I'm not going to put another contract in place, but I'm going to ask you to continue to pretend this club doesn't exist. If you know someone who genuinely wants to be involved, send them my way. But we aren't just about passing exams anymore." He ran a hand through his hair, thinking over his next words. He didn't want to scare anyone, but...

"I'm not going to force you to fight in this war. No one should be forced into that kind of a fight. But I also can't promise that the war will leave you alone — we all know how ruthless the other side can be. All I can do is give you the tools to defend yourselves, whether or not you choose to seek out the fight when it arrives. The headmaster doesn't want me to do this — he thinks that if everyone sits back and lets the adults handle things, the Death Eaters will be perfectly happy to leave us kids out of it." He rolled his eyes, and was glad to see several expressions of disgust in his audience. "So if Dumbledore asks, we disbanded at the end of last year. If *anyone* asks, we disbanded."

"What's the deal with you and Dumbledore, anyway?" Cho asked boldly, raising her eyebrows at him. "All that stuff in the paper over the summer..."

Harry grimaced. "Let's just say that Dumbledore has been planning for his own glory far too long to consider I might not want to be used as a weapon." He didn't dare say anything more, not when half this group didn't know the truth, but he hoped that would be enough. It would certainly get them thinking.

Still, he didn't want their first session back to turn into an interrogation. He clapped his hands together, grinning. "Right, then. Let's get started."

They had a lot to get through, after all.

.-.-.-.

It was a rare evening that found Harry alone in the Gryffindor common room. Normally, he tried his best *not* to be in that space for any decent length of time, but Neville and Ginny had gone for a romantic walk by the lake before curfew, and Harry had been out doing something or another every night that week so far — he didn't want people to start getting suspicious about where he spent his evenings.

Unfortunately, being alone in the common room made him a target for exactly the kind of thing he was hoping to avoid.

"I know what you're doing, you know." Hermione stood over him, arms folded and eyes narrowed. Harry glanced at the parchment in front of him.

"...My Transfiguration essay?" His facetiousness made her scowl, and he fought a smile. There were any number of things she could've figured out that he was up to; which one had a bee in her bonnet now?

"All your new friends. I didn't think anything of it until I came across a book about the Wizengamot this summer. But it all makes sense — Susan Bones, Zabini and Greengrass, even Neville! And now you're all cosy with Malfoy; conveniently right after his mum takes over a whole load of seats!"

As she got more progressively worked up, Harry leaned back in his chair, setting his quill down. He had to admit, he was surprised it had taken Hermione this long to figure things out.

"Draco and I have been friends for far longer than just this summer," he pointed out. "There was just the minor issue of his dad wanting to *kill me*, so we didn't think to publicise it."

Hermione huffed. "So? He's still exactly what you're becoming; an uppity pureblood who thinks they're better than the rest of us."

"I'm still a half-blood, Hermione," Harry said, but she just rolled her eyes.

"A half-blood who's planning on joining the same government system that's been oppressing muggleborns for decades! We don't even get a say in how this country is run, we're just expected to shut up and let the purebloods walk all over us! How could you possibly support them, Harry — how could you think your *mother* would be happy about that?" It was clear she had a whole speech prepared, and Harry wished he could send her Justin's way and have her actually listen to his and Susan's plans for the future of the Wizengamot, but he knew she would just take everything straight to Dumbledore — if she even paused in her ranting long enough to actually listen.

"You have to have control of the government before you can change anything about it," he pointed out patiently.

"Like any of them would change a system they benefit from," Hermione dismissed, making Harry scowl.

"What do you propose, then, Hermione?" he retorted. "We should all just give up our seats and let the Death Eaters have full control? Or do you think all of us should give proxies to Dumbledore, so he can go ahead and do whatever the hell he wants with this country? Because he's done *so much good* with the seats he's had the last few decades." His disdain was blatant, and Hermione glared, hands on her hips.

"Professor Dumbledore knows a lot more about politics than you and your *friends*," she spat. Harry couldn't help but scoff.

"You're so sure about that, are you?" he shot back reflexively. "Look, Hermione, I don't care what you think of me or my friends, but I'd suggest you do your research before you start accusing people of oppression. My Wizengamot seats are part of my family heritage, and I'm not going to ignore them just because *you* think anyone who isn't a muggleborn is immediately out to get you. Especially not when you're just jealous I have decent friends that aren't you."

He started packing up his books and parchment; his essay would get done much faster in the privacy of his dorm, even if it would be a bit uncomfortable to have everything balanced on a conjured lap desk. Hermione continued to splutter at him, half-starting a dozen different sentences, her tirade utterly derailed by his complete lack of interest or defensiveness.

"I never thought you'd be such a *blood purist*, Harry," she declared as he stood — loud enough to draw the attention of the few people in the common room who weren't already watching their interaction. Harry rolled his eyes; wonderful, now he'd have *that* added to the rumours about him going Dark.

"And yet I'm entirely unsurprised by you shoving your opinions on people before you even know enough about the subject to properly understand it," he replied evenly, turning away and heading for the stairs to the dorms.

Let that start circulating for a while — his reputation couldn't get much worse amongst those who were already thinking poorly of him, after all.

.

It was unsettling to hear so many voices at Seren Du, Severus thought as he let go of Ceri's hand and looked around the entrance hall. For so long it had just been him and Remus and Sirius — Harry during the summer, but otherwise, quiet. Hell, for half of the year before, he and Remus had often been the only ones in the enormous house.

Now, Narcissa lived there full time, and Charlie Weasley, and the Tonks family were over so often it sometimes felt like they lived there. Indeed, they were there now; Andromeda and Narcissa and Sirius having tea in the kitchen like he was sure none of them imagined they ever would when they were teenagers. Out in the garden he could hear Charlie, Tonks and Kingsley — it sounded like they were duelling, the aurors putting the dragon tamer through his paces.

"Severus!" Narcissa greeted brightly when he entered. "We weren't expecting you home."

It still baffled him just a little bit to call this place home, let alone to have people there who might be *expecting* him in it. People other than Remus.

"For once, I don't have any miscreants in detention today." Something he'd done purposefully — he hadn't spent more than an hour with his partner since school had picked back up.

Sirius barked out a laugh. "Our godsons are otherwise occupied, then?" he joked — another baffling thing, joking around with Sirius Black. "Moony's up in the library, I think."

Severus tried his best not to blush as both women smiled behind their teacups — it had proven fruitless, over the summer, to try and keep his and Remus' relationship secret from those who frequented the manor, though as far as he knew Kingsley hadn't yet figured it out. He would, soon; it hardly made any sense for Severus to be living there just as Draco's godfather. He was still spying for both sides, he had no reason to be hiding, not like Narcissa.

And, as Remus kept reminding him, they were *family* now.

"Ceri will be sending up tea for Master Snape," the house elf chirped from her stool at the counter where she was rolling dough for what looked like scones.

"Thank you, Ceri." Severus nodded at her, then cast his gaze over the trio of Blacks. "Enjoy your afternoon tea. I'm sure I'll see you all at dinner." None of the Tonks' would pass up a free meal from Ceri, and if Ted Tonks finished work at a decent hour he was more likely to join them than expect his wife and child home.

He left the kitchen, heading for the stairs, unbuttoning the collar of his robe. Was this what his future was to be like? A house full of people, all of whom knew plain as day that he was in love with Remus Lupin — people he could trust not to use that knowledge against him.

After an entire lifetime of sneaking around and covering their tracks and blatantly lying to most of their friends, Severus couldn't fathom it. He wondered if Remus felt the same, sometimes. Then again, the damned wolf was probably counting down the days until the Dark Lord was gone and he could shout his feelings from the rooftops.

Severus would never admit to the warmth that filled his chest at the prospect.

Sure enough, his partner was curled up in his usual spot in the library, a book in his lap and a cup of tea on the side table. He looked up at the sound of footsteps, and the bright smile that took over his face at the sight of Severus was, as always, enough to make his heart stutter. “Severus!” Remus greeted, setting his book down. “I wasn’t sure you’d be able to get away this weekend. You’ve been so busy.”

“*Too busy,*” Severus groused, sliding into the space at Remus’ side, leaning in for a kiss. “But I told Harry and Draco to work amongst themselves for today. They both deserve a break — it seems the transition to NEWTs is just as jarring as it was when we were their age.”

Remus smirked, happily curling against Severus’ side. “I’m sure the boys are grateful.” His amber eyes danced playfully. “I certainly am, to have you home.”

Severus smirked, kissing his lover once more, relishing in the warm weight of Remus pressed against him. Merlin, a summer of sleeping by his wolf’s side always made the first month of school nigh on unbearable.

“Albus will expect me at breakfast tomorrow,” he relayed. “But I can stay the night as long as I leave early.”

Remus beamed. “Perfect.”

A second cup of tea appeared beside Remus’, along with a small plate of chocolate biscuits. Remus hummed happily, reaching for both and handing Severus his cup. “So how are classes going? Have you grown used to teaching outside your dungeons yet?” he teased, making Severus snort.

“It will take more than a few weeks to break that habit,” he said wryly. It was a good thing his quarters were still in the dungeons — that was no one would ever know how often he had automatically walked towards his old classroom to begin teaching. “Classes are... a mixed bag.” Nibbling on a biscuit, he thought back over the classes he’d taught since taking the DADA position. “The second and third years are exactly as dismal as you’d expect.” A year with Umbridge, and for the older students a year with Crouch posed as Moody — all too young to have been invited to Harry’s secret defence club. “The first years are appropriately terrified.”

Remus smirked. “Your legacy continues even without exploding cauldrons,” he drawled, making Severus match his expression. “And fourth year up?”

Severus' lips pursed. "The older students... it is inordinately clear to me which of them were involved in Potter's little club." He leaned back, arm settling around Remus' shoulders. "It's quite astonishing, to be completely honest. I had no idea how much work he'd managed to do with them. How quickly they all must have progressed to be as proficient as they are now." Most of his sixth years were already capable of non-verbal casting, while a good number of his seventh years seemed more competent than half the aurors he'd seen in recent years. Those in his fifth year classes who had studied under Potter could take their DADA OWL tomorrow and get at least an E, and while there were only a handful of fourth years who had been involved, the difference between them and their contemporaries was entirely too clear.

And if some of the whispers he'd heard were to be believed, the club had resumed once more. At this rate, Potter would be doing half his job for him.

"Didn't you talk to him about it over the summer?" Remus asked, one eyebrow raised. Severus shook his head.

"By the time I knew I would be taking over the class, we had bigger things to worry about," he said. "And truthfully, I did not expect it to matter quite so much." He had not expected those students to be so far ahead of their peers. "Harry told me he'd taught them the basics — shields, disarming, stunning. He never mentioned the rest." Once again, Harry Potter had downplayed his skills.

"I suppose you weren't there to see them fighting at the Ministry," Remus mused. "Then you might have seen what they're capable of, thanks to Harry." He kissed Severus' cheek, and swiped another biscuit. "I suppose you're just being even more of an evil git to the ones who already know the curriculum, to stop them getting too much of an ego about it," he teased. Severus' lips pursed.

"I am pushing them harder than their peers," he agreed slowly. "But..." and here was something he wouldn't admit to anyone other than Remus, "I confess, I'm not quite as stern as one might expect. I am keeping up appearances, of course. I certainly can't *praise* them for their abilities. But damn it all, I find I'm actually somewhat proud of the little buggers. They saw they needed to take their education into their own hands, and they did so without any of us figuring them out." He glared at his partner. "I blame you for this, you know. I never used to give a damn about most of my students before you shoved your way back into my life." A handful of students who were decent at Potions and didn't shrink under his death-stare, that was all he'd had the capacity to approve of before. Other than his Slytherins, of course. But even so, he'd never felt like this about students before Remus — before Harry, and the boy's earnest desire to better himself, to make Severus proud, to pass on that knowledge to his friends with the hopes it might keep them safe.

Remus did his best to look solemn, but his eyes were laughing. "I'm awfully sorry I've brought so much joy into that shrivelled up heart of yours that you're finding it difficult to be a dick to children."

Severus scowled, and Remus chuckled, cupping his jaw for a kiss. "It's not a bad thing, to care," he murmured fondly. "Especially not in the position you're in now. You may have to hide what you're truly doing, but you've got the chance to help Harry teach these kids to survive."

The Slytherin knew that all too well — a Hogwarts DADA education was patchy at best, had been since his own school days, since the position had originally been cursed by a young Tom Riddle before Severus was even born. It showed in their Ministry, in their culture, in the way they had been so easily decimated by the Dark Lord's forces; death on both sides, because neither truly had the advantage.

Severus might only have a year in the position, but he be damned if he wasn't going to cram as much useful information into their teenage heads as physically possible in that year.

"Classes aside," he drawled, before Remus could tease him further about having positive emotions towards students, "I'm concerned about Albus. He's planning something." The headmaster had been absent more days than not since school had begun, and on the days he was present he spent far too much time watching Harry at mealtimes for Severus to be comfortable.

"Has he mentioned anything to you about it?" Remus asked, and Severus shook his head.

"No, which is all the more worrying." Albus still believed Severus was his man through and through. If there was something the headmaster wasn't telling him, thought that even *he* might not approve of... it couldn't be good.

Remus' fingers slid into his hair, blunt nails scratching gently at his scalp. "All we can do is wait, love," he pointed out softly. "Whatever he's planning, we'll face it as it comes. But your position is too precarious for you to go snooping."

Remus was right and they both knew it, but that didn't make it any easier for Severus to hear.

It was hell, working for two masters and trusting neither of them. Severus desperately hoped Harry's plans worked out, that they were able to find all the horcruxes and destroy them, destroy the Dark Lord as soon as the boy turned seventeen. He wasn't sure he could bear this burden much longer, not now he had a life worth living outside the shadows.

He was so fucking *tired*.

.-.-.-.

Harry hadn't been able to take Draco down to the Chamber yet this school year, but the chance finally arose when Snape headed home for the weekend and told them to entertain themselves.

He tugged on his boyfriend's hand as they walked down the narrow stone passageway — Draco didn't know it, but Harry's heart was fluttering anxiously. "So, I know I said we could come down here and train," he started, pausing to hiss the command for the other end of the passage to open, revealing the Chamber itself. "And we can still do that, if you want to."

Draco pulled him closer, his silver eyes knowing, his mouth curled in amusement. "I suppose you've got better ideas, do you?" he drawled, his free hand slipping down to the small of Harry's back.

It took a moment for Harry to fight past the sudden haze of lust and remember his original point. “I mean, we *can* do that, too,” he assured, fighting a smile, “but also... I’ve finally got permission, to make some introductions. If you’re interested.”

The blond stared at him in confusion for a few seconds, until it all clicked. Then, he gaped. “You mean...?”

Harry nodded. “Salazar is happy to welcome you into his office.” The founder had loosened up a little once he’d seen how much care Severus had taken in his office, and Harry privately thought he was a little sad about the idea that Harry was the last true Slytherin heir left.

Draco’s jaw dropped, eyes going wide. “I— yes, of course! You couldn’t have warned me sooner?” he yelped, looking down at his slightly ruffled school uniform. Harry laughed, kissing him.

“And let you get all worked up about it?” he teased, heading towards the hidden office. Draco seemed to freeze once the door was open, and Harry had to gently nudge him through the doorway. Salazar surveyed them with intrigued dark eyes, a flicker of a smile beneath his short beard.

“Good evening, Harry, my lad. This is your better half, then, is it?” he greeted, thankfully speaking English. Harry grinned at him, while Draco’s cheeks went pink.

“Yup,” he said proudly, arm around Draco’s waist. “This is him. Draco, love, this is Salazar.”

Draco took a hesitant step closer. “I— it is truly an *honour*, Lord Slytherin,” he said reverently, and Salazar chuckled.

“Welcome to my office, young Heir Malfoy. It’s a pleasure to meet you; Harry speaks very highly of you indeed.”

It was Harry’s turn to blush, as Draco whipped around to narrow his gaze at the Gryffindor. “I’m just gonna...” Harry trailed off, gesturing vaguely towards the bookshelves. “You two can talk.”

Draco floundered slightly at that, but Harry urged him to sit on the sofa, and Salazar — no doubt sensing the teen’s nerves — happily asked him about the state of Slytherin house from a student’s perspective. That was all it took, and before long Draco was chatting away with the founder as if they’d been friends for months, hardly paying any attention to Harry as he browsed the shelves for anything that might be useful.

Like Severus, Harry had no doubt that once the shock of meeting Salazar Slytherin himself wore off, Draco would be voraciously going through the bookshelves himself, but until then Harry was happy to peruse them at his own pace. All the while, a tiny voice laughed in the back of his head, imagining what Voldemort might say if he knew how close he’d come to meeting his beloved ancestor — and how much that ancestor would have absolutely *hated* him.

.-.-.

Life at Hogwarts began to settle into some sort of a routine, as time went on. Harry got used to his classes, learned which of his free periods needed to be devoted to homework and which could be used to get half an hour with Draco; he worked out a schedule for quidditch practice and HA and training with Snape; and at least twice a week, he chatted to Sirius on the mirror, getting caught up on everything that was going on outside the school. Which, honestly, was very little outside the expected — the Ministry was essentially off-limits and utterly useless, with floo being monitored and the aurors under Voldemort's thumb. The Order were currently trying to get all muggle parents of magical children to somewhere safe, now that the Death Eaters had access to the student registry and the Muggleborn Identification Department. It made Harry's stomach squirm every time he thought about the visions he'd had in the summer of Death Eaters destroying muggle houses — how many of those young children had been future Hogwarts students? How many more were being attacked now they had the Ministry, that Harry was no longer aware of?

The Order could only do so much with the Hogwarts Book of Students, after all.

But Harry tried his best not to let it keep him up at night, even as the ball of guilt in the pit of his stomach grew harder and more painful with each passing day. He certainly had plenty of distractions from it, throwing himself into his classes and extra-curriculars the best he could.

“Mr Potter, a word, if you please.” McGonagall’s voice lifting over the chatter of students leaving the Transfiguration classroom was a surprise. Harry glanced over at her — as he did, his gaze caught on Hermione’s smug expression as the girl gathered her books. Had she reported him to their Housemistress for some perceived slight or another?

Harry stood in front of the desk, waiting patiently until the classroom had otherwise emptied. McGonagall shut the door with a wave of her wand, and Harry tried not to fidget too overtly. “Don’t worry, Potter, you’re not in trouble,” the Scottish woman assured him, lips curling when his shoulders visibly relaxed. “I merely wanted to talk to you. I did a lot of thinking, over the summer, about the things we discussed at the end of last year.”

Harry raised an eyebrow at her, heart leaping to his throat. Did he dare hope? “Can I assume you’ve come to some sort of conclusion, then, Professor?”

She huffed, lips pursing. “Only more questions,” she admitted, frustrated. “I… looking back, the way Albus has treated you throughout your school years. I should have seen earlier that things didn’t add up. The way he spoke about your home life, versus the way you’ve acted. The things I’ve heard from other… acquaintances, these past couple of years.”

Harry winced. That wasn’t the part of Dumbledore’s machinations he’d hoped to discuss.

“I feel I owe you more than a few apologies,” McGonagall continued. Harry tried to wave her off, but she narrowed her gaze. “No, Potter — you have been failed by many members of staff, but I am the one who is supposed to be responsible for you, and I have not lived up to that responsibility.”

“Professor, you did what you could,” Harry insisted. “You didn’t have all the information.” His smile tightened. “Dumbledore made sure of that.”

The stern woman frowned. "Indeed — I am beginning to realise that." She sighed quietly. "I will admit, I don't know how I can help. If I were to go against Albus' wishes—“

"You'd lose your job," Harry finished grimly. "No, it's not worth it. Just— honestly, I have most of it under control. It's just good to know you're on my side, even if you have to pretend you're on his." She wouldn't be the only person limited by their closeness to Albus Dumbledore. "We'll need someone trustworthy to take charge of the school once we get Dumbledore out."

McGonagall blinked, then slowly raised an eyebrow. "I'm sure I don't want to know who is involved in this 'we' you refer to, do I?" she asked, dryly, making Harry grin. "Well... I did think the headship may be coming for me in the next few years, though admittedly I assumed it would be due to Albus' age. How..." She paused, the topic clearly a difficult one for her. "How long do you expect to take?"

"He'll be gone by the end of this school year," Harry promised her. Whether that was due to his work discrediting the man, or the curse on his arm taking its toll, that remained to be seen — but that wasn't information McGonagall needed.

She gave a tight nod, shoulders tensing slightly. "Right, then." McGonagall straightened some papers on her desk, and when she looked at Harry her eyes were full of pure Gryffindor ferocity. "Whatever I can do to help, Potter, I shall. You only have to ask."

There was a small pain in Harry's chest, a knife worming between his ribs — how different would his life had been if he'd heard those words from her three years ago, or even earlier?

But it was too late to think like that. At least he had her on his side now, when it was truly important. "Thank you, Professor," he said sincerely.

If there were a way to achieve his goals without hurting the people he cared about with the realisation that their idol was a manipulative, selfish man bent on the destruction of magical Britain for the sake of his own glory, Harry would have jumped at it. But there wasn't.

The truth was hard, but it was necessary. He only hoped the rest of the wizarding world took it so gracefully.

.-. .

As term rolled on, the students of Hogwarts learned to dread the morning post.

The flurry of owls arriving in the Great Hall wasn't as big as it had been in previous years; fewer students, for one, but also many people not finding it safe to write. And plenty of students ending their subscription to the *Prophet* now that it was essentially Dark propaganda and misinformation.

But in amongst the usual cluster of post delivery, there were black envelopes.

These were a brand new development since the *regime change* at the Ministry. A way of informing Hogwarts students of a death in the family. Either a thinly-veiled taunt at the death

of a muggleborn or *blood-traitor* parent at the hands of the Death Eaters — always described as an *unfortunate accident* — or a genuine letter of condolence for a child whose Death Eater parent lost their life.

No one was safe from the prospect of a black envelope. Except, of course, those like Harry — those who had no blood family to be notified about.

This morning, Harry spotted four in the delivery; two headed to the Ravenclaw table, one to Slytherin, and the last to a Gryffindor second year who went the colour of sour milk when the envelope landed on the table in front of him.

One of the Ravenclaws fled sobbing from the hall. Harry's stomach turned. He wasn't hungry anymore.

Ignoring the concerned look in Neville's hazel eyes, Harry shoved his plate aside and stood abruptly, trying not to shudder under the heavy gazes of those who watched him leave.

Were they thinking the same thing he was? Probably. They certainly hadn't been quiet about it in the past.

He was Harry Potter — the Chosen One. He was supposed to be stopping Voldemort, stopping the Dark before anyone else's parents or cousins or siblings could die. Before any more of those black envelopes could be sent.

Every single one was another nail right in his heart, another reminder that he was safe in school while the rest of the world was not. More than once, a recipient of a black envelope had screamed at him over breakfast, blaming him for the death of their loved one. Harry was never sure what to say to that — they were right, of course; he wasn't moving fast enough, was wasting time going to classes and snogging his boyfriend and just *waiting to turn seventeen* while outside the castle, the fight continued.

A hand suddenly gripped his shoulder, and Harry whirled around with a glare — a glare that faltered at the sight of knowing silver-grey eyes.

Draco tugged him into an empty classroom, warding the door and turning to face Harry, arms crossed over his chest. "Whatever self-flagellating bullshit you've got in your head right now, drop it," the Slytherin ordered. Harry grit his teeth.

"It's not *self-flagellating bullshit*," he sneered in response. "I could have stopped these, Draco — or at least helped! If I hadn't got rid of that bloody horcrux in my mind, I could've seen his plans. Some of those people might still be alive." It was a thought he had every single time black envelopes arrived. He had led the Order to help so many over the summer, by getting early insight into Voldemort's plans. How was that fair to all the attacks that came after?

Draco scoffed. "He was blocking you long before you got rid of it," he pointed out. "You wouldn't have seen shit." He reached out, and Harry only fought him for a moment, reluctantly letting the taller boy pull him close. "You aren't responsible for every person he

kills, Harry,” Draco murmured, hand running soothingly through Harry’s hair. “Thinking like that won’t get you anywhere.”

“I’m the only one who can kill him,” Harry retorted, and Draco glared.

“But his followers are doing most of the work, and you’re not bound to them at all,” he argued. “You may be a key player, but this war is bigger than you. Hell, if you want someone to blame, blame bloody Dumbledore.”

Harry snorted, guilt faltering ever so slightly. It was true; Dumbledore’s insistence on making the wizarding world worship him as everything *light* and *good* was what had caused the shadows to grow so dangerous. He had upset the balance long before Harry had been born.

But Harry was the one who would right the balance, and he wasn’t moving fast enough. How many more people would die before he could fulfil his destiny?

Seemingly able to sense the turn of his thoughts, Draco held Harry tighter, kissing his forehead. “The Order are doing what they can. Kingsley and Tonks, your godfathers, my mother — all of them are doing their best to help people survive. Nothing can be done until you turn seventeen and have your full magic; no amount of hating yourself is going to change that, you ridiculous lion.” He smiled against Harry’s scar, and Harry leaned into him, a lump rising in his throat.

“I should be doing more,” he rasped. Draco shook his head.

“You’re doing so much already. You don’t even realise it,” he insisted. “Let the rest of us share your burden, alright?” He pulled back, meeting Harry’s eyes, a faint smile at his lips. “Honestly, Potter — I’m supposed to be the selfish one in this relationship. Stop thinking everything is about you.”

His tone was teasing, and a startled laugh slipped from Harry’s lips. Reluctantly, he relaxed into the embrace, trying to shed the guilt that was weighing down his shoulders and filling his chest. He took a deep breath — his boyfriend was right, of course, as always. Harry couldn’t make time go any faster. Couldn’t summon the remaining horcruxes with a click of his fingers.

It was war, and people died. He couldn’t take that personally.

That wouldn’t stop him having nightmares about it, though. Wouldn’t stop him wondering when the day would come that a black envelope arrived for someone he knew, someone he loved.

It was only a matter of time.

Chapter 89

The first week of October was a fairly ordinary one, as far as Hogwarts went.

At least, it started out that way.

Harry went to bed fairly late on the Friday night, after a HA meeting that culminated in him and Draco staying back in the Room for some alone time. He was exhausted when he finally collapsed on his mattress, looking forward to a nice long rest before he had to spend his weekend writing essays.

He was not expecting to be woken up at four in the morning by a strange, persistent sort of magic.

His hand went reflexively to his scar, alarmed, before he remembered it was entirely inert these days. And this magic felt... different. It didn't set him on edge — if anything, it was welcoming. But it was impatient. It needed him for something.

Trepidation brewing in his stomach, Harry pulled back his curtains, swinging his legs over the edge of his bed — and froze. Neville stood in the middle of the darkened room, pulling a dressing gown over his pyjamas.

Both boys stared at each other, wide eyed.

"I... do you feel it, too?" Harry asked tentatively. Neville blinked, then nodded.

"What is it?" he asked. Harry shook his head, shoving his feet into slippers.

"No idea." The rest of their dorm mates seemed utterly oblivious, Ron's snores drifting through his poor attempt at a Silencing charm.

Utterly bewildered, wands in hand, Harry and Neville crept down the stairs. The common room was empty — the boys' frowns deepened. The magic continued to push, like a guiding hand on Harry's shoulder, urging him to leave Gryffindor Tower. He followed, though his gaze was wary.

Once out in the corridor, the magic directed him to turn right. The feeling of intent grew — it was almost... excited. Eager.

Absently, a memory flashed through his mind. Speaking to Salazar at the beginning of the year — *the castle is keen*.

Was that what was happening? But what was the castle *keen for*? And what did he and Neville have to do with it?

His shoulders relaxed a little at the realisation that the magic was Hogwarts itself; it wouldn't hurt him. But where was it taking them?

They both halted immediately at the sound of footsteps, whirling around to see Hannah Abbott creeping towards them. She was in pyjamas, too, and an oversized black jumper with the sleeves rolled to her elbows, wand held aloft. She tensed as she spotted them, then relaxed, eyeing them suspiciously. “What’s happening?”

“No idea. Did the magic bring you up here?” Neville asked. Hannah nodded, cheeks flushing slightly.

“It sounds weird, doesn’t it? But I just felt like — like something *needed* me to be up here.”

“Not weird at all,” Harry assured. The two boys flanked her, and the trio continued.

Harry realised they were headed to the Room of Requirement only a turn before they got there. His exhausted brain whirred frantically to try and figure out what was happening — then he saw Luna, waiting outside the door to the Room, and a suspicion began to grow.

“Luna?” Neville greeted, perplexed. “Are you the one who summoned us here?”

The blonde girl smiled, shaking her head. Her eyes seemed to almost glow in the dim moonlight. “No, it wasn’t me.”

“But you know why we’re here,” Harry presumed. He could feel it, now, with the four of them stood together. That pressure in his chest, the flood of magic in his veins. Family magic.

Slytherin magic.

Luna’s smile turned knowing. “So do you.”

“Well, I don’t,” Hannah cut in impatiently. “So if you’d care to share...”

Harry turned to her and Neville, quietly surprised. Luna, he half-expected; she was appropriately mysterious and ethereal to be hiding a secret Ravenclaw bloodline connection. Neville too, to an extent; the Longbottoms had been rumoured to be connected to Gryffindor’s line for centuries now. But Hannah was unexpected.

“It’s your birthday today, isn’t it, Hannah?” he asked, making her blink.

“I— yes? I got my magic surge about an hour ago.”

Harry smiled slightly. “Looks like the castle is eager for a shake-up,” he mused. It was growing impatient, too; practically screaming in his head for him to open the door to the Room. He reached for the handle, pushing it open, then stepped back. “After you, Lady Hufflepuff,” he said softly, gaze fixed on Hannah. She gasped, and so did Neville.

“How did you...?” She trailed off, stepping through the door. As Harry walked in behind her, making sure Neville and Luna were following, his breath caught in his throat.

The castle had led them to the Wardstone.

It was *nothing* like any Wardstone he'd seen before. Not that he'd seen many — just the Pottery, and Grimmauld. But the Hogwarts wardstone was easily twice the size of either of those, a perfect crystal sphere sat on a stone pedestal, shining with internal lights; blue and red and green and yellow, all dancing around each other, pulsing with the faint rhythm of the castle's magic. The heartbeat of Hogwarts.

"This shouldn't be possible," Neville murmured, astonished. "Hannah's the only one of us who's of age!"

"When things become necessary, the castle has ways of speeding up the inheritance process," Luna declared, that strange Other tone to her voice. Harry looked up, hopeful, and she shook her head at him. "Not for the rest of your family magics. Only Slytherin." She was apologetic — she knew how important it was for Harry to reach his full potential quickly.

"Slytherin?" Hannah repeated, staring at Harry incredulously. Harry nodded.

"Conquering heir," he confirmed. He turned to the Wardstone, the magic washing over him like a tidal wave. "Looks like it's time for us to take up our duties." The first time in centuries the Hogwarts heirs had been needed.

Of course it was him. Of course it was now.

As if he needed anything else to make him special.

"What... what do we do?" Neville took a half-step closer. Harry wondered if he was feeling the call, too — the urge to press his hands to the Wardstone and just sink into it.

"We answer the call," Luna replied, as if it were obvious. "But we must do it all together."

No one argued, and within moments the four of them were stood around the Wardstone — stood at the four cardinal points, the points that felt *right*, had the castle humming with satisfaction. Harry had a strong feeling of *deja-vu* — only it wasn't him he was remembering, but Salazar himself, and all the Hogwarts heirs that had come since. All the Slytherin-blooded wixen who had once stood in this exact spot, who had lent their magic to the castle, drawn magic in return.

Each of them raised their dominant hand, and in unison, pressed it to the surprisingly warm surface of the Wardstone.

Immediately, Harry's spine stiffened with the force of the power that rushed through him. It was jumbled at first, a discordant clash of magics and wards and sensation that made him dizzy — then, as it began to twine with his own, the sensation calmed down.

It was at that point that he realised just how *desperate* the wards were.

It made his heart hurt, to feel such incredible wards so clearly languishing. Huge holes ripped in the tight weave, patched clumsily by a somewhat recent-feeling magic, certain aspects flooded with power while others were utterly ignored.

Dumbledore had been manipulating the school wards for his own gains for *decades*.

The castle knew what it wanted — Harry was just a vessel, his magic reaching for the threads of emerald green magic within the stone, the colour pooling under his fingertips inside the crystal. In his mind's eye, he could see the wards start to rebuild themselves; the wards keeping dangerous creatures out of the school reforming; the wards to alert the staff of students in danger filling with magic once more. So many aspects of the school that had been ignored for so long, to the point where most people alive had likely forgotten they even existed to begin with.

None of the *trials* Dumbledore had put him through in his years at Hogwarts would have been possible under the wards at full strength.

Now he was much deeper within them, he realised they had not begun to fade *just* when Dumbledore had become headmaster — some time before that, likely during Grindelwald's rise to power. When Dumbledore was just a Transfiguration teacher.

Had he done something then, to disrupt the wards' connection with the actual headmaster? Started seeking his power even at such an early point?

Started supplementing his own power with that of the Hogwarts wards?

For it was inordinately clear that was what Dumbledore had been doing, at least for the last few decades — with the amount of ambient magic around the students, not to mention the magic naturally within the land Hogwarts was built on, it shouldn't have been possible for the wards to get so weak without the magic being directed elsewhere. That was why the founders had built Hogwarts on this spot — that was why their family magics were so strange, so deeply intertwined with the castle. After everything the founders put of themselves into it, and all those decades of them living within the castle while the magic was so new and volatile, it had changed the family magics so they were unlike anything seen elsewhere; so they were all interlocked, and far more sentient than any other magics had been discovered to be.

The magic tangled through the four of them, pulling the wards away from Dumbledore and linking them to those of founders' blood. Harry wondered with a panic if Dumbledore might notice, but the castle soothed him in his mind, a flicker of mischief dancing across his skin. Things would be fine.

With their power imbued in the castle, with the wards finally allowed to flourish once more, Hogwarts would handle everything. The heirs just had to protect themselves, and protect the school from Dumbledore and others like him.

They could have been in there for hours. Days, even. Time lost all meaning as Harry descended into the castle's magic, his brain filling with an *awareness* unlike anything he'd ever felt before. The kind of awareness the head of school was supposed to have — awareness of the students and their safety, of the ghosts and the elves and the lake and the forest.

The kind of awareness that kept students safe. The awareness that had been lacking for the entirety of Dumbledore's Hogwarts career.

At last, the magic melted back into the Wardstone, and Harry was able to remove his hand. But the awareness was still there, in the back of his mind, waiting for him to need it. *Hogwarts* was there, waiting.

It didn't feel like the oily, suffocating press of foreign magic, not like he'd experienced before. It wasn't his own, that much was clear, but it nestled in beside his without issue. It felt like an extension of his Slytherin family magics, almost — magics that were now fully functional and coursing through him, as if he were of-age, though his other family magics remained dormant.

"Wow," Hannah breathed, reminding him of his company. Harry surveyed his three friends, noting the way they stood that little bit straighter, their eyes bright and their faces flushed. They felt more powerful, too. They felt like *family*.

"The wards were so broken," Neville breathed, horrified. "He let them get that way. He *made* them that way."

Harry understood his disgust — now, aware of all the things the Hogwarts wards were *supposed* to do, he couldn't believe Dumbledore had taken all that away. Not just sneaking dangerous artefacts and creatures into the school — the wards were old enough not to have the same ideals of Light and Dark as modern day — but even as far as making sure students couldn't seriously harm one another, or themselves.

How many student injuries could have been prevented with the wards at full capacity? How many sexual assaults? He wasn't so naive to think it didn't happen.

How many suicides had there been in the last seventy-odd years, that could have been avoided?

Harry felt sick at the thought of it.

"His reign is over," Luna declared quietly. "The school is ours, now."

Harry reached out, placing one hand on Luna's shoulder and the other on Hannah's. Opposite him, Neville did the same, and the girls reached out too until all four of them were huddled together around the glowing Wardstone.

"This is going to turn the whole world upside-down, once word gets out," Hannah mused. Then she smirked, laughing quietly. "Susan is going to *flip*."

Harry snorted; yes, the future Chief Warlock was certainly going to have plenty to say about the Founders' seats being active for the first time since the eighteenth century. Once it was safe to go to the Ministry and claim them, after all.

"We should keep it secret, for now," he suggested. "No one will know what's happened. Even Dumbledore won't know the truth." He would feel his connection to the wards had changed, but he wouldn't understand why. The castle would protect them. "It's an advantage we can't afford to give away."

“You’re right,” Neville agreed. “But… blimey. I never expected this.”

Harry hadn’t, either — he should have, though, with his track record.

When they reluctantly pulled themselves away from the Wardstone, they headed to the door — and all four of them stopped as they were hit with such a strong surge of *gratitude* it left them breathless. Hogwarts was so very glad to have heirs again.

The school was ready to fight. And now, with them at the wards, they might actually win.

.-. .

Breakfast should have been unbearable, on so little sleep — when Harry and Neville had returned to their dorms after bidding goodbye to the girls, they were so wired from the influx of magic the sun had been creeping over the horizon by the time they’d finally nodded off.

But nonetheless, Harry had woken at the usual time feeling refreshed and invigorated; more so than he had in weeks, quite honestly. Neville, too, seemed bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, greeting Ginny with a hug so tight it lifted her off her feet for a moment. She squealed and laughed, eyeing her boyfriend in confusion.

“Someone’s in a good mood,” she commented, looking at Harry for an explanation, but he just grinned at her.

Down in the Great Hall, Harry laughed at seeing Hannah sat at the Hufflepuff table wearing a ridiculous hat shaped like a birthday cake, complete with charmed candles flickering on top. She glanced up when they entered, and beamed widely, her brown eyes knowing.

Over at the Ravenclaw table, chatting happily to Sully, Luna was practically glowing with energy — but that wasn’t unusual for the odd girl, so no one seemed to take note of it.

Feeling a little smug, Harry looked up at the head table; Dumbledore was present for once, and he looked a little grey in the face, nursing a cup of tea with a half-eaten slice of toast going neglected on his plate.

It had to hurt, being cut off from a source of magic you’d been shamelessly abusing for decades.

As Harry sat down, he caught the headmaster’s gaze, and automatically raised his Occlumency shields against intrusion, shifting his eyes away. Dumbledore scowled slightly behind his beard. Harry ignored him, reaching for a plate of sausages — the headmaster could glare suspiciously as much as he wanted, he wouldn’t discover the truth of the night before. It wasn’t surprising that he was just assuming Harry had something to do with it.

Harry smiled to himself, wondering what the old man might do if he discovered who else had been involved in cutting him out of the Hogwarts wards. Wondering how long it might take him to figure out that was what happened — with the castle itself shrouding the truth, Dumbledore likely thought it was just more side effects from the curse slowly ravaging his

body. He may never know; not until he tried to draw even more magic, or manipulate the wards further, only to find them out of his reach.

In the back of his mind, Hogwarts was laughing.

.-.-.-.

Naturally, the first person Harry went to after breakfast — for a generous stretch of the definition of person — was Salazar, who took one look at him and smiled wider than Harry had ever seen from him before.

“You knew this was going to happen,” Harry accused, and Salazar laughed.

“I did not know when,” he confessed, “but I could feel the change coming. Even as a portrait, my magic is connected to the castle.” His dark eyes fixed knowingly on Harry. “It feels good, doesn’t it?”

Harry flopped down on the sofa, letting out a long breath. “It feels amazing,” he said honestly, running a hand through his hair. “I— is this what my full adult power will feel like?” He couldn’t imagine it, having that much magic running through his veins. Killing Voldemort would feel as easy as swatting a fly.

“Not quite. Your Slytherin magic is strengthened by the connection to the castle; your other family magics won’t have that. But the boost is quite similar — always elevated for the first forty-eight hours. It’s a good thing it’s a weekend, or you’d have a lot of explaining to do when you cast spells in class.”

Harry grimaced slightly; yes, he’d have to make sure he had his power properly contained before Monday’s classes began.

“Can I pour that extra magic back into the wards?” he asked. “I don’t need it, not now — and the wards have been lacking for *so long*.” His despair was audible; the whole concept of Dumbledore binding and warping the castle’s magic like that hit a little too close to home for Harry’s comfort.

Salazar’s eyes were sympathetic, and he stroked his pet snake’s head, leaning back in his chair. “Of all the heirs I have met in recent centuries, I am most glad this power has found you, Harry,” he said solemnly. “Often the ambition of a Slytherin can become warped, surpassing their own good sense — it gladdens me to see you care more for this school’s wellbeing than your own magical ability.” He smiled; a sad, wistful thing. “Dear Hogwarts does so much for the magical youth of this country, it deserves to have such a steadfast champion.”

Harry blushed, even as something warm and happy swelled in his chest. “Hogwarts was the first place I ever truly called home,” he replied softly. “It deserves better than what it has become under Dumbledore’s thumb.” He would see it become better, if it killed him.

“It certainly does,” Salazar agreed, smile turning into one of pride as he looked down at his heir. “Come; tell me about the other heirs — I can only assume they share your same

devotion to this school, if Hogwarts has decided to awaken you all. And I am curious which families have ended up carrying my friends' lines with them." Then he smirked, that Slytherin deviousness returning. "Then, if you have no pressing engagements, I shall teach you how to properly utilise your new connection to the wards — for the castle's benefit, and your own."

Harry grinned, making himself more comfortable. His homework could wait.

.-. .

Carrying even a fraction of the wards of Hogwarts took a little time to get used to, for all four of the heirs. Even with the tips from Salazar, Harry had to work hard not to accidentally pull from the wards, or focus too hard on trying to feel them. It was exhausting, having a low-level awareness of the entire school in the back of his mind.

But already, the castle felt better — stronger, happier. The students seemed to feel it, too, even if they didn't know why. And Dumbledore certainly felt it, if the thinly veiled confusion on his face was anything to go by.

The Hogwarts heirs were getting used to it. It would be easier, Salazar assured, when all of them were seventeen and fully developed; right now it was a bit of a strain on their adolescent magical cores, but the castle would do its best to ease that strain. Either way, it was just another oddity on the list for Harry to get used to.

By the first Hogsmeade weekend near the end of October, Harry was both desperate to leave the castle and terrified of doing so. He wasn't sure how the connection would stretch, even though Salazar assured him it would be fine. The wards hadn't been designed to keep them trapped within the castle, after all.

"It'll be fine," Neville assured optimistically as the pair of them headed down to breakfast, dressed for a day in the village. "Come on, Harry; you've been looking forward to this for ages. Hannah and I are both staying here, it'll be fine."

He was right, and Harry knew it. Forcing his anxiety away, he managed a smile, nodding tightly. Neville grinned, gently bumping his shoulder. "Stop being such a control freak," he teased, making Harry stick his tongue out. He wasn't a control freak! He was just... usually the epicentre of trouble, and liked to be on top of things when it occurred.

Still, he kept silent, not sure Neville would see it his way.

Reaching the Entrance Hall, Harry had more of a spring in his step, remembering the reason he'd been looking forward to the Hogsmeade weekend for so long. Draco stood near the doors, two wrapped sandwiches in his hands, his Slytherin scarf wrapped around his neck to ward off the late October chill. His grey eyes looked even more vivid against the dark green wool, and Harry felt a tingle travel down his spine.

"I'll see you later, then," Neville drawled, amused. Harry snapped back to attention, feeling heat rise on his cheeks. Neville just laughed. "Be careful out there. Remember, you're just friends, yeah?"

Harry scowled lightly at him. “We’ll be fine,” he insisted. “See you at dinner.”

They parted ways, and Harry strode over to Draco’s side, offering the blond a grin. “Morning,” he greeted, taking one of the sandwiches from his boyfriend. It was still warm, carefully wrapped so the bacon and eggs wouldn’t fall out. “Thanks. Didn’t feel like eating breakfast in the hall this morning?”

Draco shrugged, falling into step beside Harry as they headed out onto the grounds, huddled close against the freezing wind sweeping across the landscape. “I’ll take any excuse to skip sitting in that damned hall these days,” he replied, eyes darkening. Harry hummed in sympathy; he understood the feeling. Between everyone staring at him like he was about to crack, Dumbledore’s suspicious gaze, and the potential delivery of black envelopes, Harry was getting sick of mealtimes at Hogwarts too.

The boys ate as they walked, falling into the steady stream of students heading down to the village. Even now, nearly two months into term, they got strange looks just for being together, being friendly. Harry tried his best to ignore the eyes on him, focusing on enjoying his time with Draco.

Hogsmeade, when they reached it, was quieter than usual — not only because many students had seen the temperature outside and decided to give the weekend a miss. Zonko’s Joke Shop was boarded up, and they weren’t the only ones; it seemed even the village’s proximity to the school wasn’t enough to leave people feeling safe.

“Or Zonko’s has gone under because the twins are putting them out of business,” Draco remarked when Harry said as much, making him blink.

“That quickly? You think so?”

“From what Blaise has told me about how business was going over the summer, it wouldn’t surprise me,” Draco mused, shrugging. “Of course, Zonko’s has — or had, rather — the upper hand with a physical presence so close to the school, but the twins got so good at sneaking owl-orders under Umbridge’s nose last year, their customers don’t have to worry about deliveries getting caught.”

Harry knew the twins were still paying Dobby a small fee to deliver within the castle, and he smirked to himself. “Maybe they can buy out Zonko’s, have a second shop here.”

“Blaise would certainly like that,” Draco agreed, matching his expression. Harry laughed.

“As if George living in Diagon is stopping those two from meeting up,” he said, shaking his head. He knew the redhead was somewhere around the village — or perhaps had already snuck into the school to visit his beau, given the terrible weather.

A particularly strong gust of icy wind made him shiver, leaning in a little closer to Draco. He had to stop himself from sliding an arm around the blond’s waist to properly cuddle up for warmth — he couldn’t do that in public. They were just friends, as far as the rest of the school was concerned. Though, truthfully, Harry was caring less and less about keeping that

secret with every day that passed. People gossiped enough about him as it was; why not add one more thing to the list?

Luckily, while Zonko's was closed, Honeyduke's was open; the pair hurried over to take refuge from the cold, as even Warming charms couldn't do much about the wind. Harry let out a quiet sigh as they squeezed into the already crowded shop, getting hit with an immediate blast of warmth. Beside him, he felt Draco relax ever so slightly.

"Maybe we should've stayed in the castle," Harry joked under his breath — it seemed that half the students who were visiting the village had sequestered away inside the warm, delicious-smelling shop. There was hardly room to move, let alone browse the shelves for treats.

"Harry, my boy!" The jovial call made his heart sink; it was Slughorn, wrapped up tight in a furry hat and coat, clutching a box of crystallised pineapple. "Good to see you out and about! I was starting to think you spent all your time on the quidditch pitch, these days. Or in detention!" Slughorn chuckled at his own joke. "You keep missing my little suppers; I'll have to have a word with Severus if he keeps it up. I'm sure you don't deserve half the detentions he gives you. Or do you only behave in my classes?" he chuckled again, and Harry echoed the sound, forcing a smile.

"Some classes are easier to behave in than others," he joked, and Slughorn winked at him.

"Quite right, quite right. Not to worry, I'll get you eventually — how about Monday night? You can't possibly be out playing quidditch in this weather!"

Harry, who had mostly been scheduling quidditch practices specifically to clash with Slughorn's little parties, knew he wouldn't be able to get out of this one. He couldn't even use the HA as an excuse, as Slughorn didn't know it existed and he'd rather like to keep it that way. "Monday night it is, sir," he confirmed, trying to sound more enthusiastic than he felt.

"Excellent!" Slughorn beamed, clapping him on the shoulder. "Good to hear it, lad. Now, I suppose I'd best let you get on with your day, I'm sure you'd rather chat to your friends than your old Potions Professor!" He peered around, as if expecting Harry to be hiding a gaggle of adoring fans behind a shelf somewhere, and blinked at Draco as if he'd only just noticed him. "Mr Malfoy! My, I had no idea the two of you were, ah, friends outside the classroom!"

Harry stifled a snicker; if only he knew. "Draco and I have been friends for ages, sir," he replied, smiling. "Slytherins and Gryffindors do get along on occasion. I'm sure you'll agree that their reputation isn't always deserved — you were a Slytherin, weren't you, sir?" He remembered Snape mentioning Slughorn had been his head of house, back in the day. "Indeed I was," Slughorn confirmed with a slightly awkward chuckle. "Many years ago, mind. The inter-house rivalry wasn't quite what it is now, back in my day. Still, a little friendly competition never hurt anyone, eh?"

Harry would argue that the current view of Slytherin house was more than 'friendly competition', but he was still trying to get on Slughorn's good side, so he just laughed. "As long as we don't start talking about quidditch, we'll be fine," he remarked, slinging a

companionable arm around Draco's shoulders. Slughorn's gaze followed the movement, and Harry wondered what he was thinking. Did he see this as a sign of Harry sinking further into the Dark, or of him playing the saviour and redeeming the previously irredeemable?

Slughorn stuttered out a few more platitudes, then squeezed past them and left the shop. Once he was gone, Draco let out a quiet noise of disgust. "I'm so glad I don't have to deal with those *suppers* of his," he muttered derisively.

"You should be," Harry agreed, reluctantly dropping his arm from the blond's shoulders when a pair of Hufflepuff girls eyed them strangely. He was still probably being too obvious, practically pressed against Draco's back as the pair of them surveyed a display of fudge, but he didn't care. He was hanging out with his boyfriend in public, even if they were pretending to be just friends. It was more than he could have hoped for last year, for sure!

"Has he told you anything useful, yet?" Draco reached for some dark chocolate and cherry fudge, then grabbed a packet of the chocolate-orange flavour with a quick grin to Harry, tucking it in with his own purchases even though they both knew it was for the Gryffindor. Harry smiled back, forgetting the question for a moment.

"What? Oh. Uh, not really?" Snape was so sure that Slughorn had to know something important, that there was a reason Dumbledore had brought him back to the castle, but if there was he was keeping it close to his chest.

Then again, Harry was struggling to find a non-suspicious way of asking for information about Tom Riddle, so perhaps he just hadn't found the right questions yet. It was hard, when he was fully aware of what lies Dumbledore may have filled the man's head with.

"Maybe if I stop skiving off his suppers he'll warm up to me a bit," he admitted, making Draco snort.

"Yes, that would help."

With all their layers of clothing, it was starting to get a little *too* warm in the shop, and with the crowd pushing them so close together Harry was finding it increasingly difficult not to settle a hand on Draco's hip or brush a kiss across his temple. So they wrestled their way to the till, had a brief but silent argument about Draco paying for all of Harry's sweets — which, naturally, Draco won — and braced themselves with more Warming charms before heading back out into the street.

It was jarringly quiet, compared to what both of them were used to in Hogsmeade. The street was practically empty — no one lingered, keeping their heads down and heading straight for their next shop. Harry doubted the weather was entirely to blame.

The only people who weren't hurrying to get out of the open were the guards patrolling the village. Harry grinned to himself at the sight of Kingsley leaning up against a lamp-post, wrapped up tight in heavy robes and a wool hat covering his bald head. "Hey, Kings," he greeted cheerfully, heading towards the man. Kingsley straightened up, nodding towards him.

"Harry. Mr Malfoy." He had to pretend he hadn't seen Draco dozens of times over the summer; people weren't to know just how involved he was with Harry's true family. "Enjoying the weather?" he asked wryly. Harry snorted.

"Hardly. How long have you been out here?" The man had to be absolutely freezing.

"Since eight," the auror — or was it ex-auror, technically, since he couldn't go to the Ministry without being killed? — replied, shrugging. "I'll switch with Vance in an hour or so. Can't see the students staying long today."

"You're only here for the Hogsmeade weekend, then?" Draco asked, but Kingsley shook his head.

"Oh, no; Albus has a constant guard in the village, just to keep an eye on things. But we've doubled up protection while the students are about. Tonks is around here somewhere. Fletcher's supposed to be on guard, too, but I'm pretty sure he buggered off a while ago. He was bitching about frostbite." Kingsley rolled his eyes, and Harry scowled. He still had not met Mundungus Fletcher in person, and hoped it stayed that way.

"Typical," he muttered derisively.

"What are you boys up to, then?" Kingsley's dark eyes travelled pointedly between them, and both boys flushed beneath their scarves.

"Just out and about. Getting a break from the castle. Not that this is much better," Harry added, turning to glare at a pair of fourth years whispering a bit too loudly about him on their way past. Kingsley frowned.

"Yes, Sirius mentioned you'd been having some trouble," he murmured.

"It's nothing I can't handle," Harry assured. "Just gossip. The usual."

"But the headmaster isn't helping," Draco cut in with a dark look. "Watching you like you're about to start throwing Unforgivables around the Great Hall."

"I can handle it," Harry insisted stubbornly.

"Wish you didn't have to, kid," Kingsley sighed, shaking his head slightly. "But you're doing alright, otherwise? All things considered?" His gaze was pointed — there were so many things Harry didn't dare write in letters, and he wasn't sure how much Sirius shared.

But those same things were far too sensitive to be talked about in the middle of Hogsmeade, and they both knew it.

"Doing fine," he assured. "Keeping my head down, my grades up, all that jazz." He flashed a cheeky grin, and Kingsley chuckled.

"Glad to hear it. Look after yourselves, both of you. Now get out of this bloody cold — just because I have to stand here freezing to death doesn't mean you need to join me." His voice

was jovial, but he was looking around at the street — at the students who were staring curiously at Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy stood talking to this strange adult.

He was right; they should get inside, try and pretend to be normal students for a while longer.

“Give the rest our love,” Harry said quietly, and Kingsley nodded, bidding them goodbye. The two boys turned away, wincing at the bitter sting of wind on their cheeks.

“Three Broomsticks?” Draco suggested, already headed for the pub. Harry smirked.

“Not Puddifoot’s?” he teased, earning a scowl.

“You couldn’t pay me enough to go in there.”

Harry laughed, the sound ringing through the quiet street, earning them even more strange looks. People seemed surprised that Draco could draw such a bright sound from him.

They didn’t know Draco like Harry did.

The Three Broomsticks was just as busy as they expected it to be, but there was enough space for them to squeeze in at the bar and order a couple of butterbeers. Harry ended up pressed to Draco from hip to ankle, trying not to get jostled by the crowd, stopping himself a dozen times over from putting his hands somewhere inappropriate for mere friendship.

Merlin, pretending to be friends was even more exhausting than pretending to hate each other, sometimes.

.-.-.

Honestly, Remus was quite surprised he and Sirius were still invited to Order meetings.

The atmosphere in the Burrow was tense — Albus had moved meeting to the Weasley house when it became clear Sirius was not going to rescind his ban against Molly in the Grimmauld wards. Molly seemed equally displeased about having to let Sirius into her house; especially since he and Charlie made no moves to hide their relationship in front of her.

He wondered how Albus couldn’t see the divide within his own people; was he truly that blind, or had he stopped caring? Decided he was so close to defeating Voldemort by himself that the rest of them no longer mattered? The old man seemed more evasive than ever, these days. Severus was right to worry about what he was planning — whatever it was, he wasn’t sharing with the Order, and that was not a good sign.

“Now, I trust everything in Hogsmeade went as planned?” the headmaster asked, once Joseph Hawthorne had finished giving his report on the Ministry. That was another thing; over the last few months Albus had inducted more people into the Order, people the rest of them hardly knew. He claimed it was because all his previous Ministry informants were now out of the job, which was true, but Remus wasn’t sure he trusted these new ones entirely.

“Quiet as a mouse,” Kingsley confirmed. “Clearly the Death Eaters didn’t want to be out in that cold any more than we did.”

There were a few chuckles around the table, but Albus' lips only twitched briefly. "Glad to hear it. Although — I heard several of the students mention that Harry had been talking to strangers in the village."

"He stopped to chat a moment," Kingsley assented, face as impassive as always. "Him and the Malfoy lad."

"What did he ask about?" Albus pressed.

"Nothing in particular. Just wanted to say hello, ask how everyone was doing outside the castle. Like I said, he only stopped for a moment."

"He said hi to me in the Three Broomsticks," Tonks volunteered. "But there weren't any free seats, so they left after one drink."

"Just him and the Malfoy boy?" Moody asked suspiciously, bright blue eye fixed on Tonks. "Didn't meet any of his other friends there?"

"Not that I saw."

Moody's lips thinned. "Boy's headed down a dangerous path."

"The Malfoys are on our side," Sirius cut in, irritation clear in his voice. "Narcissa has more than made amends for what she was forced to do while her husband was alive. There's no reason Harry and Draco shouldn't be friends."

Moody scowled, but before he could say anything Albus cleared his throat. "Harry's friendships aside," he cut in, "you must not draw such attention to yourselves. And you must be careful what you say to him. All of you," he added, surveying the group with that condescending, disappointed-grandfather face that made Remus' hackles rise. "I understand that Harry is used to seeking out information for himself — and indeed, seems to have decided he no longer wants the information I am willing to give him — but you must be careful what you say in front of him. We cannot be certain he can be trusted."

"Oh, not this again," Sirius groaned loudly. "Give it a rest, Albus. He doesn't have Voldemort in his head!"

"The nature of Harry's connection with Voldemort is strange and mysterious magic, Sirius," Albus insisted. "With the recent changes in his behaviours, it is not something we can rule out entirely. Even if Harry himself is not aware of the influence, it could be affecting him."

"That poor boy," Molly fretted. "Ron and Hermione are so worried about him — he won't even talk to them anymore!"

Remus stifled a snort; worried, sure. So worried they were calling him a blood supremacist to anyone who might listen. But they wouldn't have told Molly about that.

It wasn't the first time the argument had come up in an Order meeting — indeed, as the same old points were hashed over for the dozenth time, Sirius getting increasingly furious in defence of his godson. Remus wondered how much longer the Order could last. He could see

it in peoples' eyes — those who knew the truth about Dumbledore, those who were on Harry's side, all of them sat with varying degrees of veiled rage as Albus and Moody and Molly insisted that Harry was under Dark influences and needed to be *managed carefully*.

It would be so easy to just get up and leave. All of them, make their stand, make Albus realise how many of them were no longer working for him. Leave the man and his sycophants to their slow-brewing disaster, turn away and get some *real* work done. Already they were having meetings of their own, gathering at Seren Du or Grimmauld whenever they could manage, discussing their continued efforts to get at-risk people to safety. The Order knew nothing about those in hiding at the Pottery, or Malfoy Manor, or the handful of other properties they had begun using all over the country. They certainly didn't know about their contact with Mrs Zabini, with Mr and Mrs Delacour, with some of Charlie's friends in Romania and some of Viktor Krum's teammates in Bulgaria — all working to help smuggle people out of the country, if there was truly too much danger for them to stay.

They would get so much more work done if they could leave the Order to crumble, and it was tempting. But Remus knew they couldn't. They all knew they couldn't.

As long as Harry was outwardly taking a stand against Dumbledore, even if he had not yet started to dismantle the man's reputation, he would need as many of them as possible on the headmaster's good side to stay in the loop, in case Albus' plans took a drastic turn. Right now, he just wanted to keep Harry out of the way, oblivious — hardly much different than previous years, in all honesty, except for his insistence that Harry was dangerous.

But the moment that changed, the moment he decided Harry was *too* dangerous, they needed to know. They needed to be ready.

Harry's life could depend on it.

.-.-.

Slughorn's Monday night supper was just as dreadfully boring as Harry anticipated it would be. This one was a more formal sit-down affair, and much to his dismay Harry had been seated between Hermione Granger and Cormac McLaggen. Cormac had no desire to talk to Harry after being denied a place on the quidditch team, so Harry was stuck trying to ignore Hermione's attempts at befriending him — clearly someone had told her she needed to be nice to him again, because it was a drastic turn from her previous behaviour.

How stupid did Dumbledore think Harry was?

Annoyingly, with Hermione nattering away at him, Harry didn't even get much of a chance to talk to Slughorn. Not that he knew what he might say. He had no idea how he was supposed to get information from the man, especially when he barely knew what information he was looking for to begin with.

If he outright asked Slughorn about horcruxes, he'd go straight to Dumbledore, and Harry would be screwed.

He hurried from the man's office as soon as Slughorn started making noises about dismissing them all for the night. Hermione tried to follow him, but Harry ducked into a side passage that conveniently made itself available for him — an unexpected perk of holding the Hogwarts wards was the castle's willingness to accommodate him, however it could. Harry had been sneaking around using Salazar's passages since he'd discovered them, but it was nice to have the other secret hide-aways available too. The other heirs certainly enjoyed it. The other day Hannah had delightedly told them she could get an extra twenty minutes of studying done after lunch most days thanks to passages to take her quickly from the Hufflepuff dorms to the upper levels of the school.

Speaking of the wards, as he walked through the passage, Harry began to feel an insistent sort of tugging in the corner of his mind the castle now occupied. It didn't feel urgent — it wasn't a student in trouble. More... the castle had something to show him.

Well, Hogwarts hadn't led him wrong yet. He followed the tug obediently, eyebrows rising when, once again, he was being led to the Room of Requirement. He was alone — the other heirs hadn't been called along too. It wasn't a problem with the Wardstone, then.

When Harry opened the door, his jaw dropped. He was staring at a seemingly endless room, full of piles of assorted *stuff*. Books and clothes and furniture and Merlin only knew what else; prank items and strange potions and sinister-looking weapons. Most of it was junk, and a lot of it looked older than even Dumbledore.

The room of Hidden Things, a voice supplied in his head. Harry looked around, and snorted.

"Hogwarts Lost and Found, more like," he muttered — everything the castle occupants had ever forgotten about, or tried to hide from teachers. Everything abandoned and unused and probably some stolen things in there, too; it seemed to have all wormed its way into this room. He peered closer at a stack of books, letting out an impressed whistle. He recognised many of the titles from the Seren Du library — they were rare books, old books.

"When was the last time someone sorted this place out?" he asked, feeling a vague negative sensation from the castle. A long time, then.

Another thing on the list of things to do once the war was over.

But there had to be a reason he'd been brought here, past just being shown to this treasure trove of odds and ends. He opened his magic up to the castle, waiting for more guidance. Slowly, Hogwarts began to nudge him down the aisles of junk, a clear destination in mind.

When Harry turned a corner, he knew immediately what the problem was. Thick, oily magic sidled up against his own. Familiar darkness — even without the matching darkness residing in his scar, Harry could tell immediately what it was.

"Another one? Here?" He stepped up to the bust of an ugly old man, beside which lay a tarnished silver tiara.

A tiara that was *leaking* with dark magic. Horcrux magic. Harry stared at it, wide-eyed. How long had this been within the school? Room of Hidden Things indeed — clearly Tom Ridde

had thought he was the only person to find such a place, despite clear evidence of how many students over the years had done the same thing.

He wondered how long the castle had been aware of this foul magic within its walls, crying out for someone to do something about it, but too weak to be heard.

Looking around, Harry saw a slightly moth-eaten silk scarf, and quickly wrapped the tiara up in it. Sending a mental thanks to Hogwarts for the tip-off, he hurried out of the room, only one destination in mind. He only paused once — to check the person he was after was actually present. Then he made a slight detour; not to Snape's quarters, but to his personal lab a few doors down. He knocked, stepping back to wait, not caring that he didn't have his invisibility cloak with him. He hardly needed it these days; the castle would warn him if he needed to hide.

Snape answered the door with a scowl, which deepened at the sight of Harry. "Potter," he spat, then narrowed his gaze, no doubt catching the feel of the dark magic Harry carried with him. "Get in here."

He ushered Harry inside, warded the door, and turned to him. "What's the matter?"

Harry set his wrapped bundle on the nearest workbench, carefully dislodging the scarf until the tiara was visible. "Found it just now. Or rather, the castle showed it to me." He hadn't kept his new status as true Lord Slytherin secret from his family, or Draco. Snape knew about Harry's new connection with Hogwarts' magic. "How many more of these damned things can there be?"

"This may well be the last," Snape murmured, scanning it with his wand. "Other than the snake, of course. But you remember what Bill said — any more than eight or nine splittings and the soul becomes too unstable to exist."

Harry did a mental count — his scar, the locket, the diary, the cup, the ring, the snake, and now this. Seven horcruxes. Only six made intentionally. The number clicked in his brain, a trickle of cold running down his spine. "I think there's one more."

Snape raised one dark eyebrow at him. "What makes you say that?"

"Voldemort knows Arithmancy, right? Think about the numbers of magical power; three, seven, nine. He's definitely made more than three, we know that. And nine would be too many — also if he was going for three threes, the objects would probably come in threes, but they don't. But seven... it's more powerful than the other two, and it makes sense. Seven horcruxes — seven anchors to the mortal world. And if mine was an accident, that makes it an extra — so that gives him eight."

The Potions Master's lips thinned in thought, his brow furrowed. "You're forgetting, of course, that there is another anchor. The original soul piece, within him. Seven horcruxes would make eight soul pieces in total. And eight is a terrible number for such things. It is far more likely that he intended for six horcruxes — totalling seven pieces of soul — and, as you say, the fragment within you was an unintended extra, shaken loose from his already fractured soul when the Killing curse rebounded on him."

He was right, of course. Voldemort might have lost his sanity in the process of splitting his soul, but if the numbers were important to him, he wouldn't have upset that balance. And the numbers likely *were* important to him — someone as obsessed with magical strength would not ignore such a basic tenet of magical power, a fundamental law of their existence.

"So... you think this is the last one, then? Truly? Other than the snake." Harry bit his lip.
"That's a big assumption to make about something so important."

"Indeed," Snape assented. "But it is not unreasonable. And we have precious few other ways of determining the number otherwise."

Harry snorted to himself. "Yeah, can't exactly just stroll up and ask him." He glanced back at the tiara, shuddering at the magic bleeding from it. "What's so special about this thing, anyway? Everything else has had meaning." Slytherin's locket, Hufflepuff's cup. A family ring, and his childhood diary.

"If I am not mistaken, this is the lost diadem of Rowena Ravenclaw." Snape's lips twisted in a sneer. "Another priceless artefact we will have to destroy to end the Dark Lord's reign."

Harry frowned — he'd heard of Ravenclaw's diadem. Read about it, somewhere, perhaps. Or maybe heard his Ravenclaw friends talk about it. "That's the one that's supposed to give you infinite knowledge if you wear it, right?" Snape nodded. "Blimey. You'd think he might have bothered to put it on before he cursed it, maybe realised this whole thing was a bad idea."

A reluctant twitch of amusement flickered across Snape's face. "Quite. Nevertheless, we must deal with the matter quickly." The tall man straightened up, striding across his lab past the gently simmering potion, waving his wand to reveal a hidden niche in one of his shelves. From that niche he pulled a wooden box, and from that box came a crystal vial filled with vivid yellow liquid.

Basilisk venom.

Snape's hands were perfectly steady as he brought the vial over. "Harry, get the crystal slab out, would you? It's beside the gold cauldron."

Harry turned, peering at the rack of cauldrons until he saw the shimmering piece of crystal tucked away between them. The size of a regular chopping board, Harry knew the slab was the strongest, most magically resistant material available, used for working with volatile ingredients.

He set the slab up on the worktop, then carefully shifted the diadem atop it, making sure not to touch it with his bare skin.

"Stand back," Snape warned. Harry didn't need telling twice. Wand raised in case the horcrux tried to put up a fight, Harry took a large step backwards, watching as Snape uncorked the vial and poured its contents over the diadem.

Immediately, it began to hiss and bubble — and then scream, a black cloud of smoke seeping from the twisted metal, the same scream the diary had given, and his scar, and all the other

horcruxes as they died. Harry tried not to flinch, didn't dare look away until the smoke had dissipated, even as the wards went haywire in his mind at such a strong concentration of danger. He hoped the other heirs didn't get alerted, hoped the castle knew he had this handled.

Then there was silence, but for the slow hiss and sputter of the silver and jewels melting to nothing under the power of the basilisk venom, creating a disgusting puddle on the crystal slab. After a few moments, Snape flicked his wand, vanishing the mess. Both of them stared at each other grimly.

"Well, then," Harry murmured eventually. "Just the snake left, you think?" He wanted to believe Snape's logic, wanted *so much* to know that they were almost done.

"We shall do what research we can to confirm," Snape replied. "But I truly do think so."

It would be a disaster, if they were wrong.

But if they were right.

If they were right, it changed *everything*.

Chapter 90

Chapter Notes

Warning for non-graphic discussion of sexual assault (RE Amortentia use)

All through Tuesday, Harry wished he could find a chance to tell Draco about the previous evening's events. He trusted Snape would get word back to the crowd at Seren Du, to Bill and his team investigating the matter. Draco was the only other person in the school who knew about horcruxes — except Salazar, of course. But the founder's portrait had already admitted he didn't know of a way to track existing horcruxes, and he would probably agree with Snape's sensible logic about seven soul pieces.

It just seemed too easy. Too neat, the way Harry had found all the horcruxes — and Dumbledore had found the one he would have struggled to hunt down. Perhaps it was a sign of Voldemort's arrogance, to have such obvious hiding places for his precious treasures. He certainly hadn't shown good sense in giving one to *Lucius Malfoy* to keep safe.

Could he really be so close to ending it all for good?

He tried to force the subject from his mind, especially when Dumbledore was around. He couldn't risk the headmaster catching even the tiniest fragment of a stray thought from him, not about that. And Dumbledore was getting less and less discreet about his dislike of Harry.

It wasn't just Harry he had problems with, either. Whether he believed Hermione's idea that Harry and the other Wizengamot heirs were planning the next stages of pureblood supremacy within the Ministry, or he just didn't like the idea that soon this group of teenagers would have more political power than he could even dream of, he was starting to get terse with the rest of the heirs to the point where even the other students had begun to notice.

Of course, it was nothing drastic — nothing that could lead to people thinking the *esteemed* Albus Dumbledore was bullying a bunch of schoolchildren. But he would stare at them through mealtimes, frowning; he would take points from them for ridiculous reasons, and scold them for no real reason at all.

The rumour mill was working furiously with each new incident, and Harry was happy to add fuel to that particular fire.

"You should start spreading it around that he tried to give me a detention just to force me to spend time with him," Harry suggested to Parvati in their heir's meeting that afternoon. The Gryffindor girl raised an eyebrow.

"When did he do that?"

“Oh, he didn’t,” Harry replied, shrugging. “But it sounds like something he would do, doesn’t it?”

Parvati giggled. Beside Harry, Draco rolled his eyes. “Add in too many false rumours and it’ll backfire on you,” he warned, but Harry wasn’t bothered.

“The rest are all real.” The current topic of gossip in the school was Dumbledore trying to corner Sully to ask about their parents — and constantly misgendering them in the process. It was a foolish move on Dumbledore’s part — those who knew the truth of the Fawleys’ allegiances would know Dumbledore was sticking his nose in and clam up, while those who thought the Fawleys were still light would think Dumbledore was getting too paranoid in his old age.

Along with the number of rumours revolving around Dumbledore’s withered hand, there was a growing consensus that the headmaster was finally losing it.

Harry couldn’t be happier.

“Have you thought up an excuse to get out of Slughorn’s Christmas party, yet?” Blaise asked, directing an amused look at Harry, who blinked.

In the drama of the horcrux, he’d entirely forgotten Slughorn announcing his plans for a Christmas party at the supper the night before. “Oh, fuck. I’m gonna have to go, aren’t I?”

Daphne cackled. “Don’t look so smug, darling,” Blaise warned. “I’m dragging you in with me. We’re allowed to bring a guest to this one.”

“I hate you,” the blonde Slytherin announced, but Blaise just winked.

“Slughorn’s letting us have a plus one?” Harry asked, surprised. He must have zoned out through that part of the announcement. “Well, that might make it a little more bearable.” He turned to Draco, grinning teasingly. “You want to finally see what all the fuss is about?” he joked.

Draco gave a thoughtful frown, then nodded. Harry choked. “Alright, then,” Draco agreed, eyes sparkling. “It can’t be any worse than some of the parties my father used to throw.”

Blaise, Theo and Daphne all nodded in vehement agreement, but Harry was too busy staring incredulously at his boyfriend. “You— really? You’d go with me?” He suddenly looked doubtful. “Like, as a friend, or...?”

Grey eyes softened. “I think we’ve both had enough of that ruse, don’t you?” he mused wryly. “I’m ready if you are.”

Harry swallowed thickly. This felt like part of a much bigger conversation — a conversation they really shouldn’t be having in front of their entire friend group. But at the same time, it seemed so simple; Draco was right, they were both tired of pretending.

Was Slughorn’s Christmas party really the best place to go public, though?

After a beat, Harry snorted. “I suppose people can’t hate me much more than they already do.” Those who thought he was going Dark wouldn’t care if Draco was his friend or his boyfriend, they’d see it as validation all the same. And it would probably piss Dumbledore off, which was a good enough reason to do anything as far as Harry was concerned. “You’re really sure you’re ready for that?” he checked anxiously. Being Harry’s boyfriend — his first ever confirmed romantic partner — would be a huge deal in the eyes of the public. Even though the *Prophet* was a bunch of Death Eater propaganda these days, there would still probably be gossip in *Witch Weekly* once the news got out.

“I’ll have to face it sooner or later, won’t I?” came Draco’s easy response. He was much calmer about all this than Harry had expected — how long had he been thinking about this, without Harry even knowing?

The Slytherin’s hand covered his on the tabletop, their fingers tangling together. “Think of it this way; we can go to the party, scandalise all of Slughorn’s little worshippers, then bugger off home for Yule and let the gossip hounds wear themselves out before we come back in January.” He smirked. “And then we can scandalise them all over again by snogging in the library where anyone can see us.”

Harry laughed. “You’re sure, then,” he said again, making Draco huff.

“If you ask me one more time, I’ll hex you,” he declared in annoyance. “I’ve always known this day was coming. Allow me the opportunity to gloat about snagging the hottest guy in school, alright?”

Harry’s cheeks burned, but he couldn’t hold back his smile, leaning in for a chaste kiss. “You’re on, then,” he agreed happily. Maybe having Draco at the party might make it halfway bearable.

A throat cleared pointedly, and Harry snapped his gaze away from Draco, belatedly realising that the entire group was still there — and had been for the duration of that whole conversation.

“Are you quite finished?” Susan asked, eyebrows raised. “Because if you’re going to start feeling each other up under the table *again*, you can leave.”

“We never— that wasn’t—” Harry spluttered helplessly, and several of his friends laughed, the traitors. They hadn’t been *feeling each other up*, they had just been sitting together, and it wasn’t his fault Draco had decided to put a hand on Harry’s thigh while he studied. “All of you are the worst friends,” he declared, glaring at them. Neville snickered.

“Too bad we’re the only ones you’ve got,” he replied, entirely unsympathetic.

Harry scowled, but it didn’t last long — not when he looked back at Draco and thought about going to the party with him, *properly* with him, being able to hold his hand and kiss him in public and finally stop holding himself back.

For once, he was actually looking forward to one of Slughorn’s get-togethers.

.--.

It was like the run-up to the Yule Ball, but worse.

As soon as word got out that Slughorn was having a party and that the invitees were allowed a plus one, suddenly Harry was fending people off all over the damned castle. The only bright spot was that this time it was mostly guys asking him — though a fair few bold girls gave it a shot, too. Some were guys he knew through the HA, or other Gryffindors, but some were total strangers. Every time, Harry apologetically told them he already had a date.

Unfortunately, because he and Draco wanted to keep things secret until the party just to have some modicum of peace, the entire school was eager to know *who* his mystery date was, and until someone could produce a name Harry was considered fair game. His friends were no help — they all knew the truth, but were far too amused by the whole situation, and had a habit of throwing random names into consideration just for fun.

Harry wished he could just ignore it all, but with Draco plotting the murder of every boy who even *thought* about asking Harry to the party, it was hard to avoid the subject even when they were alone. Not that they got many chances to be alone, lately; between classes and quidditch and HA and Harry's detentions with Snape, he and Draco hadn't had time for more than a quick hand-job in an empty classroom in weeks.

Harry was very much looking forward to the holidays.

Still, there was almost two months before that glorious freedom arrived. Almost two months of having to deal with people asking him out, or trying to wheedle the name of his mystery date out of him. Why had Slughorn announced the party so early? Perhaps to guarantee Harry couldn't find an excuse to get out of it — he had seemed awfully delighted when Harry had confirmed his attendance.

It did start to die down after the first couple of weeks, at least. People seemed to realise Harry wasn't just saying he already had a date just to let them down gently; only the truly persistent were still trying. And the rumours about Dumbledore soon became even more interesting than Harry, especially after Dumbledore lost his temper quite spectacularly at some seventh year Slytherins and forcibly checked them for Dark Marks.

So classes continued, and Harry did his best to keep on top of everything he had going on. It was a relief to know that the horcrux hunt was being put on the back-burner — Bill and his Gringotts team had agreed with Snape's theory, after they had apparently spent some time studying the results of the ritual Harry had undergone to estimate the power of the soul fragment in his scar, to give them an idea of just how shattered Voldemort's soul was. Six intentional horcruxes and one accidental one seemed to be the sensible answer for everyone involved. Harry just hoped they weren't being optimistic.

With the first quidditch match of the season drawing ever closer — naturally, against Slytherin, because Merlin forbid they have an easy start — Harry spent more and more time with his team out on the pitch, wanting to make sure they were as ready as he could get them. With so many new members this year, he knew he wasn't going to get the same level of beautiful cohesion he was used to out of the Gryffindor team, but he was damned well going

to try. He'd missed quidditch so much, when Umbridge had banned him last year. He was determined to make up for everything he'd missed.

And equally determined to win against his boyfriend, both of them eager for another locker room tryst regardless of which team's showers they ended up in.

"Did you hear the latest?" Ginny asked by way of greeting when she arrived for practice that evening, broom slung over her shoulder. Harry raised a curious eyebrow. "Apparently Hermione asked Ron to Slughorn's party. Or, well — whether she *asked* is unclear, they might have just bickered their way into it, but I think they're going together."

"Really?" Harry asked, mildly impressed. "Blimey. Didn't think they'd ever get their heads out of their arses."

"Right?" Ginny agreed, snorting. "It's weird — they've been mad about each other for ages, anyone can see that, but I can't *actually* imagine them dating. They just fight so constantly now they don't have you as a buffer."

Harry knew what she meant; every third conversation between the pair seemed to end in some kind of argument. He wasn't one to judge bickering as foreplay — not when he was dating Draco — but even so... "I guess we'll have to see how it goes."

If it crashed and burned, well, at least it was something else for people to talk about that had nothing to do with Harry. There was such scarce relationship drama these days, with half their year either happily paired off or having no intention of sticking with one person any time soon.

The rest of the team began to arrive, and Harry turned his focus to more important things. He could get the Gryffindor gossip from Parvati and Lavender later.

.-.-.-.

At last, the time had come — the Gryffindor/Slytherin quidditch match was upon them.

For once, the Gryffindor table was a solid block of red and gold when Harry arrived at breakfast, Ginny and Neville at his sides. They cheered at the sight of him, Katie shuffling up so they could sit with the rest of the team.

"How you feeling, Harry?" she asked, bright-eyed, and Harry grinned.

"Brilliant. The weather's looking perfect, too." Not too bright, not too windy, nice and crisp; excellent quidditch conditions.

"That's not the only thing. One of the Slytherin chasers — Vaisey, the fourth year kid — he's got a concussion from a bludger to the head in yesterday's practice, so Pomfrey's said he can't play. *And* Malfoy's called off sick, too, so they've got Harper as seeker." Katie paused, wide-eyed, suddenly realising that Harry might not see that as good news. "Malfoy's fine," she hastened to add, "as far as I know. Just got a sudden flu or something."

Harry bit his lip — Draco had been fine when they'd met up last night. He glanced over at the Slytherin table, where the team sat in their green and silver uniform jumpers; sure enough, Draco wasn't there, but fifth year Harper was suited up and ready to play, looking a bit queasy himself.

"I'm sure he's okay, Harry," Ginny said, bumping his shoulder with hers. "You can check on him after the match."

Harry hummed, still worried. "He must be feeling really shitty to miss the game, though. Playing Gryffindor is the highlight of his year." The opportunities to fly seeker against Harry in a proper game were few and far between, these days.

"There's always next year," Katie said, shrugging. "I wouldn't have thought it would be that big a deal, now you two are friends and all."

Heat rose in Harry's cheeks, and he tried to will it away. "I'd still rather fly against him than Harper," he retorted evasively. "Some kind of challenge would be nice."

"Oh, just shut up and let us take this easy win, Captain," Ginny teased. "Draco will get over it. You never know, he might appreciate the save to his pride — at least this way when they lose to us no one can say it's his fault."

Despite his worry, Harry laughed. Then he noticed a familiar green and silver clad figure heading in his direction — some of the other Gryffindors booed and hissed, but it was light-hearted; Blaise was dating a Weasley, that made him practically a Gryffindor, even on quidditch days.

"He's doing fine, just in the dorms feeling sorry for himself," the Italian boy declared, leaning down to talk to Harry quietly. "But he says if you want to throw the match because of his illness, you're more than welcome to do so." He sounded amused, and Harry's shoulders relaxed — if Draco was up for making jokes, he clearly wasn't too ill.

"He wishes," he retorted, smiling. "What's wrong with him?"

Blaise frowned slightly, shaking his head just a fraction. "Nothing Pomfrey could pinpoint. But nothing she could declare foul play, either. He just woke up with a fever and a headache, potions didn't shift it so Pomfrey wouldn't clear him for the match."

Heart aching in sympathy, Harry ran a hand through his hair. "That sucks."

"Even magic can't cure everything," Neville remarked. "Some colds are just extra potion resistant."

Harry hoped it was just that, and not anything more sinister.

Either way, he didn't have any time to worry about it further — he and the rest of the team had to get down to the changing rooms and get ready for the match. The Gryffindor table cheered again when they left, several people wolf-whistling at the kiss Neville and Ginny shared before they parted ways.

It was a different atmosphere than Harry was used to, before a match against Slytherin. There was hardly a fraction of the animosity against the snake house that there had been when he'd first started at Hogwarts — though there were still enough genuine Death Eater supporters on the team to make the match dangerous.

Harry gave his best attempt at an Oliver-Wood-worthy Captain's speech, Katie giving him a discreet thumbs up at the end of it, and then they were headed out for their first game of the season. It was weird, stepping up to shake hands with Urquhart, not seeing Draco's grey eyes narrowed in challenge amongst the opposing team. Harper was taller and broader than Harry, and Harry quietly thought he would have no trouble at all catching the snitch before the fifth year boy.

The match began, Harry's Firebolt responding quickly under his grasp as he soared into the air, circling the pitch and watching his team spring into action. Despite his worry about Draco, he was feeling confident. They had a great team — certainly better than Slytherin, down two of their main players.

He could have done without Zacharias Smith on commentary, but it was easy enough to tune the Hufflepuff boy out. His chest swelled with pride as his team were on fine form, the chasers easily scoring three early goals, the new beaters wrangling the bludgers competently, and Vicky with honestly very little to do because of it.

Harper's strategy seemed to be an attempt to follow Harry around and harass him as much as possible; but he wasn't nearly as annoying as Draco had been in their youth, and with his superior broom Harry was able to shake him easily.

Slytherin tried their best, but it wasn't good enough — when Gryffindor were already up 80-20, Harry caught a flash of gold out of the corner of his eye, and immediately spun to chase after it. Harper tried to follow, but it was no use; by the time he was on Harry's tail, Harry was halfway to the snitch. His hand closed around the fluttering gold ball and the stadium exploded into cheers.

As Harry steadied his broom and raised the snitch in triumph, Harper scowled at him, glaring hard. Harry just grinned all the wider — and then he lost sight of the Slytherin player as he was bundled in a hug from half a dozen red-and-gold clad players.

"You all did brilliantly!" Harry enthused, clapping the shoulder of anyone he could reach.

"You too, Captain!" Vicky returned, beaming at him. They all lowered themselves to the ground, and Harry ruffled Ginny's hair on the way to the changing rooms.

"Your brothers will be so proud of you," he told her, and she beamed at him. It was a shame, really — due to the political climate outside the castle, Dumbledore wasn't letting any spectators come to the student quidditch matches this year. Harry was sure all the Weasley boys would have come, if they could.

Next year.

He shot a somewhat wistful look at the showers as he stripped off his quidditch robe — there would be no post-match romp with Draco, unfortunately. That was another thing that would have to wait a year.

As with any Gryffindor win, there was a party in the common room to follow. Harry had already put Dobby on snack duty, and it was the work of only a few moments to sneak out to Hogsmeade for the usual delivery from the Three Broomsticks; he had promised the twins he'd keep up the tradition, after all.

Rosmerta gave him a scolding look, even as she brought out the crate of butterbeer. "You shouldn't be sneaking around, Potter, with things the way they are. The target on your back is big enough."

"They won't get me in the village," he assured confidently. The woman didn't look convinced, and chided him to hurry back to school.

"Next time just send a bloody owl-order in advance," she told him, rolling her eyes, "it's not like your team ever loses, is it?"

Harry laughed, offering a wave and ducking out of the pub, butterbeer securely in his pocket.

The party was in full swing when he arrived, cheers exploding through the packed common room. He set up the butterbeer and swiped an armful of bottles, then turned to try and find his teammates.

In his search, he was briefly accosted by an enthusiastic pair of Creevey brothers, keen to show him the pictures they'd taken during the match. There were some great ones in the mix, and Harry made them promise to get copies for him — there was one of Ginny scoring an amazing goal that he knew Charlie would love to have.

Eventually, he did make it over to the team gathered by the window. He handed out the butterbeers he'd brought over for them, making sure there was an extra for Neville, who had Ginny quite happily perched in his lap. Katie shuffled over to make room for Harry between her and Vicky on the sofa, with Jimmy and Ritchie sat on the arms of the armchair Demelza had claimed.

"Not a bad start to the season, then!" Katie declared happily, clinking the neck of her bottle against Harry's. "Even if Slytherin weren't playing their best team, they still gave us a run for our money."

"We play like that against Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw, and the cup is in the bag," Harry assured, beaming at his team. "You were all fantastic, honestly."

There would be time for criticisms and improvements at the next practice; right now, Harry wanted them all to enjoy a match well played. Especially the new members, who had improved so quickly since the start of the year.

Harry stayed and chatted for the time it took him to drink one butterbeer, accepting congratulations from all the Gryffindors who came up to pat him on the back and talk to the

rest of the team. At one point, he noticed Ron and Hermione kissing in a corner, and he stared with a wide-eyed sort of fascination.

“Looks like he’s eating her face, doesn’t it,” Ginny remarked. “But I guess everyone has to start somewhere.”

“Hasn’t he spent most of the last year and a half giving you shit for kissing in public?” Vicky asked, brows raised, and Ginny nodded.

“Yup,” she agreed, popping the ‘p’. “Maybe this is him trying to get back at me for it. Or he’s just a big ‘ol hypocrite who’s just trying to brag about finally getting someone to kiss him.” She watched the pair keep going, looking increasingly disturbed. “Really, though, there’s no way watching me snog Nev is more gross than *that*.”

Harry, who wasn’t particularly inclined to enjoy watching *either* snogging session, still had to agree.

“Well, on that note,” he declared, patting his thigh and getting to his feet. “I’m out. I’ll catch you all later.”

There were several disappointed groans. “Oh, come on, Harry! Don’t let them put you off your party!” Demelza insisted.

“Oh, he’s not,” Ginny cut in smugly, “he’s just heading off for a private party of his own. Aren’t you?” Her brown eyes met his challengingly, and he raised his hands in a ‘you got me’ gesture.

“Maybe I am, maybe I’m not,” he drawled, winking.

“Don’t keep him up too late,” Neville called. “Both of you need your rest! You’ve classes in the morning.”

Harry barked out a laugh, merely waving goodbye, squeezing his way through the crowd. He had to go and grab his invisibility cloak from his dorm, first.

“Hi, Harry!”

He resisted the urge to groan as Romilda Vane stepped in front of him, blocking his path. “Hi, Romilda. Excuse me, sorry, I need to go upstairs.”

“Want some company?” she asked, giggling flirtatiously. Harry levelled her with a flat look.

“I’m going to take a piss, so no,” he returned evenly, getting a small spark of satisfaction when she blushed.

“Oh. I, uh—I got these for you!” She held out a thin rectangular package. “As a congratulations. For winning the match. You’re a really great captain, Harry.” She giggled again. Harry looked down at the box of chocolate cauldrons she’d forced into his hands.

"Uh, thanks. Bye, then." And, ignoring her stuttering, he neatly side-stepped her and carried on towards the dorm.

Slughorn's party couldn't come soon enough. Maybe then people would finally leave him alone.

Tossing the chocolate cauldrons aside, uncaring of where they ended up — he certainly had no intention of eating them — he dug through his satchel for his invisibility cloak and the map, and paused for a moment. What else could he bring Draco? What did you bring people when they were unwell?

He had vague memories of Aunt Petunia plying a poorly Dudley with endless soup and ice cream. But Draco wasn't a big fan of ice cream, and he'd probably already eaten. Anyway, bringing food wasn't that impressive when Draco had full access to the same house elves Harry did.

What else? He stared at his trunk, as if it might hold all the answers. There was no point in bringing potions, not when he'd likely had all he could take from Pomfrey and Snape. A book, maybe?

Then, Harry's gaze landed on the blanket balled up at the bottom of his bed. It was a new addition; Andromeda had quilted it for his birthday, a patchwork of monochrome fabrics with the Black family crest in the centre.

Perfect. It wouldn't even look out of place if Crabbe or Goyle saw it — they would just assume it was a gift from his mother.

Harry folded up the blanket, shrinking it down to put in his pocket, and hurried from the dorm.

It was a little difficult getting out of the common room — far too crowded to try and sneak out under the cloak, but being visible meant people trying to talk to him — but he managed it with a few brusque remarks, and once he was in the corridor outside he headed to the nearest Parseltongue passage.

Sneaking into the Slytherin common room was easy, with the castle wards negating the need for a password. The snake pit was a much more morose sight; they had nothing to celebrate, after all. But nobody noticed the door open for no one, and Harry was entirely silent as he snuck towards the boys' dorms. He had the Marauder's Map open in one hand beneath the cloak, edging towards the room that only held one single dot; he had been correct to assume Draco's dorm mates would seek refuge elsewhere, just in case he was contagious.

He crept through the door, shutting it firmly behind him, murmuring a privacy ward under his breath. He heard a quiet, muffled call. "Blaise, that you?"

"Not Blaise," Harry said softly, shrugging the cloak off.

The lights were dimmed, but he could see Draco lying in his bed, the drapes only half-closed. He was propped up on some pillows, his face paler than usual and his hair ruffled and

haphazard. The Slytherin's eyes widened at the sight of his unexpected visitor. "Harry! How'd you get in here?"

"Slytherin's heir, remember?" Harry teased, striding over. He sat on the edge of the bed, reaching out to stroke Draco's cheek gently. His skin was a little warm. "How are you feeling, love?"

Draco groaned quietly. "Like I've been hit with about eight bludgers," he admitted honestly. "How was the match? I heard you won." His glare was about as powerful as a kitten's, and Harry's heart melted.

"We did. Sorry." He toed off his shoes, and leaned in to kiss Draco's forehead. "Brought you a present, though." Removing the shrunken blanket from his pocket, he returned it to its usual size as he shook it out, draping it over Draco's bed. "Thought you could borrow it 'til you feel better."

Draco's breath hitched as he looked down at the blanket. Harry didn't doubt that by Christmas Draco would have one of his own, but still; it was the thought that counted. "Oh," he murmured. "I— thank you. You didn't have to." He frowned slightly. "Shouldn't you be partying up in your tower, right about now? How late is it?"

Harry chuckled, running a fond hand through his boyfriend's mussed hair. "I partied for a little while. But I was worried about you. I know Blaise said you were fine, but... it's not like you to miss quidditch." It wasn't like Draco to get sick.

"These things happen, sometimes," Draco groused. "Pomfrey says it's just a virus, should work its way through my system in a day or so. I just wish taking potions would help any."

"It's no fun, being sick," Harry sympathised, and the kitten-glare returned.

"You wouldn't know, you've never been sick a day in your life."

That was true — even at the Dursleys, Harry had never got ill, even when everyone in the house had come down with something. He'd had infections due to injuries, and had the usual side effects from starvation and dehydration, but colds and viruses and stomach bugs had always passed him by.

"Still." Harry frowned slightly. "Hey, budge over."

It took a little nudging, getting Draco to shift over enough for Harry to burrow under the blankets beside him, pulling the blond's head gently down to his chest. Draco gave a weak protest. "Don't wanna give you my germs," he insisted, but Harry just kissed his hair and held him closer.

"We just established I don't get sick," he pointed out. "And if I do, I'll deal with it." Missing a day or two of classes wouldn't be the end of the world.

Draco sighed, the argument apparently over, and curled into Harry's side. He was warm — too warm, really — but Harry could feel his faint shivers. He stroked the blond's hair

soothingly, wishing there was more he could do. “I’m sorry you missed the match today,” he said quietly. Draco hummed.

“I’m more sorry I missed our plans for after the match,” he retorted, making Harry grin despite himself.

“Those plans will keep,” he assured, cuddling Draco close. “If Harper’s going to be your replacement when you graduate, though, he’ll need a fair bit of work.”

“Harper’s an idiot,” Draco groaned, fingers curling in the hem of Harry’s t-shirt. “It was a last-minute thing.”

“I’ve always wondered why we don’t have reserve teams, y’know. Back up players who train with the main team.” It seemed unfair to Harry, that the only people who got to play quidditch were those on the main house teams. What about the kids who weren’t very good, but enjoyed the game anyway? Or the kids who had never played before and didn’t know whether they had any skill or passion for it. At muggle schools, everyone played sports, regardless of whether or not you were on the teams.

“It is a bit stupid,” Draco agreed. “Maybe we can make reserve teams next year. McGonagall won’t mind, she likes quidditch.”

Harry hummed thoughtfully; it was certainly an idea. Though after how the tryouts this year had gone, he dreaded the idea of trying to find an entire reserve team.

“Something to think about.” He shuffled further back against the pillows, adjusting his hold on Draco in the narrow bed until the blond was sprawled almost entirely on his chest, and Harry could run a gentle hand up and down his back in the way he knew turned Draco to a puddle of goo. “I’ve missed this, y’know.” They’d taken it for granted, over the summer, how easy it was to get time to just lie in bed and cuddle. Sure, they had the conjured sofa in the Chamber, and sometimes the Room of Requirement, but they rarely had the time to lie down together like this, without giving in to the urge to rip each others’ clothes off. It was just a shame Draco’s illness was the reason for it.

“Me, too.” He could hear the drowsiness in his boyfriend’s voice, and kept stroking his back until he felt the blond go fully limp, his breathing only a little laboured.

He couldn’t stay the whole night, in the Slytherin dorm. Eventually the other boys would want to get back into their room, and there would be hell to pay if Crabbe or Goyle found Harry in there. But he stayed as long as he dared, and when it got late he reluctantly wriggled his way out of Draco’s grasp, trying not to wake the other boy. It didn’t work — Draco’s grey eyes blinked groggily up at him, a cute frown tugging at his lips. Harry leaned down, kissing him chastely. “I have to go to bed,” he whispered. “Go back to sleep.”

Draco sighed, settling back down, and Harry tucked the blankets up around him properly. He didn’t miss the way Draco’s hand fisted in the patchwork quilt, pulling it up to his face and inhaling Harry’s scent lingering on the fabric. Harry’s heart stuttered, a smile tugging at his lips. He couldn’t resist leaning in for one more kiss before he left. “Feel better soon. I love you.”

“Mm, love you,” Draco replied dazedly, already halfway asleep again.

Reluctantly, Harry tore himself away from the blond’s bedside, covering himself with the invisibility cloak and reactivating the map. With one last look at his drowsy beloved, he dismantled his wards on the door, and started the journey back up to Gryffindor Tower and his cold, empty bed.

. . .

Thankfully, Draco’s illness only seemed to last the one day — he was at breakfast the next morning, still a little pale but insisting he was ready for classes. Harry winked at him from the Gryffindor table, and he rolled his eyes in response.

“What did you do, snog him back to full health?” Ginny teased under her breath, earning a glare.

Harry was saved having to respond by a commotion starting at the other end of the table — they looked over, seeing Ron stood in front of Romilda Vane, looking at her with awe-filled eyes. Harry couldn’t hear what he was saying, but it had to be good, judging by the incredulous faces surrounding them.

“But Romilda!” Ron continued, more audible now as the whole hall began to hush, watching events unfold. “We’re meant to be together, can’t you see? You’re the most beautiful girl in the whole school!”

Harry sucked in a sharp breath — as Ron had spoken, Hermione had walked through the door. She stopped in her tracks like she’d been slapped, her hand moving to her mouth as her boyfriend continued.

“Why are you acting like this?” Romilda asked, utterly bewildered. Ron reached for her hand, grasping it in his own.

“Because I love you, and I know you love me too!”

“You’ve never even spoken to me before!” Romilda protested.

“What the *hell* is going on here?” Hermione screeched, stalking up to Ron and grabbing him by the shoulder. Ron shrugged her off with a glare.

“Leave me alone, Hermione.” He turned back to Romilda, unperturbed. “Look, come on, if you just give me a chance I know we could be happy together. You’re the love of my life, Romilda Vane!”

All of a sudden, Romilda went pale, and let out a horrified squeak. She stood, and to Harry’s utter bewilderment, hurried towards him. “You gave him the chocolates I gave you!” she accused. Harry blinked at her.

“You what?”

“The chocolate cauldrons!” Romilda repeated. “They were specifically *for you*. You let him have them, didn’t you?” She gestured back at Ron, who was hurrying towards them now, looking furious.

“Of course, you’re after Harry. It’s always *Harry bloody Potter*,” he grumbled, glaring. “You know he’s not even into girls, right? He can’t love you the way I do, Romilda!”

Hermione caught up with him then, and slapped him hard across the face, the sound echoing through the hall. “How *dare* you!” she hissed, turning around and hurrying from the hall, shoulders shaking with sobs.

“What is the meaning of all this?” McGonagall thundered, striding over with Dumbledore hot at her heel. “Mr Weasley, Miss Vane, what in Merlin’s name is going on here?”

“It’s all Harry’s fault!” Romilda accused. “If he’d just *eaten* the chocolates I’d given him rather than letting *him* find them!” She glared at Ron, who looked like he might cry.

“But— but Romilda,” he croaked.

“And what, exactly, was *in* these chocolates, Miss Vane?” McGonagall asked icily.

Romilda froze, suddenly seeming to realise just how much trouble she was in. “Um. Nothing?”

“Indeed. So if I were to ask Madam Pomfrey to test Mr Weasley for the presence of love potions, it would come back negative, would it?” The Gryffindor housemistress’ stare had broken stronger people than Romilda Vane — the fourth year girl crumbled after only a few seconds under the piercing gaze.

“Alright! I stole Amortentia from Slughorn’s classroom!” she blurted, tears welling in her eyes. “I just — if Harry would just give me a *chance*!” She turned to him plaintively, and he recoiled back.

“I’m gay, Romilda!” he reminded, horrified. “And even if I wasn’t, you don’t get to *drug people into loving you*. That’s basically rape!” This wasn’t a Weasley twins’ love potion, only powerful enough to embolden feelings that already existed. Amortentia was the strongest love potion in the world; continued dosing could turn someone into a mindless slave!

“I think we all need to just calm down a moment,” Dumbledore cut in, but McGonagall ignored him.

“Amortentia is *illegal*, Miss Vane! If you were of age you’d be facing time in Azkaban for such a crime!” she told her student, who gasped and continued crying.

“I—I didn’t mean to!” she wailed. “I just wanted him to like me!”

“Now, Minerva,” Dumbledore soothed genially. “I’m sure Miss Vane is very sorry for what she’s done. And really, if Mr Potter had not been so irresponsible in leaving the chocolates lying around his dormitory, poor Mr Weasley would not be in this predicament.”

“You’re trying to blame this on me!” Harry yelped, furious. “She’s the one who drugged the chocolates in the first place!”

“Feelings can make people do silly things; especially young ladies of Miss Vane’s age,” Dumbledore replied, shaking his head.

“Albus, you cannot be serious!” McGonagall argued. “Potter had nothing to do with this. He was unaware there was anything wrong with the chocolates. And I certainly expect *young ladies of Miss Vane’s age* to have better sense than to use illegal love potions under my very nose! Not to mention stealing from a professor! You’ll be lucky not to be expelled for this. You’ll be lucky if no one presses charges!”

Romilda burst into louder tears.

“Now, now, that’s a little bit drastic,” Dumbledore was fumbling, now, and they could all see it. He looked up, realising for the first time that the entire hall was staring at him in disgust, that he would so easily try and dismiss what was essentially attempted rape. “Why don’t we all take this up to my office, get everything straightened out?”

“I’m not going anywhere with you, or *her*,” Harry declared, glaring at Romilda. “And I really think someone should take Ron to the Hospital Wing.”

“Right you are, Potter. Miss Weasley, take your brother up to Madam Pomfrey, will you?” McGonagall instructed, and Ginny nodded, pale behind her freckles as she grabbed Ron by the arm. He was reluctant to leave, calling Romilda’s name — eventually Ginny had to resort to Stunning him, levitating him from the hall.

“Mr Potter, will you be pressing charges?” McGonagall asked plainly. Harry grit his teeth.

“Not this time. But I will if she tries anything again.” He would give her the benefit of the doubt, assume she didn’t know what Amortentia was truly like, how helpless it would have left Harry. McGonagall gave a curt nod, and gripped Romilda hard by the shoulder, frog-marching her out of the hall. No one else moved.

“The rest of you, off to class!” the Scottish woman barked in the doorway. “My seventh year class, take a free period. Go, you’re all running late!”

As soon as she disappeared, there was a scramble of activity, everyone hurrying to shovel down as much of the breakfast they’d abandoned before they had to go. Harry didn’t realise he was shaking until Neville eased him down to sit on the bench, and Parvati and Lavender appeared at his side.

“Are you alright, Harry?” Lavender asked, voice trembling. He nodded jerkily.

“Potter.” He looked up to see Professor Babbling, frowning down at him in concern. “Don’t worry about making it to class. Missing one period won’t kill you, and I daresay your mind would be elsewhere regardless.” Her frown deepened, and she patted him on the shoulder. “I’ll give your homework back to Mr Malfoy to pass on to you.”

"I— thanks, Professor," Harry croaked, and she left. Across the hall, Harry could see Draco staring at him with pained eyes, clearly torn between coming to check on him and not being late to class. Harry flicked his gaze towards the door pointedly. He could find Draco later. If the blond tried to talk to him now, Harry might lose it.

If he had eaten a single one of those chocolate cauldrons... how many had Ron had, to be so head over heels so quickly? Harry might not like the bloke, but he still felt bad — he didn't deserve to be love-potioned. Hopefully Hermione would understand once she heard what really happened.

But if it had been Harry... if he had been dosed, if he had approached Romilda somewhere a little more private than the Great Hall... how far would she have let it go on?

"How did Slughorn not notice there was some missing from the cauldron?" Parvati remarked quietly. Harry grimaced — the Potions professor hadn't been in the hall during the drama, but Harry was certain McGonagall would give him one hell of a dressing down for leaving Amortentia unsupervised in a school full of children.

How many other people could have snuck some out of there?

"Y'know, I think Romilda got lucky, there," Neville said, and Harry goggled at him.

"Her? I was the lucky one!" He'd been too busy worrying about Draco to even remember the chocolates existed.

Neville's hazel eyes were serious as they met his. "Yeah, but imagine what your boyfriend would have done to her if she'd succeeded," he pointed out. "Way worse than anything Hermione could come up with."

Harry sucked in a sharp breath; Neville was right, of course. Hell, there was nothing to say Draco wouldn't destroy her just for *trying*, and Harry was of half a mind to let him.

Even Lavender, who didn't know who Harry was dating — though he wouldn't put it past her to have figured it out by now, perceptive girl that she was — looked nauseous at the prospect.

"Next HA meeting," Harry murmured softly, "we're learning detection spells. Alright?" He knew a few, thanks to Snape and Sirius, but he'd never anticipated having to use them regularly at school.

He didn't want anyone getting ideas from Romilda's little stunt, though.

"Sounds good, Harry," Lavender agreed, squeezing his shoulder gently. "Why don't we go up to the common room for a bit? We've got Snape second period, I don't think he'll go easy on you after this."

Harry grimaced — he wasn't sure he had the energy to pretend to hate Snape, not now. But he'd have to find it somewhere.

"I don't know why I'm so shaken by this," he muttered, scowling as he got to his feet. "I didn't even take the potion."

"But you might have," Parvati said, voice sympathetic. "It's scary. I... I can't believe Romilda would do that. I can't believe *anyone* would do that." She shuddered, wrapping her arms around herself.

"I hope she gets suspended," Neville muttered darkly.

"Doubt it," Harry replied. "You saw Dumbledore — he was all ready to sweep it under the rug. Fuck, he thought it was my fault for letting Ron eat the chocolates!"

All four of them scowled. "Dumbledore's losing his mind," Lavender declared. "I never thought I'd say this, but he really needs to retire."

Harry glanced up, meeting Neville's gaze. It wasn't the most ideal situation to start shattering peoples' trust in Dumbledore, but Harry would take it.

.-.

It was decided that the current *political climate* made it too dangerous to suspend Romilda, so she was given a month's worth of detentions with McGonagall and was banned from Hogsmeade for the rest of the year. She was also, so he heard, *strongly discouraged* from trying to speak to Harry ever again.

Even if McGonagall hadn't ordered as much, Harry felt sure she wouldn't have spoken to him again anyway; when she saw him in the common room after lunch, she turned bright red and fled to her dorm.

Harry, on the other hand, spent most of the evening angrily duelling Snape in the Chamber, having earned a detention of his own in class. His friends were all ready to riot, but Harry was secretly glad for the chance to blow off steam.

"Do I need to go over your detection spells?" the Potions Master asked, when they took a break from duelling. Harry shook his head.

"I know them. And I would have used them, if I'd planned to eat the chocolates at all." He wasn't so stupid to have just blindly eaten the gift from a girl he barely knew.

"I want you using them at every meal. And on anything else you might consume, unless it has come from Ceri or Dobby."

"Yes, Severus." That was a rule Harry would happily follow.

He straightened up, intending to ask for another duel, then cocked his head as the castle nudged at his senses. He was shown a mental image of Draco pacing outside the Room of Requirement. Blinking away the image, he grimaced up at the tall man. "I, uh— Draco's in the Room, I think he wants to see me. Can I..."

Snape's scowl softened, as much as a man like that could soften for anyone that wasn't Remus. "We're done here," he confirmed. "Be careful when you return to your dorm — Weasley has been released from the Hospital Wing, and he may blame you for his predicament."

Harry grimaced — he hadn't even thought about that. "I'll be on my guard," he promised, heading over to his to the passage that would let the professor back out in his office. Harry walked him back up to the school proper, opening the passage at the other end for him, then bid him goodnight and hurried to take a passage up to the Room. As the castle had promised, Draco was there waiting for him, and the blond slumped in relief when Harry entered.

"I wasn't sure you'd know I was here."

"Hogwarts told me," Harry assured, happily sinking into Draco's arms. A sofa appeared beside them, and the pair made themselves comfortable, Harry burying his face in Draco's neck.

"I want to kill her," Draco muttered, fingers tangling in Harry's hair.

"Not this time," Harry chided. "If she tries again, she's all yours." Draco snorted, and Harry felt lips press to the crown of his head. For the first time all day, Harry properly relaxed, stopped pretending he was unbothered by what had almost happened. Let himself shudder and cry in Draco's arms.

Later, when he was done crying, he would kiss his boyfriend hard, tug impatiently at his shirt, beg for a reminder that Romilda hadn't succeeded — that his body was his own, and his love was Draco's, and nothing in the world would change that. Draco would give him that reminder, whispering his own words of love, his hands on Harry's skin proof that nothing would tear them apart.

But even after that, sleep would be hard to come by.

Chapter 91

Chapter Notes

Here it is, the moment you've all been waiting for ;)

Life went on. Far quicker than Harry anticipated, the students of Hogwarts moved on from the drama of the Amortentia — once Ron was out of the Hospital Wing and he and Hermione had made up, there wasn't really much to gossip about. Romilda hardly showed her face outside meals, and Harry ignored anyone who tried to ask him about it.

Since nothing *awful* had happened, only Ron making a fool of himself in front of the whole school, everyone seemed perfectly happy to just brush it off as a prank gone wrong, look to the next bit of juicy gossip — look back to the question of who Harry was taking to Slughorn's party.

Part of Harry didn't blame them for not wanting to dwell on it. But another part of Harry — the part that was still diligently checking every meal, every drink, refusing anything that was handed to him from anyone he didn't trust — couldn't believe how little they cared about how catastrophic it could have all been.

Then again, with Dumbledore as their example, how could he expect anything less?

As the Christmas holidays — and Slughorn's party — drew closer, the students began to get restless. Harry didn't doubt many of them would be staying at the castle over the break, their homes too dangerous to return to. Since the Floo Network was now being monitored, Professor Flitwick had offered to create portkeys for everyone who wished to go home; which was technically illegal, but so were half a dozen other things the staff were doing, including harbouring Harry Potter. Harry had already been assured that Snape would take him and Draco home with a portkey of their own, and the matter had been cleared through McGonagall. That also meant that McGonagall would assume Harry was spending Christmas at Malfoy Manor, but considering how tight the manor's wards were locked down, Harry didn't see that being a problem.

Ordinarily, Hogwarts would have been abuzz with children eager to go home for Christmas, to have a break from classes and homework. And they were still eager for that, but it was... more wary. Fragile. Like wounded animals waiting for a chance to slink away and heal in private.

Everyone knew what lurked beyond the castle walls. Not everyone was confident in their own safety should they step past them.

But they were all trying their best to get into the holiday spirit. Especially for the younger years, who knew enough to be scared but not enough to properly understand why. The castle was decorated as cheerfully as ever, and Slughorn was pleased to assure everyone that his party would bring just the jolt of festive cheer they all needed.

"It'll be a bit quieter than I had hoped, of course," he added apologetically during one Potions class. "I originally wanted to invite some friends of mine from outside the castle — ex-students, you know, who have an interest in helping the next generation find their feet — but of course, with safety concerns being what they are, that hasn't been possible. But not to worry! I'm sure we'll all still have a smashing time!"

Harry wasn't so sure about that, but he'd committed to the thing now. At least he was dragging Draco with him; he wouldn't have to suffer alone.

It was quite impressive, how many people cared about who Harry was taking to the party, despite how few of them would be attending as well. He knew why, of course — he'd made it pretty clear that his date was a boyfriend, not just a friend the way he'd taken Susan to the Yule Ball — but it still baffled him to have so many people interested in his love life. People who just a few months ago had been hissing insults at him in the corridors, accusing him of going Dark.

There were dozens of eyes on him at dinner. As if he was going to reveal his secret now, an hour before the party, in front of the whole school. Harry kept his head down and focused on his meal, ignoring Ginny's quiet cackling at his side.

"I can't *wait* to see everyone's faces," she muttered, making him glare at her.

"Surely it won't be that much of a shocker?" he remarked. Across the table, Lavender giggled.

"Sorry, Harry, but if it's who I think it is, it will be," she told him. He sighed.

"It's probably exactly who you think it is," he said mournfully, watching her eyes dart across to the Slytherin table. The brunette girl let out a quiet squeal of delight.

"God, that's hot," she said, then blushed. Far from being offended, Harry laughed.

"He is," he agreed, well aware of how ridiculously attractive his boyfriend was.

"She meant both of you," Ginny told him, elbowing him in the side. "And she's right." When Harry raised an eyebrow, she just winked. Lavender giggled again.

They headed up to Gryffindor Tower to go and get ready for the party, Harry loudly declaring in the common room that he was meeting his date at the party so there was no reason for people to linger.

Neville was Ginny's date, so the two boys put on their dress robes together, ignoring Ron scowling at them as he did the same — Neville in a chocolate brown set that made his eyes look extremely bright, and Harry in deep purple robes that had been a present from Narcissa,

so he had to assume they were incredibly fashionable. He took some extra time to try and tame his hair.

“You’re putting in an awful lot of effort for a bloke who’s seen you at your worst, y’know,” Neville remarked in amusement. Harry shrugged.

“We don’t get dressed up very often. And it might only be Slughorn’s party, but… this is a big deal, for us.” Their first time in public as a couple. He didn’t want Draco to have a single ounce of regret about standing at his side.

“Well I think that’s about as good as it’ll get, mate,” Neville told him bluntly. Harry looked in the mirror, turning his head to check his hair from several angles, then sighed.

“I suppose.” He put away his hair potion, washing his hands with a quick spell. “Let’s go, then. Don’t want to keep Ginny waiting.”

The redheaded witch was indeed waiting for them, her face lighting up at the sight of Neville. She wore pretty gold dress robes Harry hadn’t seen before, but they complemented Neville’s robes well enough Harry wondered if that had been an intentional matching. Perhaps Neville’s gran had been involved?

“Well, you two scrub up nicely,” she said approvingly. “Shall we go find you a man, Harrikins?”

She sounded so much like George for a moment, Harry had to do a double take. Then he snickered. “Good thing I know exactly where to find one,” he joked.

“Oh, I wish I was going tonight,” Parvati moaned enviously, sprawled on the sofa in front of the fire with Lavender. “You all look so good! There’s never any excuses to dress up around here.”

“We need another Yule Ball,” Lavender agreed with a wistful sigh. “You three have fun.”

Just as she said that, Hermione started to descend the staircase from the dorms, and the trio exchanged a look, then hurried out of the portrait hole. The last thing they wanted was to get stuck walking to the party alongside Ron and Hermione.

“I wonder who McLaggen’s taken,” Harry mused, thinking of the only other Gryffindor in the Slug Club.

“One of the Hufflepuff girls in my year, but I can’t remember which,” Ginny supplied. “Pretty sure all the girls in sixth and seventh know better than to agree to anything with him.”

That wouldn’t surprise Harry one bit.

“You ready for this, then?” Ginny asked, looking excited. “Your official coming out. Well. Y’know. Your *other* coming out.”

Harry snorted. “Yeah. I’m ready.” He’d been ready for ages, to be honest. But this felt like the right time — a big event, where it would be extremely impolite for people to ask questions, and he could leave for two weeks almost immediately after.

He wanted everyone to know Draco was his.

Still, his stomach fluttered anxiously as they grew closer to Slughorn’s office. And then he saw him.

Draco was waiting in an alcove, slightly shielded from view, his hands clasped in front of him. He looked up at the sound of footsteps, and his lips curled in as wide a smile as he dared show in public. He stepped out of the alcove, giving Harry the full view of him in perfectly tailored slate-grey dress robes, the tie knotted at his throat the exact same colour as Harry’s own robes.

Definitely Narcissa’s doing, there.

“I can hear the hearts of half the students of Hogwarts breaking already,” Ginny remarked teasingly. “Godric, you look smitten. Go on, if you must.”

Harry snickered, but happily crossed the distance between him and Draco, offering his date a smooth bow. “May I?” he asked, offering an arm. Draco cocked an eyebrow at him, then snorted, stepping closer and resting his hands on Harry’s shoulders, kissing him firmly.

“I really need to find more excuses to get you in formalwear,” he drawled, smoothing his hands over the front of Harry’s robes. They were high-collared, with no need for a tie or anything, but surprisingly comfortable.

“Only if you’re there with me,” Harry returned without missing a beat.

“I should’ve nicked Colin’s camera on the way out,” Ginny sighed, approaching with Neville’s hand in hers. “One picture of the two of you looking like this sent to *Witch Weekly*, I’d never have to work a day in my life.”

Draco laughed, neatly tucking his arm into Harry’s. “Please; that rag doesn’t pay nearly as well as it should.” He stepped back, gesturing for the other pair to go ahead. “Ladies first.”

“Only if you give us a minute to get in there before you make your big entrance,” Ginny replied, patting Harry on the cheek before letting Neville escort her into Slughorn’s office, where music and quiet conversation were already drifting through the open doorway.

Harry let out a long breath, glancing up at his boyfriend. “Sure you want to do this?”

Draco rolled his eyes, kissing him again. “I have spent the last two years waiting for this, Potter. Don’t chicken out now; you’re supposed to be the brave one.”

A slightly breathless laugh escaped the Gryffindor. “Fair enough.” It was easy. He just had to walk through that door, and they would be out. They had friends in the party; Ginny and Neville, and Blaise and Daphne. It would be fine.

He steadied his shoulders, squeezed Draco's arm, and stepped forward.

Slughorn's office had been magically expanded for the occasion, the walls draped in jewel-toned fabrics to give the illusion of some sort of huge tent. It was vaguely smoky within, but not nearly as crowded as it might have been if Slughorn had been able to invite his *friends* along.

As such, every single person in the room could see Harry and Draco walk in together.

"Harry, my boy!" Slughorn was right there, wearing a velvet hat and matching smoking jacket, and he almost dropped his glass of port as he looked at Draco. "Well, well — Slytherins and Gryffindors getting along, indeed!" He laughed, wiggling his bushy brows salaciously. "You have been keeping a tight lid on this one, haven't you, my lad."

Harry flushed. Luckily, Draco was a pro at these kinds of situations. "Harry has so little of his private life kept truly private, Professor," he said earnestly, "I'm sure you can understand his want to let our relationship grow without prying eyes."

"Quite right, Mr Malfoy! My, my — I had, of course, heard the rumours of the Black family reuniting after the death of Lord Malfoy. My condolences, Mr Malfoy," he added hastily, but Draco shook his head.

"Thank you, Professor, but there was little love lost between myself and my father — or, indeed, him and my mother. We are much happier without him forcing us both to stand at his side." The insinuation was clear; neither remaining Malfoys agreed with Lucius' beliefs. "Mother was delighted to get back in touch with her cousin Sirius, and that certainly made things easier for Harry and I — but we had eyes for each other long before then." Draco winked, and Slughorn chuckled.

"Say no more, lad," he teased, winking exaggeratedly. "Well, wonderful to have you both; please, enjoy the party! Ah, Miss Granger, good to see you!"

The only thing stopping Harry from whirling around on the spot to see Ron and Hermione's faces when they saw him with Draco himself, pointedly escorting him away from Slughorn and over to the side. "Don't stare yet," Draco warned in an undertone, expertly moving them to stand in a place they could easily see the door from without looking too obvious. Everyone was still staring at them — including Ron, now, who was blatantly ignoring Slughorn's attempts to talk to him as he gaped at the two of them.

"You're far too good at this," Harry accused, making Draco smirk.

"This was what I was raised with, darling. Lord Malfoy is always a master of the art of conversation." He brushed a stray curl off Harry's forehead. "Slughorn is an easy target to win over. Let him think he's privy to some great secret and you have him — I daresay we've made him the envy of his entire social circle, giving him such juicy inside knowledge before the gossip rags."

"Then I should've done this ages ago, if it'll win him over," Harry muttered. "Maybe now I'll be able to get him to talk." Though about what, he still wasn't sure.

"I suppose we have been a bit remiss on your pureblood etiquette lessons, all things considered," Draco mused. "Once things are quieter, we'll have to pick that back up. You'll need to know how to handle people like Slughorn going forward."

Harry groaned quietly — he'd been perfectly happy with those lessons being abandoned in favour of more important things, like how to kill Dark Lords. Draco laughed fondly. "Chin up, love. I'm sure I'll find a way to make it fun for you." His grey eyes darkened, and Harry couldn't help but kiss him, even as it set off a wave of gasps and whispers throughout the room.

"Having fun, are we?" Daphne and Blaise appeared beside them, both looking far too amused by the whole affair. "I thought Becky Arncliffe was going to cry when she saw you two walk in together."

Harry frowned, looking over at the seventh year Ravenclaw girl. "I've never spoken to her in my life."

"No, but she's had a crush on Draco for *forever* now," Daphne told him smugly. Harry blinked, surprised by the sudden flare of jealousy within him.

That was unexpected. He hadn't had to worry about that before; none of Draco's admirers were as bold as his own. But of course, there were people who fancied his boyfriend; Draco was gorgeous and the perfect pureblood and obnoxiously wealthy and the epitome of Slytherin. It made more sense for people to fancy him than Harry.

He liked the idea of those admirers being disappointed at the news that Draco was taken, a lot more than he thought he would. He'd never taken himself to be the possessive type.

It seems he was learning all sorts of new things, tonight.

Ginny and Neville sidled over, both holding flutes of what looked like champagne. "Have you seen Hermione's face? She looks like she's going to *explode*," Ginny said gleefully. "Also, Daphne, you look offensively gorgeous tonight, those robes are amazing."

"Thank you," Daphne replied, quietly delighted. "You two are a very stunning couple. You should get a picture to send to your grandmother, Neville; let her show off her handsome grandson to her Bluff club."

"I'm not even going to ask how you know about my gran's Bluff club," Neville said, shaking his head. All of a sudden, Harry remembered a conversation from half a lifetime ago now; sat in an abandoned classroom with Draco Malfoy, their friendship still fragile, being told never to play Warlock's Bluff with Daphne Greengrass or she would rob him of everything he owned. His insistence that he would never be in a position to play cards with her in the first place.

How naive he'd been.

Trying his best to be discreet, Harry looked over at Hermione and Ron, now they had escaped Slughorn's grasp. Hermione did indeed look like she would explode — or perhaps like she'd

eaten something very, very sour. It was surprisingly reminiscent of his Aunt Petunia, and Harry had to swallow the laugh that threatened to burst out. Beside her, Ron was as red as his hair with fury, thankfully wearing a less hideous set of dress robes than he had to the Yule Ball. He was glaring daggers at Harry and Draco, and Harry wondered if the pair would be brave enough to confront him over his choice in boyfriend while surrounded by all these people.

It wasn't just students in attendance; some of the other professors were floating about, too, with glasses of something alcoholic in hand. Harry's brows shot up at the sight of Professor Sinistra stood with her hand low on Professor Babbling's back, the two women chatting with their heads close together in a way that could only be described as *intimate*.

Was that new? Did everyone know about that, and Harry had missed it?

He turned to Draco. "Did you know about Sinistra and Babbling?" he asked, and Draco hummed, following his gaze.

"What? Oh, yes, those two have been together for ages now. Theo swears he once caught them snogging in the Astronomy Tower back in second year."

"Theo's a filthy liar," Blaise cut in. "It was a brief peck at best."

"Maybe he didn't know the difference at the time," Ginny suggested. "I'm sure he does, now."

"Susan's made sure of that," Neville agreed ruefully, making Ginny giggle.

Slughorn didn't seem to quite know what to do with himself, now they had all arrived — it was clear he'd hoped for this party to be a much bigger event, with lots of impressive people to introduce them to.

Harry was inordinately glad it wasn't.

This was bearable — stood with his friends, drinking champagne offered to them by a house elf carrying a silver tray, pretending the rest of the room didn't exist. It wasn't quite what he'd call a *party*, but it was bearable. Certainly, with Draco's arm around his waist, he would've put up with much worse.

At one point, Slughorn did drift towards their little cluster, looking just as surprised by the pairing of Neville and Ginny as he was by Harry and Draco. Harry wondered if he was starting to reconsider Neville, as he drew the Gryffindor boy into a conversation about Herbology. Not that Neville *wanted* to be reconsidered.

"What about you, then, Harry? Grand plans for Christmas, or kicking about the castle?" the professor asked, once Neville had told him about the work he planned to do in his greenhouse over the break.

"Sirius and I are spending Yule with Draco and his mother," Harry replied, watching Slughorn's moustache twitch at his pointed use of the wizarding holiday.

"Well, that's marvellous — I've not been to Malfoy Manor in many a year, now; your grandfather Abraxas used to throw quite the soiree, back in the day!" he added to Draco, chuckling. Then his gaze grew sad. "I never quite approved of the company, you know, but they were still excellent parties all the same. Such a shame about Abraxas; he was such a bright lad, one of my best students! Then he fell in with young Riddle, and... well," he shook his head, as if trying to banish the thoughts. "No use thinking about what once was."

Harry's eyes widened, and he sent a discreet look at Draco, urging him to keep the conversation going.

"I didn't spend much time with Grandfather — he passed when I was quite young, as I'm sure you remember — but I do seem to remember he spoke highly of you. You were the Slytherin housemaster at the time, were you not?"

"Indeed I was!" Slughorn confirmed, brightening up. "Back when I had a little more energy to spare!"

"Yes, he always spoke so fondly of his time as a Slytherin. I don't believe he ever mentioned anyone named Riddle, though. A classmate of his?"

"Yes, yes — but I suppose he wouldn't have called him that, now, would he?" Slughorn reached for a new glass of wine off a nearby tray, his rosy cheeks only getting redder the more he drank. "Now, there's a story of wasted potential if I've ever seen it. A young man who could've had everything, if he'd only been a bit more polite about asking for it. I tried my best, so I did, but there's only so much you can do with one as determined as Tom Riddle!"

Across from him, Harry saw Ginny's face turn chalky, her hand gripping tightly to Neville's.

"Did this Riddle boy come to you for advice, then?" Harry asked tentatively, heart hammering against his ribs. "I'd imagine you had plenty of it, for someone with as much... potential as you say he had."

"Oh, I tried, but he wanted advice on the kind of thing it's not polite to speak of!" Slughorn ran his fingers over his moustache, sipping at his wine. "No, no — I thought I could help him when he was young, but by the time he was set to graduate he'd already gone too far down the wrong path. Terrible, terrible shame." He peered up at Harry, eyes a touch unfocused. "I think old Albus is jumping at shadows when it comes to you, my lad — telling me to watch out for the past repeating itself. Bah! He's looking for trouble where there isn't any. You've a good head on your shoulders, Harry, my boy — don't let anyone tell you otherwise."

He blinked, then shook his head, straightening up suddenly. "Good lord, how much have I had to drink? Listen to me, getting maudlin — it's being back in this castle, does funny things to an old man's head!" He chuckled, the sound a touch strained. "I think I'd best grab something to eat; line the stomach and all that. I'll see you all later!" He gave that awkward chuckle once more and retreated quickly, and all six of them let out a collective breath when he was gone.

“What the *hell* was that about?” Ginny hissed, staring urgently at Harry. He pursed his lips. That hadn’t been nearly as enlightening as he’d hoped.

“Dumbledore asked him back for a reason. I’m trying to find out what it is.”

“And you think it has something to do with this Riddle bloke?” Daphne asked, frowning. “Who is he, anyway?”

“It’s You-Know-Who’s real name,” Neville piped up, surprising Harry. “Ginny told me,” he added, seeing his friend’s confusion. “About the diary and stuff.”

Of course, that made sense.

“Slughorn taught the Dark Lord as a child?” Blaise realised, eyes following the tipsy professor across the room. Harry nodded.

“Yeah, and I think he taught him something he perhaps shouldn’t have, but I can’t figure out how to get him to tell me.” He sighed, leaning against Draco. “Bugger, that was the closest I’ve gotten in ages.”

“There’s plenty of time after Yule,” Draco pointed out. He brushed a kiss over Harry’s cheek. “I doubt you’ll get anything more out of him tonight, though.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” Harry frowned, but cheered up at the sight of Ron glaring at him. “Well, at least the night wasn’t a total waste. Ron’s been so busy trying to kill Draco with his eyes, he’s ignored Hermione all night. And she doesn’t look happy about it.” She was tugging on her boyfriend’s arm, trying to get him to dance with her; a few couples were drifting around the small dance floor space.

“That’s a win if I’ve ever seen one,” Ginny agreed, amused. “Count yourselves lucky — I have to spend all bloody Christmas with him. I can’t even floo to Neville’s, with the network under watch.” She pouted, and Neville dropped a kiss on her hair.

“I’m sure one of your older brothers will apparate you,” he pointed out.

“Yes, be glad you’re not staying under apparition wards,” Blaise added, distinctly unimpressed. He was staying at the castle for the holidays, and while Harry knew George had plans to sneak in at least once, it couldn’t be easy for them.

“Do you think we’ve stayed long enough?” Harry asked, surveying the room critically. No one else had left yet — but that didn’t mean they couldn’t be the first.

“I think if you stay long enough for Weasley to have one more glass of wine, you’ll regret it,” Daphne replied, nodding in Ron’s direction. Harry grimaced.

“Yeah, okay, we’re leaving.”

“We can’t all leave at once, Slughorn will notice,” Neville said, then sighed. “Go on; you two get out of here, we’ll cover for you.”

"Knew I liked you for a reason, Longbottom," Draco remarked. Neville snorted.

"While I merely put up with you for Harry's sake," he lied cheerfully. "Will I see you back at the dorm, Harry?"

"I think it'll piss Ron off more if I'm not," Harry said. It was too good an opportunity to pass up. No one argued the point, and Harry offered a smile to the group. "Good night, then. Thanks for making this evening surprisingly entertaining. And if I don't see you before we leave, Merry Yule," he added, mostly to Blaise and Daphne, who returned the sentiment.

With that sorted, the two boys slipped away from the party, hand in hand. Harry was just a touch bubbly from the champagne, and he leaned into Draco's side as they walked away, grinning to himself. "This time tomorrow, we'll be back home, and the whole damned castle will know I'm in love with you," he declared happily. Draco smirked at him, eyes fond.

"Whatever shall we do until then?" he drawled, voice turning a little husky, sending shivers of arousal through Harry's body.

"I can think of a few ideas." He stopped abruptly, shoving Draco back against the wall and devouring his mouth, fingers sliding into the blond's perfectly parted hair, messing it up in a very satisfying way.

He could do this, now; snog his boyfriend in the middle of corridors, without having to worry about someone walking across them and telling the whole school. And *God*, it felt good.

"Let's go somewhere more private," Draco urged, breaking the kiss and taking him by the hand. "Put a few of your ideas to the test."

Harry didn't need asking twice, and the castle obliged by pulling a passage to the seventh floor into the space behind a nearby tapestry.

It had been one of Harry's smarter ideas, making sure the rest of the HA didn't know how to access the Room of Requirement outside of meetings. It meant the place was almost guaranteed to be empty when he wanted to use it to fuck his boyfriend in peace.

It was certainly more comfortable than the Chamber, at any rate.

.--.-.

Despite what he'd said to Neville, Harry and Draco did eventually return to their dorms; they might want to make a statement, but *not* the kind of statement made by turning up to breakfast in last night's dress robes. They parted ways long after their dorm mates would have gone to sleep, and in the morning Harry made sure to be out of Gryffindor Tower well before Ron awoke, his trunk packed and shrunk in his pocket. He wanted to avoid that particular meltdown as long as possible.

As he strolled leisurely down to breakfast by himself, he wondered how long it would take for word to properly spread. Already it had clearly reached a few people — several of the

students he passed on his way down began whispering to each other as soon as he passed them.

He wasn't surprised to see Lavender and the Patil twins sat at the Gryffindor table when he arrived, the hall sparsely occupied otherwise. With portkeys to take instead of a train to catch, the students weren't as worried about being late.

He joined the girls at their section of the table, letting himself look as satisfied as he felt.

"So how was the party, then?" Parvati asked archly. Harry winked at her.

"I'm sure you've heard all about it already," he returned. The Indian girl grinned impishly.

"Hermione was *furious* when she got in last night," she confided. "I swear, Sophie had to hex her silent just so we could all get some sleep. Apparently you and your boyfriend looked far too smug and handsome at the party last night."

"Smug and handsome," Harry repeated, then chuckled. "That's him in a nutshell, yeah."

All three girls tittered — Harry knew the twins were pretending the information was as new to them as it was to Lavender, so their friend didn't feel left out.

"I can't believe you managed to keep that secret! I mean, I always thought there was a *spark* between you two but I was never sure if it was just a hate-attraction sort of thing. And then you became friends and I wasn't sure what to think!" Lavender said, running her fingers through her curls. "How long has that been going on?"

"How long do you think?" he retorted. She mock-scowled, hitting him lightly on the arm.

"Don't play with us, Harry," she pleaded. "Not after all we've done for you!"

"Not after all we *can* do for you, working damage control here while you're cosied up with your boy all Yule," Parvati added pointedly. "If we have the truth we know what to do with the more outrageous lies."

She had a point and they both knew it; if the rumours were left to their own devices, Merlin only knew what they might come back to after Christmas.

"Oh, alright then," he relented playfully. "Only because I can trust you."

"I bet it was this summer," Lavender cooed. "Once your godfather and his mum reconnected."

"Earlier," Harry told her, watching her eyes widen.

"*Really?* Sometime in fifth year? He did help us out when Umbridge found the HA room, I suppose... was it after that?"

He shook his head again. "Earlier."

All three of them goggled at him, now; even the Patil twins didn't know how long the relationship had been going on, they'd just known about it for longer than Lavender.

"More than a year?" Parvati pressed keenly. "Was it the summer before last year?"

Harry had kept them in suspense long enough. "Fourth year, day after the first task," he revealed, smile going a little goofy just at the memory. The girls gaped at him.

"Never!" Padma gasped, stunned. "All that time and no one knew?"

"Almost no one," Harry confirmed. "Fred and George knew almost from the beginning, and Neville figured it out after the Yule Ball. Apparently I spent half the night staring at Draco's arse. Good thing no one else saw me, to be honest."

"You've spent most of the last three years staring at my arse, Potter; I'm sure no one noticed the difference."

Harry brightened immediately, looking up at his boyfriend; he hadn't heard Draco approach — nor had he noticed the entire hall go hushed at the Slytherin's walk towards the Gryffindor table. Harry didn't pay them any mind, urging Draco to sit by him and leaning in for a kiss, heart thumping hard and smile threatening to take over his entire face. "Good morning," he greeted, whole body going warm at Draco's fond gaze.

"Good morning, love. Ladies," Draco added, nodding to the three awestruck girls. "I suppose you're grilling him for details, then? If he's talking about my arse."

"You know me; any excuse," Harry said, winking. He reached for the teapot, pouring Draco a cup without needing to ask.

"You've been waiting for this moment for ages, haven't you, Harry?" Lavender said knowingly, her lips curling smugly. "Merlin, you're practically *glowing*."

"Wouldn't you be?"

"It's like something out of a romance novel," Parvati sighed. "Star-crossed lovers from opposite houses, having to hide their love for their own safety. *Oh.*" She practically swooned, and Harry caught Draco's eye, trying not to blush as he thought about the *other* type of romance novel he had once compared their relationship to.

"Oh, Merlin, I'll never escape it now," Neville groaned as he sank into the seat beside Padma, glaring tiredly at Harry and Draco. "Gone are the days where you two could only be disgustingly adorable in private."

"Yup," Harry declared proudly, kissing Draco's cheek. "Sorry about it."

"No you're not."

"No, I'm not," Harry agreed, unrepentant. Draco sighed.

"You're going to ruin my reputation," he despaired, making Harry grin all the wider.

“You’ve known that for years, and yet here you are.”

The hall was getting busier now, more people coming down from breakfast — anyone who hadn’t heard the news about Harry and Draco was quickly informed, their eyes swivelling straight to the pair at the Gryffindor table. Harry and Draco both tried not to react overmuch, but they didn’t hide themselves either. Harry still swiped Draco’s toast with a jam-sticky kiss to the blond’s lips, and Draco didn’t shy away from getting right into Harry’s personal space as more people joined them at the table, many of their friends pretending to be surprised by the revelation.

“So who won the betting pool, then?” Harry asked, and suddenly the group went silent.

“What betting pool?” Ginny queried, just a touch too innocent. Draco snorted.

“Daphne won it, of course,” he revealed. “Really, all of you should know better than to let someone dating *Luna* enter a betting pool.”

“What! But she’s your friend, she wasn’t supposed to enter!” Susan blurted in protest.

“No one told me not to,” Daphne said breezily, appearing as if summoned. “You’ve made me a very rich lady, boys.”

“Buy us something nice for Yule and we’ll call it even,” Draco retorted instantly.

Several people didn’t look impressed, but none of them could say anything without admitting that the reason they hadn’t entered the pool themselves was because they already knew who Harry was dating. Clearly, Daphne had no such morals holding her back.

“Bloody Slytherins,” Ernie muttered, rolling his eyes.

Harry glanced down at his watch, then frowned, seeing Snape striding away from the head table. “We’d better get moving, love. Portkey to catch,” he reminded.

“Don’t want to be late,” Draco agreed, neatly setting his cutlery down on his plate. “We’ll see you all in the new year, then. Happy holidays.”

The table rang with well-wishes returned, and the two boys stood to leave, heading for the doors. As they passed behind Ron, the redhead jerked his elbow back, catching Harry in the leg. He glared up at his ex-best friend. “You really ditched *us* for *him*?”

“I didn’t ditch you *for him*,” Harry retorted icily. “I ditched you *and* found him. Entirely unconnected. But honestly, Ron — you sound awfully jealous. Is that something Hermione should worry about?”

And with that bombshell, he practically skipped from the hall, Draco’s hand in his.

Their break was off to an *excellent* start.

.-.-.-.

Leaning against the doorway of the conservatory, watching two figures on brooms zoom about the air over the pitch, Sirius smiled to himself, wrapping his chunky cardigan tighter around his body. There was snow on the ground — four or five inches at least, and more to come overnight — and the garden already held the signs of a snowball fight abandoned in favour of quidditch.

He didn't mind this kind of cold. The crisp, bright cold of winter, the kind that came with laughter and fun and curling up by the fire with hot chocolate once everyone was exhausted and soaked through with snow. This was a good kind of cold.

It was made even better by having his pup home. His boys, really; they came as a pair by now, and with Remus and Severus being what they were it was much easier for all of them to just claim both and be done with it.

He heard familiar footsteps, and then muscular arms wrapped around his hips, a warm chest pressing to his back. He sighed slightly, leaning into the embrace, melting into Charlie as he always did. “Glad to have them home?” the redhead asked knowingly, kissing his cheek. Sirius hummed in affirmation.

“Wish we could keep them here,” he mused wistfully. The next two weeks would fly by.

“You’d get sick of them eventually,” Charlie teased. “Trust me; a full house isn’t as fun as it sounds after six weeks stuck together. I used to beg to go back to Hogwarts early, every summer.”

Sirius laughed, trying to imagine what it must be like, being the second oldest of seven, having so many siblings around all the time. He’d only ever had Regulus, and the occasional visiting cousins.

“I dunno — full house sounds nice these days,” he mused, hands covering Charlie’s. “Before long, those two will be done with school and ready to move out into their own place. Don’t know what I’ll do then.” He was happy enough to move back into Grimmauld once it was safer — now he’d reclaimed the house from his horrific childhood there, made better memories, made it a home — but he doubted he’d be able to convince many people to move back with him. Remus and Severus would want their own place once they could go public... Narcissa would move back to her manor... it would just be him and Charlie, rattling around that big old townhouse.

“I’m sure we’ll think of something to keep you occupied,” Charlie assured. “Once we’ve gotten bored of having the place entirely to ourselves.”

A frisson of excitement ran down Sirius’ spine; both at that prospect, and what might come after.

He knew what he was getting into, falling for a Weasley.

“It’ll start getting dark, soon,” he said instead. “Want to grab our brooms and join them for a bit?”

He turned, seeing Charlie grin, cheeks dimpling. “I’d love to.” He kissed Sirius quickly. “You get the brooms, I’ll get our coats.” His blue eyes softened. “Don’t want you catching a chill out there.”

Sirius smiled, watching him go — as if that were possible, when he had Charlie around, warming every single inch of him from the inside out.

. . .

Dinner that evening was a raucous affair; the whole family was at Seren Du to celebrate the start of the holidays, even the Tonks family and Kingsley were there. Harry couldn’t be happier, surrounded by his loved ones, eating delicious food and cheerfully regaling them all with the story of his and Draco’s coming out right before they had left the school.

“I just wish we’d been able to see Dumbledore’s face, but he wasn’t at breakfast,” he said, shaking his head. “Ah well; I’m sure he’ll have something to say about it when we go back.”

“And I’m sure he’ll soon realise that hardly anyone gives a damn what he thinks anymore,” Tonks declared with a grin. Sirius barked a laugh at her side.

“Too right! You should’ve seen how many letters I had after the love potion incident; parents whose kids had written home about it, wanting to tell me they’d support our family if we wanted to pressure Albus into expelling the girl.”

“Really?” Harry asked, surprised.

“Amortentia is serious business, cub. She’s lucky she’s underage, or it would be an automatic Azkaban sentence,” Remus explained.

“Horace is the lucky one,” Snape sneered. “It’s bad enough brewing Amortentia to show to students, but leaving it unsupervised long enough for a *fourth year* to steal some! He’s fortunate he’s ancient enough that the International Society of Potions Masters can’t be bothered to properly reprimand him for it.”

“I didn’t realise they regulated that sort of thing,” Harry mused, and Snape nodded.

“He’s lost his license to brew it, after this incident. Not an enormous loss — I can’t see him brewing it often, even for demonstration purposes. But now that’s on his record he’ll lose his Mastery if he’s caught in possession of it again. Or if any students of his are caught with it.”

“Do you think anyone else managed to steal some?” Draco asked.

“Highly unlikely,” Snape assured. “He’s an idiot, but he’s not *that* incompetent. And after the spectacle the Vane girl made of herself, anyone who might have some will think twice about using it.”

“Good,” Harry declared vehemently, stabbing a roast potato. Under the table, Draco squeezed his knee sympathetically.

“Enough about that,” Sirius waved off, sensing the dip in the mood, “we’ve got two weeks of freedom ahead of us!” He turned to Harry, grinning. “If it’s alright with you, pup, we thought we’d do proper Yule celebrations this year, rather than the more muggle Christmas?”

Harry beamed at him. “That would be brilliant!” There weren’t many of the Old Ways he could follow while at school — Dumbledore didn’t let anyone celebrate Samhain at the stone circle anymore, let alone anything else — and he’d been hoping they could work Yule celebrations into their family traditions, if Sirius was willing.

He looked around the full dining room; there were far too many of them to keep eating in the kitchen, on nights like this. This was his family — missing a few members, if he counted the other Weasley siblings he cared about, and their partners. Even in his wildest dreams, shut away in his cupboard while the Dursleys spoiled Dudley all Christmas, Harry had never imagined he would ever have this many people who loved him.

The world might be getting darker out, the war escalating, but there was still plenty of joy in Harry’s life. He’d forgotten that, a little bit, cooped up in the castle with Dumbledore and all those people who glared at him and all those damned *black envelopes*.

And now, he had a whole two weeks of that joy to look forward to.

Chapter 92

Even after just a few days of Christmas break, Harry knew it was going to be so very hard to leave when the time came to return to Hogwarts.

Still, he was determined to make the most of it, and his family were happy to oblige, slipping back into their summer routine of spending the time after dinner all together in the main living room, playing chess or Bluff or just sitting together and reading.

During the day, however, most of the occupants of the house still had work to do of some kind, so often Harry and Draco were left to their own devices. That suited them perfectly well — knowing they would be out to the school when they got back didn't have either of them under the assumption that they'd find it any easier to spend time together privately.

But not all of their time was spent being hormonal teenagers. Just some of it. The rest was spent flying, or studying, or getting up to some kind of mischief.

Or, like now, working on Draco's animagus form. The blond was *so* close, and he was determined to get the transformation before they went back in January. Every free minute was spent in Harry's room with his eyes closed, meditating as hard as he could in search of that owl form.

Harry didn't mind; he was eager to see Draco transform, too. And in the mean time, he got to be a soppy idiot and stare at his boyfriend for ages while said boyfriend was too busy concentrating to notice.

Usually, Draco didn't even mind too much when Harry got bored of just *looking* and disrupted said concentration. As long as he waited long enough for Draco to give it a decent attempt.

This time, he hadn't been meditating for very long, however. Harry was amusing himself with wandlessly levitating increasingly heavy objects to try and find his limits — he was just wondering if levitating the bed he sat on would break Draco's concentration, when suddenly the boy's body *blurred*.

The next thing he knew, there was a snowy owl sitting on his bed.

"Draco!" Harry jumped to his feet, the desk rattling as it hit the ground abruptly. The owl hooted. "You did it!" He beamed at his owl-shaped boyfriend, throwing himself on the bed to get a closer look. "Oh, you're *gorgeous*, look at you."

Draco preened, letting Harry stroke gentle fingers down his feathers. He was larger than Hedwig, with wickedly sharp talons, and Harry smirked. "Mayhem, indeed," he drawled, earning a light glare from the owl. Draco would accept the nickname eventually; he insisted that of the two of them, Harry caused more mayhem. Which, he wasn't entirely wrong, but it was too late for that now.

He splayed his wings, as if to show off their impressive span, and gave a couple of unsteady hops. “You want to try flying?” Harry presumed, and Draco’s head bobbed. “It’s really windy outside, love. Maybe wait for a calmer day?” He didn’t want Draco getting hurt. “Practice getting in and out of the form first. Make sure you can transform back.”

The owl’s eyes narrowed in a glare, but after a few moments Draco was human once more, kneeling on the mattress. Harry didn’t waste any time in pouncing on him, pinning him down and kissing him. “I’m so proud of you!” he enthused, watching Draco grin up at him.

“It’s so *weird*, being a bird,” he said, tone a mix of perturbed and reverent. “I should show Mother. And Uncle Sev!”

“In a minute,” Harry agreed, peppering more kisses down the Slytherin’s jaw. “I’m not done being proud of you yet.”

Draco snorted, but didn’t argue, splaying his knees slightly to cradle Harry between them. “If you must,” he mock-sighed, biting at Harry’s lower lip. “But then we’re going to show everyone. And teach me to fly. The ballroom’s big enough for it.” He gasped softly as Harry sucked on the sensitive spot on his throat.

“Sounds like a plan,” the dark-haired boy agreed, grinning against Draco’s skin. Snape was brewing anyway; they had some time to kill before Draco could go show off.

.-. .

It was only years of experience that kept Severus’ hand steady as he poured fresh-brewed Nerve Tonic into a vial while the Mark on his forearm burned with pain. He grit his teeth against it, finishing up his work. At least the summons had come at the *end* of his brewing session, not in the middle. He hated when he ruined work because of the Dark Lord.

Only when everything was safely stored did he summon his robe and mask, sweeping from the lab. Sirius happened to be in the main hallway, and he grimaced at the sight of Severus buttoning his dark robe. “I’ll let Moony know. Be safe,” he offered. Severus merely nodded. Then, he was headed briskly down the darkened driveway, footsteps muffled by the snow. The Mark burned hotter, more urgent; following its call once he was past the wards felt almost involuntary.

He arrived to a much larger gathering than expected, and his heart began to sink.

“At last, Severus,” the Dark Lord drawled, beckoning him closer. “I was beginning to think you would not arrive.”

“Apologies, My Lord,” Severus murmured bending to kiss the hem of the monster’s robes. “I was in the middle of a sensitive potion, it had to be stabilised before I could leave it.”

“Indeed.” The response was noncommittal, and Severus braced himself for a Cruciatus, but it never came. “No matter; you are here now. We can leave.”

“Leave, My Lord?”

Voldemort's thin lips twisted in a dangerous smile. "They keep you so busy at that castle. I'm sure you have plenty of frustrations at those brats — at the Potter boy, so close and yet you cannot harm him. At the Malfoy boy... you must be so disappointed in his... *choices*."

Severus expertly pushed back all his pride and love for Draco behind his Occlumency walls, letting himself scowl. "You have heard of his romance with Potter, then, My Lord?" he replied, trying to sound utterly disgusted. Red eyes burned.

"They will both be destroyed, in due time," the Dark Lord promised him. "For now, however, I offer you another outlet for those frustrations."

Severus' heart sank even further as several Death Eaters whooped eagerly behind him, Bellatrix Lestrange the loudest among them. "You honour me, My Lord."

That hideous face grew even more so with the grotesque expression of glee, and when the Dark Lord offered his arm, Severus had no choice but to take it.

They reappeared in what seemed to be a perfectly ordinary muggle residential area. Fairly affluent, by the looks of it; middle-class, nothing enormously fancy, but certainly far nicer than where he'd grown up. Several houses had lights on, the families curled up watching TV in the winter evening. Many of the houses had coloured lights strung up outside — it was a cheerful scene. Peaceful.

It would not remain so for long.

A series of cracks heralded the arrival of the rest of the Death Eaters. There had to be at least twenty of them; Voldemort had started bringing larger groups on these things in the last few months, since the Order had started thwarting them so soundly.

If only there were a way for Severus to alert them now, without blowing his cover.

"Enjoy yourselves, my loyal subjects," Voldemort instructed, raising his wand. "You have earned it."

And then the chaos began.

Immediately, one of the houses burst into flames. The Death Eaters around him started to fan out, shouting and cackling as they blew up cars and destroyed gardens. A few curious — or stupid — muggles stepped out of their homes, some holding knives or cricket bats or even, in one case, an umbrella. All of them stopped in their doorways, staring agog at the terrifying physical impossibilities happening before them, then screaming as their torture began.

Severus could not allow himself to think. He had a cover to maintain; he had his own life to protect.

He made a beeline for a house that had not yet been claimed by his *fellows*, blasting the door open with an unnecessarily showy flourish.

Maybe if he was loud enough, the muggles inside might run before he reached them.

But that was not the case. He found three of them, huddled upstairs in the smallest bedroom — a man, a woman, and a young child. Bile rose in Severus' throat, but he pushed it away. They would not survive the night, no matter what he did. Had he been younger, more foolish, he might have tried some elaborate ruse for them to feign death until the danger had passed. But he knew better now.

The best he could offer them was a quick, painless death.

Three flashes of green light, and the room was hauntingly silent. Severus grit his teeth, and got to work, his magic cutting into their skin and tugging at their clothes, twisting the child's neck at an unnatural angle.

If he worked well enough, none of those with him would realise all the damage had been done post-mortem.

Just in case, he set fire to the child's bed, letting the flames leap from one polyester stuffed toy to the next, catching the corner of the curtains and melting the brightly coloured plastic play contraption beneath.

He turned away, confident the whole room would be ashes before anyone could stop it.

If only his night could end there.

Stepping back out into the cold street, he saw the other Death Eaters had rounded up a whole cluster of muggles, jeering at them as they huddled together and cried. Many of them were dead on the outskirts of the group — those who had tried to fight back, perhaps.

“Come, Severus!” Bellatrix cackled, her mask abandoned and her features rapturous as she held a muggle under a Cruciatus curse. “Pick one, pretend it’s that foul brat of Cissa’s! Look, there’s a blond one for you!” She jerked her wand, and a teenage boy was separated from the rest — he looked a little younger than Draco, his hair a little darker, but the similarities were enough to almost break Severus’ composure. He grit his teeth, raised his wand, tried not to look the boy in the eye.

“Sectumsempra!” he called curtly — no one would begrudge him using his signature spell, the creation he had been so *proud* of as a teen.

Huge gashes appeared across the boy’s chest. Severus made sure the magic cut deep enough — the boy was dead in less than a second. Someone in the crowd wailed; a mother, perhaps. Beside him, Bellatrix pouted exaggeratedly.

“That’s no fun!” she cried, like a child denied their toys. “You’re supposed to make it *last!*”

“Forgive me,” Severus drawled, as cool and unruffled on the outside as always. “My temper seems to have... overtaken me. As you suggested, I was imagining the Malfoy boy.”

Bellatrix cackled again, grinning a bloodthirsty grin. “It’s so easy to slip, isn’t it? They’re so *weak.*” She shot off a Cutting curse into the huddle, and a scream answered. “You’ll have to do better with the next one, Sevvie — you’ve been out of the game for far too long!”

The Dark Lord didn't often send Severus on raids such as this; his position at the school, his ability as a Potions Master, it all made him far too valuable to risk just on a bit of muggle slaughter. Clearly he thought Severus deserved a *reward*.

That, or he was so confident in his hold over the Ministry that he thought it wouldn't matter even if Severus did get caught.

Severus braced himself for another round, mind working frantically to think of how he could make this one look more torturous — then a shout of alarm went up that wasn't from the muggles.

“Order's coming!” someone warned, their voice magically amplified. “Scatter!”

His knees almost buckled with relief, but he didn't have time to be thankful. The Death Eaters around him began to apparate away, many of them throwing one last lethal curse at the group of muggles before they vanished. Severus turned on the spot, envisioning Voldemort's manor, and with a squeezing sensation he was gone.

Privately, he hoped Bellatrix stayed long enough to get caught. Long enough for one of the Order to kill her. But he doubted it — she was too clever for that, even in her insanity.

Sure enough, she returned only a few beats after him, holding something that dripped blood on the floor. It took Severus a few moments to realise it was the decapitated head of the blond muggle boy he'd killed. “Picked out an early Christmas present for myself,” she declared proudly, holding it up. “Do you like it?”

“...Charming.”

She giggled, then straightened up as the Dark Lord strode out in front of the gathered crowd. Severus hadn't counted, but it seemed like there were fewer of them than they'd started with.

Good.

“One day, we shall show Dumbledore's precious *Order* exactly how little they can do to stop our glorious future,” Voldemort remarked in his chilling, sibilant voice. “For now, we will let them clean up our messes and think they are *succeeding*.” A few cheers burst out, but were quickly silenced by a red-eyed glare. “Severus,” the monster called, and Severus walked forward obediently, trying to stop his heart from hammering. “You seemed... unenthusiastic. Did you not like your reward?”

“I enjoyed it deeply, My Lord,” he replied, bowing his head. “I am very grateful for the opportunity. It has been so long... I wanted to take in the atmosphere, before I dirtied my hands.”

The Dark Lord smirked, and Severus knew that would not be enough. “*Crucio*.” He was on his knees, screaming, his nerves turning into a hundred thousand acid-coated knives. The pain lasted so long he thought he might die from it. When it finally ended, he gasped for breath, muscles shuddering with aftershocks. “You disappoint me, Severus. I cannot have one

of my best men losing his touch, now, can I?" Voldemort drawled, to chuckles from the crowd.

"Next time I will do better, My Lord," Severus rasped, keeping his gaze on the floor. Waiting for another curse. Knowing it was coming didn't make it any easier to bear.

"The school has made you soft," his master told him. "But no matter. Before long we will have the school much as we have the Ministry, and you will be free to truly *indulge* yourself."

Severus had not yet heard anything about a plan to take Hogwarts, and terror shot through his trembling form — was there a plan going on that he didn't know about, or was the Dark Lord just pontificating about his vague and glorious plan for the future?

He hoped it was the latter. He didn't want to dwell on the implications of the former.

Painfully, carefully, he dragged himself to his feet, trying not to stagger too obviously as they were all dismissed. He couldn't show weakness here, not if he wanted to survive. Putting all his remaining strength into his thoughts of *home*, he apparated away, falling to his knees over the ward boundary of Seren Du.

"Oh, Master Severus!" Ceri gasped, and his vision was a blur as a small hand gripped him by the arm, the strange feeling of elf transportation overtaking him, sending another wave of aftershocks through his body.

"Fuck! Severus." That was Remus, and Severus recoiled from the familiar touch — he couldn't, he was filthy, he was a *murderer*, Remus shouldn't touch him. "Ceri, get the Nerve Tonic, highest strength." A moment, and then a vial was pressed against his lips. Severus swallowed clumsily, the potion instantly burning the pain and the trembling from his limbs. His heart rate began to return to normal. His fogged vision cleared. Remus' handsome face came into focus barely a foot away from him, those amber eyes full of worry and love so plainly it made Severus ache. "What happened?"

"Muggle hunting," Severus croaked out, keeping the contents of his stomach within him only through sheer force of will. "He thought I needed a *reward* for having to put up with the students and Dumbledore. He was not pleased with my performance — apparently I have *lost my touch*."

Remus' face twisted in fury, and for a moment Severus' heart stopped as he thought it might be directed at him. Then those features softened — not pity, never pity, but something close enough to make Severus' heart clench. "Come on, love. Let's get you out of those robes, into a nice hot bath. Can you stand? Can— can I help you up?"

Severus flinched. "I have killed four muggles tonight," he said flatly. "Two of them children."

Remus flinched too, a small movement he couldn't hide from Severus' keen eyes. "I'm sure you gave them a cleaner death than anyone else would have allowed them," he replied all the same, not a trace of doubt in him.

What had Severus done, to deserve such stalwart loyalty?

“Come here,” the werewolf urged, voice cracking — heart breaking, much like Severus’, much like it always did on nights like this. Over and over again, an endless cycle, one the foolish wolf wouldn’t remove himself from no matter how often Severus begged him to leave, insisted he deserved better.

Severus was too tired to be that noble, right now. He collapsed into Remus’ waiting arms, shoulders shaking with silent sobs. Remus held him, cried with him, eased him up the stairs and out of his robes and into the bath. He didn’t judge Severus’ murderous hands; just held them lovingly, kissed his palms, murmured his devotion and his understanding and his assurances that he would always be there to pick up Severus’ shattered self. He didn’t promise it would never happen again. That was a promise none of them could make.

Seven months. Seven months until Harry turned seventeen, until it could finally be over, one way or another.

He could cope with seven more months of this.

As long as he had Remus, he could cope with far worse.

.-.-.-.

T’was the night before Christmas, and all through the house, not a creature was stirring — except Sirius, padding barefoot down the stairs in search of his wayward partner. Everyone had gone to bed; though with the strength of the Silencing charm on Harry’s room, Sirius knew better than to expect everyone was sleeping. He had gone up to shower, fully expecting his gorgeous boyfriend to be waiting on the bed for some antics behind a Silencing charm of their own, only to find their room empty.

Charlie had been quieter, lately. He was trying to hide it, but Sirius could tell.

He found the dragon tamer in the kitchen, a mug of tea cradled in his large hands. He looked up at Sirius’ entrance, face turning sheepish. “Hey. I was on my way up, I just...” He trailed off, shaking his head, smiling lopsidedly. “Never mind.”

Sirius snorted, glad they weren’t going to bother with the feeble excuses. He shuffled forward, perching on the edge of the table beside the shorter man, pressing their shoulders together. “Talk to me.”

Charlie sighed, his head tilting to lean against Sirius’. “I... when I lived in Romania, I knew I’d miss family Christmas most years. I was single, no kids — I was the natural choice to stay on the Reserve over the holidays. It didn’t bother me. But... I’m not in Romania any more. I can’t kid myself into thinking I’m missing family Christmas because I can’t get there — I wasn’t *invited*, my own bloody mother doesn’t *want* me there, I—“ He broke off, breath hitching, and Sirius’ whole chest ached for him. He turned, worming an arm around Charlie’s back, kissing his temple.

“I’m sorry, love. This is my fault—“

“Don’t even start,” Charlie interrupted stubbornly. “The only thing you ever did was love me, and don’t you *dare* apologise for that. This is on *her*. She’s had it out for you long before we got together — whatever she thinks she is to Harry, you threatened that, and she hates you for it. And part of me hates her for that, a bit. For stealing from him, for lying to that poor kid who just wanted to be loved. For treating you like shit. When I was younger, I always thought my mum was perfect.” He gave a bitter snort. “I know better, now. I... I love you, Sirius, and I love being here with you. I’m honoured to be involved in your Yule celebrations — you’ve made me part of your family, and that’s amazing. I’m not saying I don’t want to be here, but I —”

“You miss your family,” Sirius finished for him. “Fuck, Charlie, of course you do! Your relationship with your mother might be difficult, but you’ve still got your dad, and the rest of your siblings. Even if Ron is a little berk.” Charlie snickered tearfully. “I wish I knew how to make it all better, love,” Sirius murmured, running a hand through Charlie’s hair, tucking the man’s head under his chin. Sometimes he felt ancient compared to his boyfriend — but this wasn’t even about age. This was just Sirius’ own years of experience having his parents hate him. He’d pretended it didn’t bother him, as a kid, but James had always seen through that bullshit in a heartbeat.

He couldn’t imagine what it was like to be Charlie, to have grown up in a loving family and only now have it fall apart as an adult.

“Things will get better,” he promised. “Once the war’s over.” Once they stopped having to live in Seren Du for their own safety. Once Dumbledore was gone and Molly could be forced to confront the consequences of her own actions. “I can’t promise your mother will come around. But when it’s all over, at least you’ll have the rest of your family with you.” He kissed Charlie’s fiery hair. “We’ll have Yule at the Pottery next year. Invite all your siblings over for dinner.” It would be chaos, and they would love every second of it.

“That would be nice,” Charlie agreed softly. “I... I know things will be different. We’re all getting older. Bill will be married next year, and even the kids are pairing off like nobody’s business. Soon we’ll all be alternating family holidays and starting our own traditions and we might not even bother doing the big family thing at the Burrow anymore. But this year...” He sighed, and Sirius held him tighter.

This year he was missing it not because he was busy, or there were other plans, but because Molly didn’t want to see him as long as he was still with Sirius. Sirius couldn’t help the guilt that pooled within him, but he ignored it; he’d done his time convincing Charlie not to get involved with him. It was too late to try again. He was in far too deep, now.

“Think of this year as a fresh start,” he offered, nudging the younger man up to look him in the eye. “Starting our own traditions, like you said. It’s the first Christmas me and Harry are having here. First Yule I’ve had since Jamie died. First one Moony and Severus have actually been able to spend together in I don’t even know how long. And the less said about the Malfoys’ Yule traditions, the better.” He kissed Charlie’s cheek, then his lips, soft and tender. “I’m not trying to replace your family. Next year we’ll have a home where all your siblings will be welcome, and your dad too.” He’d make no promises about Molly. “And if you want

to go see them tomorrow, you're more than welcome to. But if it helps any, think of this as the beginning of our family, rather than missing out on yours."

He wasn't sure if that was even *remotely* helpful, but he couldn't think of anything else to say. He personally was overjoyed at how the Yule period had been going so far, but he knew it wasn't that simple for Charlie. He hadn't felt as much heartache through their Yule dinner and rituals on the solstice — the Weasleys hadn't celebrated Yule in generations, now — but with the newness past, and Christmas coming in the morning... the redhead was clearly starting to feel the separation.

Slowly, a smile crept over that gorgeous face. The dimples didn't show, but it was much better than the sadness that had been in his eyes a moment ago. "The beginning of our family," he repeated. The words made Sirius' heart stutter in a way it hadn't when they'd been in his own mouth. *Our family*. "I like the sound of that."

When Charlie leaned in to kiss him, Sirius melted into it, their tongues twining lazily. "I love you so much," Charlie breathed, sending warmth all the way to the tips of Sirius' toes.

"Let's go to bed," Sirius suggested, smiling slightly. "Before Ceri comes down to scold us for sitting on tables."

Charlie snickered, hopping down and tugging Sirius with him, setting his cold mug of tea aside. The house elf was giving them privacy, bless her, but Sirius didn't want to push their luck. She had a lot of food to prep for tomorrow, after all.

He tangled his fingers in Charlie's, leading the way to the stairs, his thoughts now no steamier than just cuddling the hell out of his love until they fell asleep.

He couldn't do anything about Molly, but he could make sure Charlie had the best Christmas possible regardless.

.-.-.

Waking up on Christmas morning at Seren Du wasn't the same as at Hogwarts, or even the Weasleys' — there was no pile of presents at the end of his bed. Those were all under the tree, in the living room.

But there *was* a warm Draco curled tight around him, which in Harry's opinion was far better than any present.

He ran a hand through blond hair, gently nudging Draco awake. "Hey, sleepy," he teased. "Get up, it's Christmas."

Grey eyes blinked hazily, and Harry couldn't resist the urge to kiss those softly pouting lips. "Good morning."

"What time is it?" Draco asked suspiciously, and Harry chuckled.

"Half seven. Not too obscene, I promise." Harry was definitely more of an early riser than Draco; the Slytherin would sleep til noon most days of the holidays if they let him.

Draco groaned anyway, burrowing his face in Harry's neck. Harry laughed, rolling them over to pin Draco to the mattress playfully. "Come on, it's Christmas!" he wheedled. "The sooner we get up, the sooner there's presents!"

That perked Draco up a little bit. "Only once everyone else is up," he pointed out. "No one is allowed to touch their presents until Mother has had her coffee."

Considering Sirius' childhood festivities had been almost as depressing as Harry's, they were modelling their new family traditions on the Malfoy household's way of celebrating the winter season — namely, celebrating both Yule and Christmas. According to Sirius and Remus, the Potters had done something similar; the solstice held the burning of the Yule Log, the traditional dinner of roast boar, the midnight ritual to strengthen magic on the Longest Night and ask for blessings to help them through the deepest part of winter. Then, Christmas Day would hold gift-giving and another big dinner, in the traditions Harry was more familiar with.

As far as he was concerned, it meant double the celebrations, so Harry was more than happy to adopt this form of holiday cheer. The Yule ritual had been a real eye-opener; his magic still felt like it was buzzing a little, even now.

There was a loud knock on the door, startling both boys. "I hope you're decent!" was all the warning Sirius gave them before opening the door, and Harry laughed — if they weren't, the dog animagus would have never made it through Harry's wards and both of them knew it. "Merry Christmas, boys!"

"Merry Christmas, Sirius," Harry chirped brightly, rolling off Draco and dragging himself into a sitting position. Draco just buried his face in Harry's hip, making them both laugh.

"Come on, kiddo," Sirius teased, playfully yanking Draco's leg beneath the duvet. "Ceri's got breakfast going and coffee brewing."

"Fine, fine, I'm getting up," Draco relented, yawning.

"I expect you both down in ten minutes, alright?" Sirius instructed, grinning devilishly. "Don't get *distracted*."

Harry tossed a pillow at him, sending the laughing man from the room.

With the promise of delicious food and presents, they didn't linger in bed, putting dressing gowns on over their pyjamas. Apparently Lucius Malfoy had been insistent that everyone be fully dressed for Christmas breakfast, and that was one aspect of the tradition the remaining Malfoys were happy to throw out the window.

The kitchen was full when they reached it, the air full of incredible smells. Sure enough, Narcissa had a mug of strong coffee cradled in her hands, looking unfairly elegant in a silver velvet dressing gown over her blue silk pyjamas. It was something in the Black genes, Harry decided — even Sirius, hair loose and wearing a grey t-shirt and red plaid pyjama bottoms, looked the kind of attractively dishevelled that Harry would never be able to accomplish.

Season's greetings were exchanged, and the congregation was moved to the living room, where the staggering pile of presents beneath the elaborately decorated Christmas tree awaited. Sirius and Narcissa had gone all out — the two of them left unsupervised were a dangerously competent team.

"Go on, boys," Narcissa prompted, smiling indulgently and gesturing to the tree. Harry and Draco didn't need telling twice — they hurried to kneel by the pile, levitating presents to their recipients.

The next half hour was a riot of wrapping paper and sounds of delight. Harry goggled at his own pile of presents; books and clothes and sweets and all sorts of things he'd never even anticipated. "One of these days you're going to run out of things to buy me," he told his godfathers laughingly, opening another box from the pair of them, this one containing an Astronomy globe — a device that would project the stars of any given day up on the walls of the room he put it in. Sirius would never let him live down that E in Astronomy!

"Not possible," Sirius assured him, beaming. "We'll just have to get more creative as you get older."

Harry almost made a joke about Sirius soon having his own kids to spoil rotten instead of Harry, but he held his tongue — he knew Charlie was a bit sensitive on the subject of family these days, and he didn't want to put his foot in it.

He saw Draco open a patchwork quilt from Andromeda much like the one she'd made for Harry himself, except this one was in shades of green rather than black and grey. "Oh, good, I can have my blanket back now," he teased, kissing the blond's cheek. Ever since Harry had brought it to Draco when he was unwell, it had stayed in the blond's dormitory. Harry didn't really mind, glad it could bring some comfort to his boyfriend.

Suddenly, Remus let out a loud gale of laughter, and all of them turned to see Snape holding a wooden sign on a ribbon — '*Brewing in Progress; intruders will be diced and used as ingredients*'. There was even a little cartoon cauldron beneath it, with a human leg sticking out of it.

"Where the hell did Tonks find that?" Remus crowed delightedly. Snape wasn't nearly so impressed, though Harry thought he could see a flicker of amusement in those dark eyes.

"I bet Ted made it," Sirius offered, grinning. "He does all kinds of woodwork and stuff."

"Perhaps this will mean I actually get some *privacy* in this house," Snape drawled, making Narcissa scoff.

"There is only one person in this house who dares interrupt your brewing without good reason, and I would like to see you turn *him* into ingredients." Her gaze landed pointedly on Remus, and a pale flush rose on Snape's cheeks.

"Not many potions call for werewolf parts," Remus assured cheerfully, winking.

As the piles of unwrapped gifts grew higher and the shreds of wrapping paper began to take over the remaining floor space, Sirius set a record of muggle Christmas songs on the player, declaring it was time for eggnog.

Apparently even in the Black family traditions it was standard to start getting drunk before noon.

Harry looked over his own pile, feeling a small pang in his chest at one glaring absence. He glanced over at Charlie — he, too, was missing the annual Weasley jumper. The redhead caught Harry's eye, blue gaze turning knowing, smile tightening at the corners. Getting to his feet, Harry moved to claim Sirius' vacated seat beside the redhead, squeezing him around the waist. "I'm sorry."

Charlie's huge arm slung across Harry's shoulders. "Not your fault, kid," he insisted. "She'll come around." He gave a short, somewhat hollow laugh. "Merlin, she sent a jumper to Percy even when he told the whole damn family to go fuck themselves in favour of the Ministry. Nice to know where we stand, eh?" He ruffled Harry's hair, then stood up. "Don't worry about it, Harry. No need to let her being petty ruin our day, yeah?"

As the dragon tamer wandered over to assist Sirius in pouring eggnog, tugging him into a playful dance as soon as he was done, Harry smiled to himself. Charlie was right — there was way too much happiness around him to let Mrs Weasley spoil it. He was spending Christmas with Draco — more importantly, Draco and Narcissa *didn't* have to spend it with Lucius and a bunch of Death Eaters. Remus and Snape could spend the whole day together, and he could be with them and Sirius. The Tonks' would be over for dinner later. And he'd see his friends and the rest of the Weasleys he cared about at New Year's.

He laughed as Sirius dipped Charlie exaggeratedly, both of them almost spilling their eggnog.

They'd never have *everyone* with them for Christmas, not the way their family had grown. But this was a damn good start.

.-.-.-

Dinner itself, starting at precisely one in the afternoon under Ceri's keen eye, was a loud and cheerful affair. Different to a Weasley Christmas dinner, but no less full of love and laughter. Especially not with Tonks at the table — there was no way Charlie could get properly maudlin with his best friend sat beside him, making far too many jokes and almost spilling the entire gravy boat over herself.

By the end of it, his belly was full to bursting and his heart was the same, a wide grin on his face as he watched Harry try and trap Remus and Severus under enchanted mistletoe.

"You're gonna end up with detentions if you're not careful," Tonks teased, making Harry snort.

"I already have regular detentions with him," he pointed out.

“You have training sessions disguised as detentions,” Snape cut in, setting fire to the mistletoe with a wave of his wand. “I can always change them to *actual* detentions, since you clearly miss them so much. There are plenty of cauldrons that need scrubbing, even though I no longer teach the subject.”

Harry grimaced, hurriedly setting his hands in his lap. Across the room, Remus snickered.

When the Tonks family started making noises about leaving, Charlie sidled over to Sirius, kissing his partner’s cheek. “I’m going out for a bit,” he warned. Sirius’ grey eyes turned knowing.

“Want someone to come with you?”

Charlie knew that if he asked, Sirius would join him. Even if that would be a total disaster. Hell, *any* of them would join him; Tonks, Remus, even Narcissa would happily stand at his shoulder while he went to face his mother. But he couldn’t ask that of them.

“Nah, think it’s best if I go alone. I won’t be long.”

The dog animagus frowned slightly, but nodded, kissing him chastely. “Send a Patronus if you need me. Give the family my love.”

“Will do.”

He stayed long enough to see off their guests, then slipped away while the kids were cajoling Narcissa into a game of Bluff. It was brisk outside compared to the warmth within, and his shoulders hunched as he walked to the wardline, his heart beating a staccato in his chest.

He never thought he’d feel this anxious about going to his own family home.

Charlie apparated away, arriving at the gate of the Burrow. He paused to stare up at it; the same lopsided structure he’d grown up in, as always looking like a strong wind might knock it all down.

Home.

Was it home, now?

Even when he’d lived in Romania, the Burrow had been home. But this last year... When he thought of home, he thought of family, yes. But he thought mostly of grey eyes and a bark-like laugh, of the welcome he got whenever he stepped through the doors of Seren Du.

His stomach churned. But he wasn’t a Gryffindor for nothing. He’d faced *dragons*, he could handle his mother.

He started walking towards the house, and knocked on the front door.

Charlie could hear the bustle of the whole family on the other side of the door — his mother calling for someone to answer it, then yelling at the twins to stop whatever it was they were doing. Ginny laughing.

The door opened, and Charlie found himself face to face with his father, who practically crumpled in relief at the sight of him. “Oh, Charlie,” he sighed, wrapping his second eldest son in a crushing hug. It took everything Charlie had not to break down in tears right there. “I hoped you’d stop by.”

“I... I wasn’t sure if I should,” Charlie admitted. “Didn’t know if I’d be welcome. I— Mum didn’t send a jumper.”

Heartbreak flashed across Arthur Weasley’s face. “My boy,” he murmured, patting Charlie’s cheek. “Your mother is... upset. But you will *always* be welcome in this house, you hear me? No matter what.” His gaze turned pointed. “As will Sirius Black.”

Charlie grimaced. “Don’t know about that,” he muttered, imagining how that might go down.

“Arthur! Who is it?” came the call from inside the house. Arthur looked back at his son.

“Are you coming in? Everyone will be pleased to see you.”

Charlie loved his dad, right then, for phrasing it like a question — for giving him one last chance to turn around and avoid the fallout. He almost took it.

“I’ve come this far,” he said instead, and his dad smiled, stepping back to let him inside.

“We have a visitor, Molly!” he replied, and Charlie heard the frantic scramble within as they all tried to guess who it might be.

He followed his dad through to the kitchen, stopping in the threshold, hands clenched tight at his sides.

The family was just at the tail end of their own Christmas dinner, a mostly-eaten Christmas pudding at the centre of the table. Charlie felt like he was having an out-of-body experience, looking in at his siblings all sat around the table without him. The only break in the sea of red hair was Hermione at Ron’s side, and Fleur, tucked under Bill’s arm, the couple staring at him wide-eyed.

Stood at the sink, Molly froze.

“Hi, everyone,” Charlie greeted awkwardly. “Uh. Merry Christmas. Thought I’d just... pop in.”

“Charlie!” Ginny was the one to break the tension, jumping to her feet and launching herself at her favourite brother. Charlie hugged her close, nose pressed to her strawberry-scented hair. *Merlin*, he’d missed her.

That was the trigger for the rest to follow — the twins hugged him, delighting in reminding him they were now taller than him. Bill ruffled his hair like he was twelve again, kissing his temple. “Good to see you, Char,” he murmured softly. Fleur hugged him, too, kissing both his cheeks and thanking him for the bracelet he’d sent her. Even Ron clapped him on the shoulder, looking uncomfortable.

Through it all, his mother didn't move.

"I would've thought you'd have other places to be today," she said tersely, once things had quieted down and Charlie had let himself be talked into a small slice of pudding. He winced.

"I wanted to see everyone. But I can leave, if you'd prefer."

"No one is leaving," Arthur cut in firmly, his hand on Charlie's arm. "We're delighted to have you here, as long as you're willing to stay."

Molly's lips thinned, but she didn't argue.

Charlie wasn't sure what he'd expected, honestly. For her to scream the house down? For her to pull out a jumper and say how sorry she was?

He forced his gaze away, smiling at his siblings instead. "Harry and everyone send their love," he told them. "And he loves the pranks you sent him," he added to the twins, who smirked. "I don't know if the rest of us are *quite* so grateful, mind."

"It's market research!" Fred insisted cheerfully.

"We can always give you something to get back at him with?" suggested George.

"I'll keep that in mind." Charlie wasn't sure *more* pranks was the solution to that particular problem.

"I suppose you're staying with the Malfoys, then?" his mum piped up. "We've all heard the news. If you're with *him*, you must be with them."

"You can say his name, you know, Mum," Charlie retorted. "But yes, *Sirius* and I are spending the holidays with the Malfoys. And Harry and Remus, of course." They didn't need to know that they weren't doing so at Malfoy Manor.

"Well *Sirius* ought to be careful about the kind of people he's letting influence poor Harry," Molly replied in the same tone.

"If you're about to start in on Slytherins, Mum," George warned, and she huffed.

"So it's silly of me to be suspicious of people who have spent the last few decades supporting You-Know-Who, is it?" she argued. "People who have made a point of tearing down our family at every chance they got!"

"That was only ever Lucius," Charlie defended.

"That's a lie; Malfoy had it out for us since we started school!" Ron said hotly. "I don't know what he's got over Harry but he's always been a git!"

"He was eleven, Ron," Ginny sniped. "He's grown up since then, which is more than I can say for *you*!"

“Now, Charlie, you can’t tell me you think it’s *normal*, how quickly Harry has gone from practically being part of our family to refusing to talk to Ron! He was so rude to me last year when we were all at Headquarters — he’s ignoring Professor Dumbledore, even! I can’t be the only one who’s concerned about his behaviour; his friendship with the Malfoy boy can’t mean anything good!”

“He was *rude* because he knows you stole from him, Mum!” Charlie blurted furiously. Silence fell abruptly. Charlie’s eyes widened in horror, Bill and the twins mirroring his expression, while the rest just looked confused.

“What?” Arthur spluttered, bewildered. “Charlie, what do you mean?”

He shouldn’t have said anything, but it was too late to take it back now. “Dumbledore gave Mum Harry’s vault key every summer, and she stole money from his account. Multiple times,” he confessed, staring his mother down. “He found out about it ages ago. He didn’t want you to know that he knew — didn’t want to cause trouble in the family. But I can’t sit there and listen to you talk about how *concerned* you are about him when you were perfectly happy to steal from a twelve year-old who thought the world of you!”

“What does it matter if Mum took a bit of money?” Ron scoffed, rolling his eyes. “He’s loaded, it’s not like he’d miss it.”

“That’s not the point, Ron!” Charlie snapped. “I’m sure if anyone had *asked*, Harry would have given you all the money you needed! He’s that kind of person. But to take from him without so much as a word, to pretend to welcome him into the family just to get *access* to him...” He shook his head, disgusted.

“Molly,” Arthur started, eyes narrowing. “Is this true?”

“I— it was just the money for his school things! And a bit extra — we had an extra mouth to feed, after all. I didn’t think he’d *mind*. Albus said it would be fine.”

“Almost two hundred galleons,” Bill said suddenly, drawing everyone’s attention. “Between Harry starting school and getting the security changed on his vault.”

Molly’s face reddened. Arthur stared at his eldest son. “You knew about this, too?”

“Harry told us not to tell you,” Bill replied. “He wasn’t sure if you knew — and if you didn’t, he didn’t want to cause problems, like Charlie said.”

“I never should have brought it up,” Charlie said. He was going to have some serious apologising to do when he got back home. “It wasn’t mine to share. But I just — you get so bloody *high and mighty*, Mum. Like you’re the only person who could possibly have Harry’s best interests at heart — you hated Sirius even before we got together because having him around meant that Harry might not need you as much anymore. And knowing what I know, I can’t be sure if that hate comes from a genuine care for Harry, or just because you’re mad at losing access to the Boy-Who-Lived and everything that comes with it. And that doesn’t even *touch* on how shitty you’ve been about my relationship — about all our relationships. Bloody

hell, Mum; Ginny is going out with *Neville Longbottom* and you're still mad about it!" He ran a hand through his hair, shaking his head incredulously.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to burst in here and derail Christmas," he said, grimacing. "But I'm done with letting you pretend you care so much about Harry's wellbeing when really you only care about what Dumbledore's told you."

"There's more to that boy than you realise, Charlie," his mother warned him, voice shaking. "You'll get hurt, if you're not careful."

"I think I know Harry a hell of a lot better than you do, Mum," he retorted.

"So you know he's got You-Know-Who in his head, then?" Ron sneered. "Or has he turned you, as well?"

Charlie just shook his head sadly. "Harry hasn't *turned*, and neither have I," he said simply. "And maybe one day, Ron, you'll grow up enough to understand what real friendship is. It sure as hell isn't reporting your *friend's* every bloody move to people like Dumbledore." In the chair next to Ron, Hermione let out a tiny gasp — had she really thought Harry wouldn't figure it out?

Charlie turned away, squeezing his dad's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Dad. I'll go."

"I'll walk you out."

He didn't say goodbye to the rest — he'd see them soon enough, anyway. So he let his father walk him back to the door, the man looking decades older than he had when Charlie first showed up. "I— how long have you known?" Arthur asked, voice cracking. "About your mother?"

"Harry told me when I saw him before the first task of the Triwizard," Charlie replied honestly. Arthur sucked in a sharp breath.

"You should have come to me, son."

"I couldn't. Harry couldn't. If Dumbledore found out that he knew..." Harry had been far too vulnerable for the truth to come out back then.

His father looked grim. "I've been putting my trust in the wrong man for far too long, haven't I?" he realised. Charlie nodded.

"If it helps, so has everyone else," he said, shrugging. "He's very good at being trustworthy." Charlie had trusted him, too, until Harry showed him the truth.

Arthur gripped Charlie's hand tight for a moment. "Will you give Harry a message for me?" he pleaded, and Charlie nodded. "Tell him... tell him I had no idea, about any of it. I'm so sorry for any harm my family may have done him. If he wants recompense—"

"He doesn't," Charlie assured quickly, knowing his dad didn't have that kind of money, but he'd give it up regardless if Harry asked. "He doesn't care about the money, not really. It's

the lies that hit the hardest.” The money was pocket change for Harry. The broken trust was not.

“Right. Then… tell him I’m sorry, and I will deal with Molly, and I love him. He’s still family, no matter what.” Arthur’s blue eyes softened behind his glasses. “*You’re* still family, Charlie. Albus Dumbledore can go hang — *nothing* will get between a Weasley and his kids.”

Charlie grinned, pulling his dad into a tight hug, a few tears sneaking from his eyes. “I love you, Dad,” he murmured. He felt lips press to his hair, arms squeezing around him.

“I love you too, son. Always will.” When he pulled back, Arthur was grinning. “And between you and me, I think Sirius is brilliant, and I’m delighted you two have found happiness together. I always thought about writing to him, but I didn’t want to upset Molly.”

That was his father’s only flaw — not wanting to upset his wife. Maybe now he might realise what he stood to lose by standing by her like that.

“You should. Write, that is. To Sirius. And to Harry. He’d like to hear from you.” Harry had never said it, but Charlie could tell how terrified the kid was that Arthur knew about his wife’s duplicity, that he supported it. Harry was so quick to believe that anyone who appeared to care for him had an ulterior motive.

With his track record, Charlie couldn’t blame him.

“I’ll do that, then,” Arthur assured with a decisive nod. “Don’t be a stranger, Charlie. Even if you need me to meet you somewhere. I’m only an owl away.”

“I’ll remember that. See you, Dad.”

With one last squeeze to the shoulder, Arthur let his son go, and Charlie trudged back out to the edge of the wards.

He couldn’t go home yet. Not after that. He couldn’t disrupt two family Christmases with that sort of drama.

An idea sparked in his mind — there was one other sibling missing from the Weasley family table. One sibling who was probably working on something, but would be happy to let him sit and bitch about their fucked up family.

He was going to visit Percy.

.-.-.-.

Draco’s fingers were running through Harry’s hair, and Harry was hard pressed not to fall asleep from the sensation.

This had definitely been the best Christmas he could ever remember having. Not that he had that many to compare it to, but even so.

They were all sprawled out in various parts of the living room, now; full of food and good cheer and — in some cases — significant amounts of alcohol. Even when Charlie had disappeared for three hours and come back quite a bit drunker than he'd left, confessing to letting the cat out of the bag with his mum and passing on an apologetic message from Arthur Weasley, that wasn't enough to bring Harry's mood down. It was bound to come up eventually, and he didn't really care if Dumbledore figured out he knew the truth about that — he was so close to getting rid of Voldemort he didn't really need the old man to think Harry was oblivious to his inheritance, to the blocks on his magic.

Maybe he'd care a bit more in the morning, when he wasn't quite so tired and blissed out from Christmas, but that was a problem for the future. Right now the only thing he cared about was Draco's hand in his hair, his head in the blond's lap.

He might have laughed, had he seen that on the other sofa, Remus and Snape were in almost the exact same position as he and Draco, the werewolf dozing as Snape's fingers scratched gently at his scalp, a book in the Potions Master's free hand.

"I think I'm going to call it a night," Narcissa sighed, getting to her feet with a graceful stretch. "It's late, and I'm not as young as I used to be."

Several people in the room snorted. "You're young enough that that excuse is bullshit," Sirius told her playfully. "But go on, go to bed. You might have the right idea, to be honest; we leave it much longer and we'll be carrying the boys to their rooms."

"I'm awake," Harry insisted sleepily, eyes still closed. He felt more than heard Draco's chuckle.

"Only barely, by the look of you," Narcissa remarked. There was a shuffling of fabric, and Harry cracked an eye open long enough to see the blonde woman lean down to kiss her son's forehead, then pat Harry's cheek gently. "Goodnight, darlings."

"Goodnight, Mother."

"G'night, Cissa," Harry murmured, smiling slightly.

She left, and Sirius let out a big sigh. "Come on then, you lot. Everyone to bed. Too many damn good mattresses in this place for us all to be sleeping on sofas."

"Now who's not as young as they used to be," Draco teased, yelping at the very weak Tickling charm that earned him. "Rude."

"My godson's a terrible influence on you," Sirius declared. "You never used to be such a mouthy little git."

Harry snorted. "That's what you think. Ow!" Draco poked him in the ribs, jerking him out of his pleasantly sleepy state. "Please, you know I love you *because* you're a mouthy little git, not in spite of it."

Draco jostled his leg pointedly until Harry dragged himself upright, his glasses crooked on his face. The blond's expression turned fond, his hand reaching out to straighten them, fingers brushing affectionately across Harry's cheek.

It was such an innocent gesture, something he'd done a hundred times before, but for some reason this time it made Harry's breath catch in his throat. Stunned, it took a moment to gather himself — luckily, Draco thought he was just tired.

"You go up," Harry murmured, kissing him softly. "I'll help Pads tidy up in here, meet you in a bit."

The Slytherin cocked his head with a curious expression — they both knew Ceri would clean up once they'd all gone to bed. Then he just shook his head. "Okay. Don't blame me if I'm asleep when you get there." As if to make his point, he yawned, and Harry chuckled.

Remus and Snape bid them goodnight, making their own sleepy way out of the room, and Harry took the record off the player, setting it carefully back in its sleeve.

"What's up, kiddo?" Sirius appeared at his shoulder, voice low, eyes concerned. Harry glanced around — Charlie was nowhere to be seen, either. Evidently Harry was not as subtle as he thought he was.

No matter. They all probably just thought he wanted a quiet moment with his godfather on Christmas. Which wasn't untrue, but...

Harry leaned back against Sirius, looking up at him. "I was wondering... would it be safe for us to take a trip to Gringotts, sometime before I go back to school?" he asked, watching the confusion flicker across his godfather's face. "Just me and you," he clarified.

"I... I don't see why not, yeah. We'd have to time it right, but— it's certainly doable." Sirius frowned, one hand coming to rest in Harry's hair, ruffling it lightly. "Anything in particular you wanted to look at? I—" His expression faltered. "I know things have been a bit of a jumble of everyone's family stuff while we're figuring out how to do the holidays now. If you wanted more Potter stuff involved — there's a Hindu celebration they used to do, but it's in mid-January, so you'll be back at school by then."

"No, no, it's not that," Harry assured. Though he made a mental note to come back to that Hindu celebration thing. "I did want to go to the Potter vault. But it's not about the holidays — this has all been brilliant, honestly." He bundled up the nerves coiling in his belly, along with the words he hadn't even known he'd been bottling up for so long until just now. "I— it's not that I don't want Remus there. Because I really do, he means as much to me as you do, but I don't want to make him keep secrets from Severus, not about this, it's not fair on him—" Harry saw the glint of amusement enter Sirius' eyes, the one that said he was rambling and the older man found it adorable. "I wanted to look at the jewellery. In the Potter vault," he blurted.

The amusement faded, replaced by shock. "Oh. *Oh.*" Grey eyes widened. "Are you sure, pup? There's no rush for it." He snorted quietly. "I don't think he's gonna change his mind any time soon."

Harry's cheeks burned. "I know. And I'm not saying I'll do it now, or even soon. But... I want to look." Now that he'd started thinking about it he couldn't stop — though really, if he was being completely honest, he'd been thinking about it ever since his birthday party, seeing that ring on Oliver's finger and how happy it made him and Cassius both. Thinking how perfect Draco's narrow fingers would look with a band of silver there.

He fully expected Sirius to tell him they were far too young for all that, that he needed to shelve that thought for at least a couple of years. So he was surprised when the dog animagus pressed a kiss to his temple, humming quietly. "You know, pup — everything else, you're your mother's son, no doubt about it. But when it comes to romance? You're Jamie's boy, through and through." He chuckled. "You little sop."

Harry grinned. "So you'll take me?" he asked, hoping Sirius was as willing to indulge his romantic nature as he had been his father's.

"Alright, then," Sirius agreed. "I'll figure out a good time to sneak off and let you know. And I won't tell anyone. Not even Moony," he promised, winking.

"I— really?"

"Like I said, I don't think he's gonna change his mind any time soon," Sirius repeated with a smirk. He nudged Harry's shoulder, urging him in the direction of the door. "Go on, go snuggle up with your boy. Dream about putting a ring on his finger next Christmas," he teased, making Harry's blush brighten.

"Only if you do the same," he challenged. Sirius faltered, then laughed, his gaze getting a little wistful.

"Y'know what, I just might," he retorted, sticking his tongue out. "Sweet dreams, pup. Love you."

"Love you, too." Harry rocked up on his toes, pressing a kiss to Sirius' stubbled cheek, then left the room, heading for his bedroom.

Maybe he would have those dreams. If he did, it certainly wouldn't be the first time.

Chapter 93

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

On New Year's Eve, all those in Harry's trusted circle who weren't staying at the castle for the holidays made their way to Longbottom Manor, which was decorated as elegantly as one might expect from Augusta Longbottom.

Harry bowed to the elderly woman, then offered up the bottle of sherry he'd brought with him. "Happy holidays," he greeted. "Thank you for inviting us into your home."

"Your family is always welcome with mine, Heir Potter," she assured, a hint of a smile on her stern face. "Posy will show you to the parlour." At her word, a house elf appeared at her side, smiling bright up at Harry and his family.

"Guests be following Posy, please," she chirped, leading the way.

Harry was much less anxious on this visit to Longbottom Manor — unlike his birthday party, people weren't here specifically to see *him*. Also, he wasn't going to be psyching himself out about having sex with Draco this time. That ship had well and truly sailed, many times over.

So he was relaxed as he followed the house elf to the parlour, which was already full of people, a second house elf fluttering around with a tray of drinks.

"Harry!" Neville strode over, grinning. "Good to see you, mate." He glanced back at the rest of the group. "No Professor Lupin tonight?"

"Too close to the moon," Sirius explained. "But he sends his regards."

Harry rather thought it was less about the full moon the night before and more about wanting to ring in the new year with Snape, but he wasn't going to say anything.

Off to the side, Harry saw Amelia Bones stood with a glass of water in hand, and he waved to her, heading over. "I'm glad to see you back on your feet," he said by way of greeting.

"Thank you. I'm fully recovered, thanks to Augusta's friend. And, so I'm told, the efforts of Severus Snape." Her eyes narrowed expectantly, and Harry shrugged.

"There's little I can say without giving away what isn't mine to share," he told her. "But I trust Professor Snape with my life."

"Good to know," she replied. "Now, I won't take up your whole evening talking business; that would be far too rude of both of us." She chuckled. "Go, spend time with your friends."

Harry grinned at her, obligingly heading to greet the rest of his friends, wondering how many more would make it. To his surprise, Percy Weasley was there, chatting with Bill and Fleur. "Hi, Percy. Wasn't expecting to see you here."

"I've been helping Madam Bones," he explained, fiddling anxiously with his glasses. "Going through paperwork to make sure everything can be processed properly once the Ministry is accessible again. She, ah, invited me along."

"And then she told me so I could make sure he actually came," Bill joked, ruffling Harry's hair in greeting. "Wasn't going to let him spend New Year's alone in his flat."

Percy blushed.

"We've got all the Weasleys together again!" Fred declared, appearing out of nowhere on Harry's left, while George popped up on his right. "Well, all the good ones, anyway."

"Except Dad. Couldn't sneak him out," George added. "Mum's been on a bit of a warpath since Charlie dropped the bomb at Christmas."

Mr Weasley had written to Harry as promised, apologising endlessly for his wife's actions — and for Ron's, as evidently Bill and the twins had explained to the man that his son had been spying on Harry for Dumbledore. Harry didn't blame him; he was so busy working to support his family, it was easily missed.

He wasn't sure how Dumbledore was going to take it all, but quite frankly at this point that was fairly low on Harry's list of worries. Lately everything Dumbledore did to try and get back at Harry only made the headmaster look more senile in the eyes of the students — students who would write back to their parents about how odd the headmaster was acting these days.

The crowd for the party wasn't quite as large as it had been for Harry's birthday, nor as energetic; they were all just here to spend some time together outside of the castle's oppressive atmosphere, be with their loved ones all together before they were separated once more. George and Blaise were practically attached at the hip, commiserating with Cassius and Oliver about how much it sucked to have one of them stuck in school while the other was graduated.

It was nice, catching up with people he hadn't seen in a while. The bubble of Seren Du was wonderful, but it could feel a little isolated after a while, when he was hardly able to leave. The last few years of having Christmas at Hogwarts or Grimmauld, he was used to the holiday involving all sorts of people stopping in.

And as much as he loved Draco, it was great to spend time with people his own age who *weren't* Draco.

And as midnight drew nearer, they moved out to the patio drenched in Warming charms, ready for the fireworks show the twins had put together. Harry bet they made a killing in fireworks this time of year.

He slipped his arm around Draco's waist, a glass of champagne in his other hand. "I've never had someone to kiss at midnight on New Year's before," he remarked, grinning — the one time they might have come close, in fourth year, there were far too many people around for them to sneak away and kiss as the clock struck twelve.

“Who says I’m going to kiss you?” Draco drawled, screwing up his nose.

“If you don’t, I’m sure someone around here will,” Harry retorted, making a show of surveying his options. Draco rolled his eyes, hand slipping into the back pocket of Harry’s jeans.

“No they wouldn’t. They know better than to throw their lot in with you,” he said, lips brushing Harry’s jaw. “I’m the only one foolish enough for that.”

“Everyone ready?” Sirius called suddenly, and the room went hushed. The dog animagus waved his wand, and suddenly a timer floated overhead, glowing gold numbers ticking down closer to midnight. Harry’s grip on Draco tightened.

“Ten! Nine! Eight!” They all shouted along with the countdown, which exploded into sparkles when it hit zero — Harry turned, sealing his mouth over Draco’s, champagne bubbles still on their tongues. Overhead, fireworks whizzed and crackled and banged, but half the audience weren’t even paying attention, too engrossed in each other. Harry let the kiss go on as long as he dared while still surrounded by his friends and family, then pulled back, green eyes meeting lust-hazed grey. “I love you,” he whispered, watching Draco smile in response. His first words of a brand new year.

“I love you,” came the reply, Draco’s arm holding him close. They tilted their heads up to watch the rest of the fireworks, faces lighting up in blues and greens and reds with every flash of colour in the sky.

When the show ended, they all cheered, and the twins stepped forward with overdramatic bows. “Here’s to 1997!” they cried, raising their glasses in unison. Everyone else copied the motion, toasting to a brand new year.

“And here’s to having the people we love here to share it with us,” Sirius added in a toast of his own, sending a fond smile Charlie’s way. They were all more than happy to toast to that.

Harry sipped his champagne, then raised his glass a third time, looking around his gathered friends. “Here’s to the end of the war,” he said, everyone falling silent. “It’s going to happen this year. One way or another, things will be over by this time next year. That’s a promise.”

It was a sea of solemn faces that raised their glasses in return. “To the end of the war,” they echoed, and they drank.

“Bold promise,” Draco murmured, once they were all headed back inside. “Sure you can keep it?”

“Absolutely,” Harry said confidently, grinning.

He turned seventeen in the summer, after all.

Voldemort wouldn’t last much longer than that.

.-.-.-.

Even though reading the *Prophet* was often an exercise in extreme restraint of one's temper, a copy still arrived at Seren Du every morning. On the morning of January second, the front page declared that *Riots Against Ministry In Rochester* had occurred the night before.

Riots against the Ministry meaning that people had actually defended themselves against Death Eaters. Harry furrowed his brow at the paper, reading what he could while Snape held it. "What's all that about?" he asked, gesturing to the article. Snape lowered the paper to peer at him, smirking.

"It seems the Dark Lord's minions met their match in their attempted raid last night," he drawled. "The public are teaching themselves to fight back."

"Tonks was telling me about that, at the Longbottoms'," Sirius piped up. "Said something about a bunch of just-graduated Hufflepuffs running a sort of defence tuition business. A pay-what-you-can type deal, all hush-hush of course. But they're going around teaching people the basics — Disarming, Stunning, snapping wands. Tonks said they're telling people you taught them everything they know," he added, glancing to Harry. "I meant to ask you about it, but I forgot. You know anything about it?"

"Hufflepuffs, Tonks said?" he clarified, gaining a nod. A slow grin crossed Harry's lips. "That'll be Patrick and the guys, then. Cho said they'd gone into business together on something. They're Cedric's dorm mates," he explained, smile faltering at the memory of his Hufflepuff friend. "They were in the HA last year. I guess I made a bit of an impression." He shook his head, amazed. "That's brilliant!" It was perfect — he'd often despaired in the HA about how many average magic users had no idea how to defend themselves in a fight. Clearly, the Hufflepuff boys had been listening.

He hoped they reached more people. He hoped they kept themselves safe.

"Doesn't take much to undo fifty years of shoddy Defence education," Remus remarked ruefully, giving Harry a grin.

"Maybe the Death Eaters will think twice about going after magical families if this is what they get from it." Of course, that just meant more attacks on muggles, but those were harder — even Voldemort didn't want to expose the magical world, so he had to be careful where he chose. If his options were so limited, he would struggle to do much real damage at all.

"Between those lads and the twins' Defence Range, maybe he will indeed," Sirius agreed.

They could only hope.

.-. .

The first few days of January flew by, and before Harry knew it they were facing their final day at Seren Du before heading back to Hogwarts. It was also the most horrendous weather outside, like nature itself understood Harry's feelings about returning to the castle.

There was another full family dinner planned for the evening as one last farewell, but until then the boys were mostly left to their own devices. And, with quidditch off the agenda, that

left them with somewhat limited options. Not that they minded.

Harry lay flat on his back on the bed in Draco's room — a place they didn't often go, but if Sirius was going to be a pest he would likely check Harry's room first. So they'd set up decoy wards on that door and scurried away to Draco's, hands already tugging at clothes.

"What's the rush?" he drawled teasingly as Draco tugged at the zip of his trousers. "We should take the opportunity to go slow while we still have it." Once they were at Hogwarts, their only free time would be snatches in the evenings and the occasional weekend. There was little opportunity for lazy lovemaking in a castle full of three hundred people.

"The rush is I want you in me," Draco growled in retort, smirking as Harry's cock jumped beneath his hand. "We can do slow on the second round."

Now Harry liked the sound of that. "Well, in *that* case." He flipped them over, wriggling out of his trousers and boxers and flinging them aside. Draco's eyes darkened, and he arched up into Harry, kissing him hotly.

"While I do love having you on top of me like this," Draco panted, cutting himself off with a gasp as Harry peeled down his underwear, "I had something else in mind, actually."

Harry cocked his head in confusion. "But— you said—" They had tried it both ways, and usually their preference was for Harry to be on top.

Draco smirked wickedly. The next thing Harry knew, he was flat on his back, Draco straddling his hips. The Slytherin reached over for the vial of lube, bracing himself with one hand planted just above Harry's shoulder, his other hand between his own legs. Harry could do nothing but watch with lust-blown eyes as Draco stretched himself, pushing against his own fingers. Then, he clasped a slick hand around Harry's straining cock, kneeling up higher, and suddenly Harry realised where this was going.

"Oh holy God," he breathed, watching Draco position himself, slowly sinking down onto Harry's length. He wasn't sure where to look; at the space between them, gradually growing smaller as he pressed deeper inside his partner, or at Draco's face, painted in rapturous ecstasy. "Fuck." His hands clenched at his sides with the effort of keeping his hips still — he didn't want to move, not when Draco was taking his time to adjust, didn't dare do *anything* that might upset this glorious vision. Every centimetre more sent sparks of white hot pleasure through him — every time Draco shifted, his breath hitched. Every moan he made went directly to Harry's core.

Eventually, Draco was fully seated, opening hazy grey eyes and shooting Harry a painfully attractive smirk. "Okay?" he checked, knees splaying a little wider. Harry gulped.

"Tell me I can move," he begged breathlessly. "Tell me I can touch you. I— Draco, *please*."

Draco adjusted his position, steadyng himself, letting out another little half-moan as Harry's cock brushed his prostate. "You can move," he assured. "Just— slowly."

Harry wasn't sure he'd last long enough to do anything but. He propped his shoulders up on the pillows, just a little bit, so he didn't have to strain his neck to see. Then, with one hand gripping Draco's hip, he started to buck his hips ever so slightly. Each movement made Draco jerk and gasp, angling his body better until he was crying out in pleasure. He leant forward, bracing against Harry, pushing down with every thrust up to get deeper still. His own cock bobbed between them, dripping onto Harry's stomach, and as Draco leant forward a little more the pressure around Harry hit *perfectly*, wringing his pleasure from him with one final thrust, his whole body going tense as a bowstring as he spent inside his lover. Draco froze, watching him, and when the haze of orgasm began to fade Harry looked up; Draco was still impaled on his rapidly softening cock, his own still rock hard and flushed.

"Hang on," Harry gasped, reaching down with both hands to ease Draco off his sensitive flesh, head buzzing. Before Draco could move away, Harry dragged the blond up his chest, forcing him to fling his arms out and grip the headboard to avoid falling face first.

"Harry, what the— *ohhh*." His words were lost to a moan as Harry took Draco's length in his mouth, the Slytherin straddling his shoulders. Harry gripped his thighs, taking as much as he could manage, begging for more. Draco's movement was tentative at first, but when Harry didn't choke or protest he grew bolder, fucking into Harry's mouth — he didn't last long, his fingers tugging at Harry's hair the only warning before he arched his back and came.

Harry did his best to swallow, but some still dribbled out of the corner of his mouth, and as Draco shuffled backward the blond let out a low moan, looking down at him. "Fucking *hell*," he groaned, pupils so wide there was hardly any grey visible. "You are... *fuck*."

Harry smirked, tongue darting out to catch the mess he'd made. "Like you can talk," he retorted, voice a little husky.

Draco leaned down and kissed him, uncaring of the taste in his mouth, and for a moment Harry wondered if their second round might not be just as fast as the first. But the heat between them soon simmered, Draco pulling back and settling down on his side, legs tangled with Harry's.

"So, that was new," Harry remarked breathlessly, lips quirking. "Been planning that for a while, or...?"

Draco flushed, the colour trickling down his chest. "I've been reading one of the books you picked up at Infinite in the summer," he admitted. "It sounded... intriguing."

Harry's eyes widened. "You mean the, ah *romance* books, or...?"

Draco grew even redder. "The *instructional* one," he confessed quietly. Harry's cock made a weak attempt at an early recovery.

"Oh." He hadn't thought Draco was interested in that one. Hell, it had taken him six months into their relationship to even be up for looking at the book Harry had been given by George, and that was tame compared to some of the stuff from Infinite. "You didn't do that just for me, did you?" he asked, stomach sinking in concern. Draco scoffed.

“Did I look like I wasn’t enjoying it?” he retorted, one eyebrow arched. “Though I was *not* expecting... *that*.” He bit his lip. “Did you... like it?”

“Sucking you off like that?” Being pinned down beneath Draco, having the blond fuck his face like that? “Yeah. Yeah, I liked it.” He’d only ever imagined something like that in his more daring fantasies.

Most of the time when they were together, he and Draco stuck to what they knew. It wasn’t *boring*, by any stretch of the imagination — even the familiar things were still relatively new enough to be exciting, so much of their bodies to still learn. But some of the books from Infinite just made Harry realise how much they *didn’t* know, hadn’t tried yet.

And that wasn’t even touching on the books that talked about *kinks*.

“Well any more new things you want to try, you go right ahead,” Harry assured him, mouthing a kiss against his jaw, his magic sliding over them in a lazy Cleaning charm. “If we don’t like it, no big deal, we do something else. It doesn’t have to be hard.”

“Pretty sure it *does*, for most of the things in that book,” Draco argued, giving a pointed glance downward that made Harry chuckle.

“You know what I mean.” He slid a hand into Draco’s silky hair, admiring the line of his boyfriend’s high cheekbones. “Don’t feel like you can’t ask me for stuff like that. Worst I can do is say no.” He grinned cheekily. “Maybe we could read the book together, note down things we both like.”

“Are you trying to give me *sex homework*, you fucking nerd?” Draco asked flatly, and Harry cackled with laughter.

“I’m *saying*, that first idea of yours was *ridiculously* sexy, and I want to see what else looks good.” He pounced, pinning the Slytherin playfully. “You’re always telling me to *expand my palate*.”

“I didn’t mean like *that*,” Draco argued, rolling his eyes. Then, his humour faltered, a guarded edge to his expression. “You’re not... bored, with what we do, are you?”

“What? Merlin, no!” Kissing Draco softly, Harry stroked his hair. “Draco, love, I could just kiss you for hours and never get bored. Hell, I think you underestimate how much time I spend just *looking* at you. Neville says I have a problem,” he added, smiling lopsidedly. “I love everything we do. But new things can be fun too.” His smile softened, hand cupping Draco’s cheek. “We’re past the point where I’m worried you’ll be freaked out by any part of me,” he confessed — his scars, his body, the literal piece of the Dark Lord he’d had in his head. Draco hadn’t batted an eyelash at any of those. “I feel like that extends to my dirty fantasies about you, too. I certainly want to hear *your* dirty fantasies.” He leaned in for another kiss, loving the way Draco’s lips parted for him so easily. “We’ve got our whole lives to figure out what we like and don’t like,” he said, thinking of the little velvet box that now lived in a hidden compartment in his desk drawer. “No need to be shy about asking for it now.”

Draco's Adam's apple bobbed. "I—I suppose." His fingers trailed up the ridges of Harry's spine. "And—that whole *kissing me for hours* thing... is that an offer?" Pale blond brows rose. Harry smirked.

"It absolutely can be."

He hadn't been lying — he would never, *ever* get bored of kissing Draco. And they had hours before they were expected at dinner.

.-.-.

Taking the portkey back to school the next day felt like being forced from the most amazing dream by a bucket of cold water to the face. They arrived in Snape's private quarters, and Harry kissed Draco goodbye before heading up to Gryffindor Tower — now they were back, no one could know that Snape had been with them over Christmas. No one except McGonagall.

In the common room, everyone was staring.

"Is it true you're going out with Draco Malfoy?" Colin asked bravely. Harry chuckled.

"Yup," he confirmed, prompting a wave of whispers. "Since fourth year," he added, in case that rumour hadn't gained enough traction.

"Blimey," Colin breathed, his pale eyes as round as a house elf's.

"Is that all everyone's been talking about all break?" Harry asked in amusement. Flushing, Colin shrugged.

"Not the *only* thing. But — well, you weren't really around for us to ask about it."

That was fair. "Well, here I am," he said, spreading his arms demonstratively. "Very much in love with Draco Malfoy, who is absolutely not a Death Eater, neither is his mother. We were pretending to hate each other because his father would kill him if he knew the truth — and, quite frankly, any other questions any of you might have about our relationship are probably none of your damn business."

He saw several people redden throughout the common room; no doubt people with the exact kind of questions Harry was *never* going to answer in public.

"I've got one more question," Colin said, and Harry raised an eyebrow. The usually shy boy gave a surprisingly bold grin. "Do you think Vicky Frobisher would go out with me if I asked her?"

A surprised laugh slipped from Harry's lips. Colin was definitely a Gryffindor at heart! "I think you should give it a try and see what happens," he retorted, winking. "But fair warning; if you break our keeper's heart, our beaters may break your face."

Colin paled a little, but his smile didn't falter.

..

Harry only really had enough time to chat with Colin and drop off his trunk before it was dinner time. He found Neville in the dorms already, having arrived with an earlier portkey. He was glad to have his friend to walk down to the Great Hall with — it was just the two of them, as Ginny's portkey wouldn't be until later.

As they reached the Entrance Hall, Harry spotted a familiar head of blond hair approaching from the corridor down to the dungeons. "Oi, Malfoy!" he called, and several heads turned, including Draco's.

Despite the rumours that had been flying, half the people in the vicinity seemed to be expecting a fight. Draco's eyes glittered, and Harry didn't miss the long-suffering expression Theo shot Neville — which Neville no doubt returned. "What do you want, Potter?" Draco sneered. Harry couldn't hold his hard-eyed expression for long, breaking out into a grin.

"Sit with me?" he asked sweetly, batting his eyelashes. Draco snorted.

"If you insist," he agreed, rolling his eyes.

"Is this how the two of you are going to be, now?" Neville complained half-heartedly, walking with them into the Great Hall.

"Until Harry gets bored of shocking people, most likely," Draco agreed — he seemed entirely resigned to the prospect, but not all that upset by it. Harry knew better; he was getting just as much joy out of shocking people as Harry himself was. He was a Black, he *lived* for drama.

Not all of the students had returned yet, but most of them had. Harry was just glad he'd get to avoid Ron and Hermione for a while longer.

As he and Draco made themselves comfortable at the Gryffindor table, Harry chanced a look up at Dumbledore. The old man looked even more worn than he had before Christmas — Harry wondered how badly the curse on his arm was hitting him, now he didn't have the castle wards to bolster him. Maybe he wouldn't even last until the end of the year.

But the lack of twinkle in his eye was not due to his clear exhaustion; it had died the moment Harry and Draco had walked in, their hands linked between them.

Harry smirked to himself. Let Dumbledore think of that what he would. Harry was done hiding parts of himself for his own safety. He was stronger than that, now — stronger than Dumbledore.

It was like any other dinner at Hogwarts, chatting with his friends about how things had been in the castle while he was gone, except for the fact that he didn't have to constantly fret about how close he was sitting to Draco and whether his comments could be taken as too flirty — and that half the hall was staring at them like they were aliens.

Harry didn't know what all the fuss was about. It wasn't like he and Draco had gone from hating each other to boyfriends in the blink of an eye; they'd given the school a few months

of their friendship to get used to.

Ginny arrived partway through dinner, squeezing her way onto the bench beside Neville and greeting them all cheerfully. Several feet behind her, much less cheerful, were Ron and Hermione — they sat far up the other end of the long table, shooting the occasional glare Harry's way but mostly pretending he didn't exist.

Not for the first time, Harry thought Charlie's little outburst at the Burrow might have been a blessing in disguise; now everyone knew that he wasn't an oblivious little idiot, he might finally get some peace from their heavy-handed attempts at burying the hatchet.

As Harry reached for the water jug, a sudden hush descended over the students around him. "Mr Malfoy." Harry jumped — Snape had appeared, staring down his hooked nose at the pair of them, his cold gaze fixed pointedly on Draco's hand on Harry's back. "Ten points from Slytherin. For conduct unbecoming of your house."

He kept walking, robes billowing behind him. Even though they both knew it was coming, Harry still felt Draco flinch minutely.

Snape had to do it, had to publicly disapprove of them now they had drawn such a blatant line in the sand. His reputation depended on it.

But for him to take points from his own house, in front of the entire *school*... he'd as good as said Draco was no longer a Slytherin in his eyes. Harry's heart clenched in sympathy as his boyfriend's eyes dulled, his shoulders hunching ever so slightly. "You okay?" he asked softly, brushing a butterfly-light kiss across his cheek. Draco nodded, jaw clenched.

"Fine. It's fine."

Still, he hardly touched the remainder of their dinner.

Even when Draco and Harry had been publicly friends, there was still some kind of hope among the genuine Voldemort supporters that he could be swayed around. They treated him with respect, in case he did come back to their side. Snape was neutral with him. All that would change, now.

Draco would handle it. He was strong. But that didn't mean Harry had to like it.

They stuck around until the hall started to clear out, though all their friends could tell their hearts weren't really in the conversation anymore. On the way out, Harry paused in the Entrance Hall, tugging Draco into a firm kiss. He could feel eyes on him, but he didn't care — he didn't want Draco going to bed sad. "I'll see you in the morning," he murmured, trying desperately not to blush, knowing everyone could hear him. "I love you." He wasn't ashamed of it. He wasn't going to hide his feelings anymore.

That earned a flicker of a genuine smile. "Sap," Draco accused, squeezing his hand. "I love you. Don't forget to finish that Transfiguration essay tonight."

Harry snorted quietly. “And they say romance is dead.” Reluctantly, he let Draco go, watching him head towards Slytherin for a few moments before Neville and Ginny nudged him towards the stairs.

Only six months left of term. They could handle it.

.-.-.

They were only a week into the new term, and already Severus was being summoned to the headmaster’s office.

Wondering what the latest problem could be — privately, guiltily hoping it was the progression of the dark curse on the old man’s arm — Severus swept up the revolving stairs, stepping inside the office. Albus didn’t look in pain, more than usual anyway. He looked as weary as he always did, showing his age in a way he never had.

“Ah, Severus,” he greeted, smiling. “Glad you could make it so promptly. Please, sit.”

Severus did so, ignoring the usual offers of tea and lemon drops. “Did you have need of me for something, headmaster?” He couldn’t help but notice Fawkes’ perch was empty — when was the last time he’d seen the phoenix? It had certainly been a while...

“Of a sort,” Albus replied, clasping his hands together on the desk. “It is in regards to Mr Potter.”

Severus raised an uncaring eyebrow. “Indeed? What had the brat done now?” How much damage control was he about to have to undertake?

Albus chuckled, though his heart wasn’t in it. “It is nothing he has done. More something that was done to him, many years ago, now.” His gaze grew serious. “Have you ever heard of horcruxes, Severus?”

The Potions Master’s blood turned to ice. “The term is familiar, though I’m not sure where from,” he replied, keeping his voice even, trying not to react outwardly. Had Albus realised Harry had hunted down several horcruxes?

He put on an appropriately disgusted face as Albus explained horcruxes to him, eventually revealing that the Dark Lord had created a number of his own. “The ring I so hastily put on over the summer was one of them,” Albus told him, shaking his head. “I admit, my foolishness got the better of me with that one.”

Severus resisted the urge to snort — that was an understatement. “I appreciate this information, Albus, but I will admit I am not sure why you’re sharing it with me. Should the Dark Lord learn that you know...”

“I have faith that you can continue to keep my secrets from Voldemort, Severus,” Albus assured, smiling slightly. “This one in particular. There is, in fact, one horcrux even Voldemort himself is unaware of.” His smile faded, his eyes meeting Severus’. “It resides within Mr Potter’s curse scar, and has done since the night his parents died.”

Severus tensed, letting the shock show on his face — not shock at the knowledge, but shock that Albus was sharing this with him. “I... how is that possible?”

“I believe that due to the number of horcruxes Voldemort created, his soul was unstable enough to splinter off a fragment when he was hit with the rebounded Killing curse. In search of a host, that fragment attached itself to the only living thing in the proximity — young Harry himself.” Albus sighed, leaning back in his chair. “I became aware of the fragment as I was performing some medical scans on Mr Potter before I placed him with his relatives. That, too, is how I knew the Dark Lord was not as deceased as everyone had hoped. I took some precautions — I had hoped, as small as that fragment of soul was, it would dislodge itself as Harry grew older, and not be a problem in later life. Sadly, I fear that is not the case.”

Severus bit back a sneer; *took precautions* indeed. The kind of *precautions* that involved binding the family magics of an infant, leaving him with people who would beat every ounce of self worth out of him.

“This fragment still resides within Potter, then?”

“It is stronger than ever, I believe,” Albus confirmed, so much feigned dismay in his voice that Severus almost laughed. “I have watched Harry closely, over the years — at first, I thought he had overpowered the fragment. When he arrived here, so much like his father, and sorted into Gryffindor...”

Because of course, no one evil could ever go into the house of the lion.

“I am telling you this, Severus, because you are the only person who knows I am dying. And the only person I can trust with the absolute truth.” Albus looked him dead in the eye, and Severus instinctively raised his Occlumency shields. “In order for Voldemort to truly be gone, Harry Potter must die.”

A long, poignant silence. “I thought you liked the boy, Albus.”

“I do. Despite our recent... differences, I care for him very much.” It amazed Severus, then, how the headmaster could say that with such a straight face, like Harry hadn’t been a pawn in his game since the moment the life left Lily Potter’s body. “I wish there were an alternate solution. But I have come to the conclusion that all of my precautions were for naught, and the soul fragment within Harry is strong enough to influence him — perhaps, given time, strong enough to overtake him entirely. Turn him into a host for the Dark Lord’s remaining soul. That cannot be allowed to happen; both for the sake of the world, and for Harry’s own sake. The boy I knew would never be able to live with himself should his body be used for evil.”

The boy Albus knew was a lie and always had been, but Severus schooled his face into a grave frown. “Must he die in any particular way?”

“I had once thought that his death must occur at Voldemort’s hand, to truly destroy the soul fragment within him. A tragic event, but a necessary one. Now, however, I don’t believe it matters as much. But he must die before anyone can attempt to destroy Voldemort’s current mortal form. I am working on discovering the rest of his horcruxes — I am confident that by

the time this curse gets the better of me, I will have destroyed all but the one in Harry's scar."

Severus sneered at him. "So you wish me to end your life, and the Potter boy's?" he presumed drolly. "Anyone else you would like to add to the list, while you're at it?" Any other acts to truly damn his soul in the eyes of the world.

"I would not ask this of you if I had any other choice, Severus," Albus insisted apologetically. "And I may not need you to end Harry's life. I feel a certain level of responsibility for him — if the time comes when the influence of the horcrux within him becomes too dangerous to ignore, I shall bear that burden myself, if I am still able. I only wanted you to know in case this curse strikes me down before that chance arises."

To hear Albus so casually talk about killing a student made Severus' gut churn. "If the boy is to die before the Dark Lord, who shall strike the final blow? The Prophecy..."

"Prophecies are tricky things, Severus," Albus replied. "Not always interpreted the way you might expect. I believe the power to defeat the Dark Lord spoken of within the Prophecy is, in a sense, the horcrux; Voldemort cannot be defeated until that is dealt with, so truly that power lies with Harry."

Severus doubted Albus honestly believed that — surely he hadn't convinced himself that the full Prophecy meant Harry needed to die in order for the Dark Lord to be killed?

"I understand," he confirmed solemnly. "So once the boy is gone, once these horcruxes are gone — then anyone can defeat the Dark Lord?"

Albus' eyes twinkled, a pale imitation of his usual brightness. "I daresay even you yourself could commit the act, so to speak."

A forced smirk, as if that was all he could ever ask for. As if he would welcome the death of a *child* just to get the final revenge on one of his hated masters. "Perhaps," he agreed.

"Thank you, Severus. You are the only one I trust with this knowledge." Albus leaned forward, eyeing him imploringly. "The only one I know who is strong enough to do what needs to be done."

More like the only one whose soul was already damned enough.

Nonetheless, Severus acted like he appreciated the headmaster's faith in him, and waited to be dismissed. On the walk back to his quarters, he mentally rearranged his evening plans to spend an hour or two back home — Remus and Sirius would need to hear of this.

If Albus decided he needed to make sure Harry was killed before he himself died, they would need to protect him.

.-.-.-

If the first term of the school year had found Dumbledore hardly present in the castle at all, the second term found him *everywhere*.

The headmaster seemed to constantly pop up in the corner of Harry's vision; crossing him in corridors between classes, watching him during mealtimes — he'd even been caught strolling away from the quidditch pitch one evening, right after a practice that Harry had ended prematurely due to one of the bludgers acting particularly aggressive towards him.

Snape had warned him of Dumbledore's *revelation* that Harry needed to die, but Harry could hardly believe the headmaster was trying to kill him already.

"I think he's trying to put me in the Hospital Wing," Harry told his friends in the heir's meeting, his face grim. "He tried to trip me at the top of the sixth floor staircase earlier today." Only Harry's quick reflexes had saved him from plummeting several floors down.

The Patil twins gasped, horrified. Even Daphne looked ill.

"But why? What could he possibly gain from injuring you like that?" Anthony asked, brow furrowed.

"Maybe he wants to put the magic blocks back on me," Harry thought aloud, shrugging. "Or maybe there's some new ritual he wants to do to me. Fuck if I know — either way, he needs me alone and unconscious, I'd bet. The old man's plans are getting wilder and wilder the closer he gets to popping his clogs. Merlin only know what he's got up his sleeve these days."

"We won't let him get to you," Neville declared vehemently. Harry shot him a quick smile.

"I appreciate that. But I was thinking... if he's upping his game, so should we." A cluster of perplexed faces stared back at him. "I think we should let out the information that he put compulsions on me as a first year."

Susan sucked in a sharp breath. "Just the compulsions, or the magic blocks too?"

"Just the compulsions, for now. Telling people about the magic blocks might make it sound too unbelievable." The general trust in Dumbledore might be waning, but he wasn't sure it was that low yet. "We can even throw in that he got Ron and Hermione to pretend to be my friend, to keep an eye on me. They know that I know about that, now." If it meant the rest of the school hated them, even better.

"We can do that," Parvati assured him. "How much detail do you want to go into? Y'know, about the result of the compulsions."

"Don't say too much," Draco piped up. "If the rumours are too detailed, it'll look suspicious. Let it lie at having Harry hate all Slytherins, and trust the headmaster. The gossip mill will supply the rest."

Harry nodded in agreement — the ideas the rest of the school could come up with would likely be far more damaging than anything he could spread.

"That should be easy enough," Parvati said with a devious smile. "If there's one thing the people at this school love to talk about, it's Harry Potter."

Harry snorted; wasn't that the truth!

.-

With a plan in place, the heirs began to disperse, wanting to get on with the rest of their afternoon. Draco had promised to study with Theo and Ernie, so Harry kissed him goodbye and headed towards Gryffindor with Neville.

"Hey, Harry," Neville began, and when Harry glanced at him he stopped in his tracks, seeing how anxious the taller boy looked. "Can we— can I talk to you about something?" A blush crept all the way up to Neville's ears. "It's... kind of private."

"I— yeah, sure." Harry frowned — he thought he heard footsteps, and when he turned his head he could've *sworn* he saw the tail of bright purple robes. "Come on." Heading for the nearest Parseltongue passage, Harry hissed to open it. "Doesn't get much more private than this," he joked, once they were safely inside. Neville chuckled half-heartedly. "So, what's up?"

"I... you and Draco have been together for a while now, yeah?" Neville started. Harry blinked at him.

"...Yes?" What did that have to do with anything?

"And you... you and him, have you... y'know..." Neville stuttered, helplessly flustered, and it took a few minutes before Harry got the gist of his insinuation.

"Are you asking if we've had sex?" he asked, raising a bewildered eyebrow. Neville's face grew impossibly redder.

"I— maybe?" The blond boy covered his face with his hands. "It's none of my business, I know, but..."

"Look, Nev," Harry said, patting him awkwardly on the shoulder. "You're my best friend, and I love you, but... if you're having some sort of sexuality crisis, I don't think I'm the person to talk to about that." Ginny surely needed to know before Harry did.

Neville's head snapped up, his eyes wide. "What? No! I'm not— not that there's anything wrong with it! But I'm straight," he insisted. Harry's frown returned — if not that, then what?

Finally, Neville let out a long, unsteady breath. "I... I think Ginny wants to have sex. With me."

"*Oh.*" Harry was the one blushing, now.

"I mean, we've done... *stuff*," Neville continued, and Harry desperately wished he didn't get the mental image of said *stuff*. "And it's great, really! But she keeps dropping all these hints, and I just— I think she wants to, y'know. Do it."

"Do you not?" Harry asked, wondering if he needed to have a conversation with his pseudo-sister about consent and pressure in a relationship. Surely Fred and George had covered that

with her by now?

“I do! At least, I think I do?” Neville ran a frustrated hand through his hair. “I know I want my first time to be with her. And it’ll be hers, too, so we can figure it out together, but... I know she did some stuff with Michael, when they were together. Sometimes it just feels like she had this head-start and I’m still trying to catch up with her.” He grimaced. “Am I making too big a deal out of it? I don’t want to make her feel bad for being with Michael before me.”

This was absolutely not how Harry had expected his afternoon to go, and he wished he had been given some kind of *warning*, some time to prepare an answer.

But Neville was his best friend, and he’d helped Harry with so much. And while most of the books about sex and relationships Harry had read — which was a surprising amount, these days — were about queer relationships, he figured most of the basics had to apply to straight ones too.

“Look, Nev, if you’re really nervous about it, just talk to her,” he said, shrugging. “Ginny won’t want to do anything you’re not completely on board with. Maybe she’s dropping hints because she thinks you want it — you are sixteen now and everything. If you want to slow down, tell her you want to slow down. There’s definitely something to be said for going slow.” He grinned to himself, remembering all the fun he’d had with Draco before they’d even *thought* about penetrative sex. “It’s not a competition, no matter what anyone tells you. As long as you’re both having fun.”

“I don’t... I don’t completely want her to slow down,” Neville admitted hesitantly.

“Then I think that’s a conversation you need to have with her, rather than me,” said Harry diplomatically. “And, as usual, I have books if you need them.”

That made Neville snicker. “You’re practically a Ravenclaw,” he teased, bumping his shoulder against Harry’s. “I... thanks, Harry. That really helps.”

Harry wasn’t sure *how*, considering most of his advice had just been ‘talk to your girlfriend’, but he smiled all the same. “Anytime, mate.”

“So... you two *have*, right?” Neville checked. “You’ve been together for ages, you must have.”

“We have,” Harry confirmed, his blush returning.

“What’s it like?” Neville blurted the question before he could think better of it.

“Bit different for me than for you, I think,” Harry teased, laughing when Neville’s eyes bugged. “It’s— I mean, it’s brilliant. Best thing ever. But that’s more because it’s Draco, I think, than because it’s sex.” He didn’t have any comparison, but he doubted anything could possibly feel even half as good with anyone else.

“Does... does it hurt?” The question was far more tentative. “Some of the things I’ve heard, from the other guys... I don’t want to hurt her.”

"Nev... I'm gonna be completely honest with you here. I don't know what happens with a woman's downstairs bits and I don't ever *want* to know," Harry told him bluntly, making a face. "I— you know about like, preparation and everything, right. What about lube? Do straight people use lube?" Neville looked like he might die if Harry continued that line of questioning, so he changed track. "Surely there's someone with more knowledge than me you could ask about this. Hell, I'll even let you borrow the mirror to talk to Sirius, if you want. He's slept with people with vaginas before." Not all of them had been women, Sirius was very clear on that, but from the stories Remus had told him about Sirius' wild youth, Harry was fairly certain his godfather would have more useful advice on the subject.

Neville shook his head vehemently. "I am absolutely not close enough with your godfather to even *think* about that."

Harry frowned in thought. "What about Susan?" His taller friend stared at him. "You two are close, right? Since her and Amelia have been living with you and all. And I'm like, ninety-five percent sure her and Theo have done it." He shrugged. "She can probably help you out. Hell, definitely more than I will." Not only was it discussing sex with only one penis involved, something he had zero experience of, but it was *Neville and Ginny*, his best friend and his little sister, and he honestly might be scarred for life if he had to get too in depth on the details there.

"What if she laughs at me?"

"It's Susan," Harry pointed out flatly. "She won't laugh at you." She'd probably be delighted to impart some knowledge, and embarrass the hell out of Neville in the process. "It's that or just ask Ginny herself."

"I can't do that!" Harry was about to set in on the whole 'if you can't talk about it you have no business doing it' speech, but then Neville continued, "I don't want her thinking it's like, her responsibility to make it not hurt. She may not know any more than I do! I just... I want it to be good, for her."

Harry's heart melted, just a little bit. "Then you're already ten steps ahead of most blokes, the way I've heard Lavender and Parvati talk about it," he said wryly. "And look on the bright side — Ginny's head over heels for you, mate. Even if you're crap at it, I'm sure she'd give you another go— hey!" He dodged the Jelly-Legs jinx Neville shot at him.

He glared, and Neville glared back, and the next thing they knew both boys were laughing, leaning into each other from the force of it.

Harry was glad, truly, that Neville felt comfortable enough to come to him about those things.

But if he ended up having a similar conversation with Ginny, he wouldn't need Dumbledore to kill him off — the force of his blush would manage that just fine.

....

As always, thanks to Parvati and Lavender, the rumours about Dumbledore using compulsion charms were flying around the school before the end of the week. And Dumbledore was

furious.

Privately, Harry thought that was what fuelled the rumours so quickly — the only thing that would make Dumbledore so visibly mad was them being *true*, and everyone knew it.

Of course, there were attempts at retribution. Only days after the first rumours began, more began to crop up — rumours that Harry had gone Dark, that he'd spend his Christmas break with Voldemort himself, making plans to take out the headmaster and rule the wizarding world together.

Harry wasn't as bothered by those rumours as Dumbledore probably hoped he would be. Hell, similar things had been floating around for *months* already; the people who thought that were always going to think that, and he was done with trying to convince them otherwise.

They were in a minority that was getting smaller and smaller with every day that Dumbledore acted strangely.

Still, all of the whispers were starting a sort of civil war within the school — a stand-off between those on Dumbledore's side and those on Harry's, a clear divide amongst the students. Ron and Hermione were the guiding force behind the Dumbledore-supporting side, countering the accusations of false friendship with angry diatribes about how they'd tried their best to be friends with Harry but he'd started pulling away from them after Voldemort returned, leaning more and more towards Dark magic and pureblood ideals.

Had anyone been paying attention, they would have realised that half the stuff they used as evidence — the rift in their friendship, Harry's relationship with Draco — had all begun *before* Voldemort's resurrection. But, well; details like that were rarely necessary in such juicy gossip.

The teachers, to their credit, were trying to stay out of things. Likely because they thought they'd be fired if they supported Harry publicly. He knew which ones were on his side, though — he could see it in their eyes, the ones who thought he was evil. Likewise, he could see the solidarity in those who stood by him.

He hadn't seen much of Hagrid, lately. Harry hoped that wasn't on purpose. They were both busy, after all.

Through all this, classes continued. The HA continued. Harry's training sessions with Snape continued.

And, to keep him sane, his late night rendezvous' with Draco continued. Perhaps a few more nights than they really should, considering how much work Harry had to do lately, but... school sucked, and the only real peace he could get these days was in his boyfriend's arms, as disgustingly cliché as that was. An hour or two with Draco before bed was sometimes the only thing stopping him from hexing every nosy little shit who muttered insults under their breath when he walked past them.

Harry was on his way back from one such encounter, crossing the fairly short distance between the Room of Requirement and Gryffindor Tower. His step was light, his head still

hazy from the force of the orgasm Draco had wrung from him. They had almost fallen asleep together, there — only a pointed nudge from the castle itself had prompted him to drag himself out of Draco's arms and back towards his common room.

The castle was still nudging him, in the back of his mind, and he scowled at the sensation. "I'm going, I'm going," he muttered quietly, jaw cracking in a wide yawn.

As he did, he didn't notice the shadowed figure behind him, shrouded by magic. And he didn't notice the jet of spellfire headed towards him until it was too late.

Chapter End Notes

Aren't y'all glad this is a midweek update ;)

Chapter 94

Finishing up a rather late breakfast — after Charlie had gone to work, Sirius had decided he needed ‘five more minutes’, which turned into almost an hour — Sirius was just considering his options for the day, when he felt something warm vibrating in his robe pocket. He frowned — what could Harry want at this time of the morning? Surely he was in class... he racked his brain, trying to remember if his pup had a free period first thing on a Wednesday. His stomach churned uneasily as he dug out the mirror, hoping it was just a friendly chat and not an emergency.

Only, the face that appeared in the mirror’s glass was not his godson’s. “Neville?” Sirius greeted, surprised — the churning of his stomach grew fiercer. The Longbottom heir was pale-faced and anxious.

“Lord Black,” he replied, only a hint of a waver to his tone. Sirius had told the boy to call him by his first name a dozen times, but he didn’t think this was the time for another reprimand. “Sir. I think Harry’s missing.”

Sirius’ heart sank. “What do you mean?”

“He wasn’t in the dorm when I woke up this morning,” Neville told him. “And he didn’t show up to breakfast.”

“And you’re sure he didn’t just sleep over with Draco and decide to have a romantic breakfast in the kitchens together?” The hope in Sirius’ voice was plain, but Neville shook his head.

“Draco was at breakfast. I asked him, he said he hasn’t seen Harry since last night. And, the castle — the castle isn’t happy. It feels... wrong.”

“Fuck.” The panic began to rise, and Sirius shoved it down. Freaking out wouldn’t help anyone. “Fuck. Oh, Merlin. I— where’s Dumbledore?”

“He was at breakfast, didn’t even seem to notice Harry was missing.” Neville looked as suspicious of that as Sirius felt. From the amount of attention the headmaster had paid to Harry lately, him *not noticing* was a tell in itself.

“Neville, do you know about the Marauder’s Map?” Sirius pressed, relief hitting him when the boy nodded. “Do you know where Harry keeps it?”

“I— he usually has it on him, honestly,” Neville said, face falling. He disappeared for a second, and Sirius heard rummaging. “It’s not in his nightstand. Nor is the cloak.”

“*Bollocks,*” Sirius hissed. Of course, the one time it would be useful for Harry *not* to have those things on him, they were shit out of luck. “Neville, listen to me.” There was only one option left, now.

The boy's hazel eyes were alert as they met Sirius' .

"I need you to go to Professor Snape," Sirius told him, watching him gape. "I promise you, he's not what you think he is. He's on our side."

Neville bit his lip, visibly conflicted. "I... I heard Amelia say he saved her life, when the Ministry fell."

"He did. He's the only damn adult I trust at that school these days — and if you knew what we were like as students, you'd know how big a deal that is," Sirius added with a bitter twist of his lips. "Go to Snape. Tell him about Harry. If anyone there can help you, it's him. I'll... I'll raise the alarm here." He'd figure it out, somehow. They would figure it out.

Harry wouldn't be missing for long, not on his watch.

"Keep the mirror with you!" he added, before Neville could cut the connection. "Be safe, kid."

Neville nodded, and the mirror went blank.

Sirius barely resisted the urge to throw the fucking thing across the room.

He hurried into the main hall, heart pounding in his chest. "Remus!" he yelled, pushing magic in his voice to carry through the whole house, tugging at the wards in his mind to track the man down. Was he even home? He could have gone out. Narcissa was out, he knew that much — over at the Manor, dealing with her secret stash of refugees. Was Remus at the Pottery?

How long had Harry been gone?

"Remus!" he called again, more urgently this time. He started up the stairs, and halted when he saw the werewolf come out of the library.

"Padfoot, what's the matter?"

"Harry's missing." Sirius explained the conversation he'd just had, watching the blood drain from his best friend's face.

"Neville's an heir, same as Harry is," Remus pointed out. "If Harry's still in the castle, he'll find him."

Sirius wondered which of them the werewolf was trying to reassure. "And if he's not in the castle?"

Remus' face hardened. "Then it's up to us." His eyes flashed gold for the briefest moment. "Call Tonks and Kingsley. I'll go talk to the twins, see if they might have anything to help."

Sirius nodded, but before he could turn away Remus had him bundled in a crushing hug. "*We will not lose him, Sirius,*" he declared strongly. Sirius gripped him tight in return, just for a moment, hoping desperately that could be true.

.--.

Of all the people to knock on the door of his office in the middle of a school day, Severus would not have placed Neville Longbottom high on the list.

The boy was lucky Severus wasn't teaching — and that he hadn't interrupted anything important.

Then again, looking at the determined set of the Gryffindor's jaw, Severus wondered if that might be half the problem. "Harry Potter is missing," the boy declared, not a hint of the usual trembling stutter he spoke to Severus with.

The Slytherin's heart stopped.

"And why should I care?" he drawled dispassionately, stepping back and beckoning the boy inside. Longbottom hesitated only for a moment, but screwed up his courage and followed his most hated professor, only whimpering a little when Severus shut and locked the door.

Gryffindors, honestly.

"I— Lord Black told me to come here. Said I could trust you," Longbottom said, hands screwed into fists at his sides. "Harry's missing, I don't know how long for. He wasn't in the dorm, wasn't at breakfast. I... I know he's not in the castle." The boy's gaze dropped evasively.

"The wards confirmed that?"

Hazel eyes widened. "You know about the wards?" Severus nodded impatiently, and Longbottom seemed to bolster. "Then, yeah. The castle is worried. If he were here, I'd know about it. And—I asked Luna and Hannah, at breakfast. They can't feel him anywhere, either."

That was... concerning, to say the least. Thinking quickly, Severus scrawled a note on a piece of paper, tapping it with his wand. It vanished in a flash of silver light. "Can Hogwarts show you what happened?" Severus wasn't sure what the heirs' connection with the castle was like, but he knew Harry had talked about being *shown* things before.

Longbottom closed his eyes, face screwing up in concentration. "It's... foggy. Distorted. And dark. I can tell where he is — in the seventh floor corridor, not far from the Room of Requirement. But I can't properly see what happened. It's like—it's like I'm being blocked, or something."

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose — that did not bode well for any of them.

A knock on the door startled both of them. Gesturing for Longbottom to stand out of view, just in case, Severus dropped his wards and went to open it. Luckily, it was just Draco. His godson's face was pale, his lip slightly swollen where he'd been worrying it between his teeth. "Is this about Harry?" he asked urgently.

Severus let him into the office, where he did a double-take at the sight of Longbottom. “You still can’t find him?” Draco pressed.

“He was with you last night, yes?” Severus asked his godson. It was a testament to how serious the situation was that Draco didn’t even blush.

“In the Room of Requirement,” he confirmed, nodding. “We both left just after midnight. I went through the shortcut down to the dungeons, he left through the main door.” His grey eyes were fearful as they met Severus’. “Uncle Sev, what if it’s Death Eaters? I know there are loyal students in the school. What if… what if *He* has Harry?”

Severus placed a hand on his godson’s shoulder, squeezing gently. “If the Dark Lord had a plan to kidnap Harry Potter, I would know about it,” he assured confidently.

“Sir—“ Longbottom cut in hesitantly, “what— what if they’re not working to You-Know-Who’s plan? What if they decided to… y’know. Take initiative?”

Severus snorted. “Death Eaters are not known for their *initiative*, Mr Longbottom. Young Death Eaters most of all.” He didn’t know all of the loyal students within the school, but he knew enough to know that they did not have the brains nor the skill to catch Harry unawares, not even if the boy was… distracted. Not after all the training Severus had put him through.

“Unfortunately, gentlemen, I believe we’re looking at something worse than Death Eaters,” he told them grimly. “There’s only one person who can manipulate the school wards in a way that even an heir cannot fight back.”

The two boys shared a look of slowly dawning horror.

Albus Dumbledore had finally reclaimed his Chosen One.

.-. .

The world returned to Harry in fragments, fuzzy around the edges and ringing in his ears.

He was horizontal. Not on the floor — something soft. His limbs were splayed, a tightness around his wrists and ankles that grew tighter when he tried to move.

He was tied to a bed. Blinking away the fuzziness, he craned his neck, confirming the suspicion. A plain double bed, pale grey sheets, ropes thick with magic wrapped securely around him, connected at the other end to the sturdy wooden posts at each corner of the bed.

His attacker had let him keep his glasses on. How *kind* of them. He looked around — the room was nondescript, with cream-coloured walls and no features but the door directly opposite. No portraits, no wardrobe, not so much as a side table. There was a candle bracket on each wall, but that didn’t do Harry much good.

Beyond that, everything was… muffled. Like Harry was in a jar with the lid on, trapped away from the rest of the world. He couldn’t feel his connection to Hogwarts, outside of a faint persistence in the very back of his mind.

He could barely feel his *own* magic.

That, more than anything else, set his heart racing in terror. He closed his eyes, trying to steady his breathing, to look inwards at his own magical core. It was like trying to swim through cement. The very attempt made him exhausted, slumping back against the mattress. It wasn't *gone*, he could feel at least that much. It was just... blocked. Restrained, much like he himself was.

When the door opened, Harry wasn't surprised at who greeted him.

"Ah, Harry, my boy. You're awake." The headmaster swept into the room, face the epitome of a kindly old grandfather — except for the threat in his eyes, of course.

"Where am I?" Harry asked, glaring at the man. Dumbledore smiled, conjuring a chair to take a seat beside the bed.

It wasn't the *room* that blocked magic, then. That was good to know.

"Somewhere safe," Dumbledore assured, making him scoff. "I'm sorry for the somewhat... unorthodox method of getting you here, but I did not think you'd be willing to come quietly."

"*Unorthodox*," Harry repeated cynically. "Kidnapping, you mean."

The old man's beard twitched as he frowned. "It is for your own good, my boy. You will come to understand that, soon." Then, he smiled, a somewhat *unhinged* light in his eyes. "I must say, you gave me far more than I expected, bringing you here like this."

Harry's stomach turned. "What do you mean?" Fear gripped him. "What did you do to me while I was unconscious?" Had he stolen Harry's magic? Linked himself to it, like a parasite, like he once had the castle wards?

"Oh, nothing sinister," Dumbledore said with a chuckle. He reached into an inside pocket of his robe, pulling out a folded pile of silky fabric — Harry's invisibility cloak. "Merely, I did not expect you to be carrying this little marvel. My, if only I had known what it truly was, when it was last in my possession. I should never have given it back to you — no matter how necessary it was for my plans. Letting you sneak about the castle, hidden even from *me*. I should have known then what it was..."

Harry stared at him, utterly bewildered. It was an invisibility cloak — of course Harry was hidden beneath it? That was the whole point!

"Now that I know the *truth*, now I have the knowledge of the Peverell family secret. I have all three artefacts." He smiled, the expression sending a shiver of unease down Harry's spine. "I have become the Master of Death, my dear boy," he declared in a reverent tone. "A lifetime of searching, and you held the final piece all along. So you understand why I had to claim it back."

He'd gone mad. Dumbledore had truly lost it — *Master of Death*, what did that even *mean*? What did it have to do with the Peverells? And Harry's cloak?

Dumbledore leaned forward, and Harry wished he could scramble away, do anything to defend himself, but he was tied to that *stupid* bed! He was utterly helpless, alone in a room Merlin only knew where, with a madman who had kidnapped him for—what, exactly?

He flinched when Dumbledore's good hand patted him on the arm. "I wish things had gone differently, my boy," the headmaster said mournfully. "Truly, I do. Had you not gotten so... headstrong, perhaps this all could have been avoided."

"Had I not broken all your compulsions, you mean," Harry spat, glaring. "Had I stayed your good little Gryffindor *pet*, ready to sacrifice myself for the greater good — and your own damn glory?"

Dumbledore didn't react, merely sighing. "Those compulsions were for your own protection, Harry," he insisted. Harry wondered if he truly believed that, if he had genuinely convinced himself he was still doing the right thing. "There is a great evil within you. Within your scar. I had hoped, when I placed that magic on you, that it would be enough to help you shed that evil. To grow stronger than its influence, to remain firmly within the Light. Sadly, that is not the case. I'm afraid we have no other choice, my boy — you must die, for the evil to truly be vanquished. You must die for Lord Voldemort to be killed. The Prophecy demands it."

Harry goggled at him, but the headmaster didn't notice, continuing his sad stare. "I wish it did not have to be this way. I wish you had been given the chance to face your destiny in battle, as a true Gryffindor should," Dumbledore told him apologetically. "But you have long since proven that your own selfishness — the influence from the evil within you — will win out. I cannot trust you to do the right thing anymore, Harry. I must take that burden upon myself." He gripped Harry's forearm tighter. "Please, forgive me."

"Bullshit!" Harry argued. "I already know about the horcruxes. I know all about the *evil* you think is within me. It's gone, now — the goblins removed it this summer. Just like they removed all your compulsions, and the blocks on my family magic, back before my third year. It's not the *influence of evil* that's pulled me away from you, it's your own damn actions! You're the one who manipulated me, who influenced me — you changed my entire personality to fit your schemes, to turn me into the perfect little pawn — your weapon!" Dumbledore's fingers dug in painfully. "The only selfish one here is you, Dumbledore. Raising a child for slaughter just to make yourself the hero once again."

To his surprise, Dumbledore just chuckled, shaking his head. "You're just like him, you know," he said — Harry doubted he meant James Potter. "He always thought he knew absolutely everything; that only his viewpoint was the truth, and everyone else was just lying, manipulating him. I can see now his soul has tainted yours on a deeper level than I ever imagined possible."

"Tom Riddle's soul is nowhere near mine," Harry snarled. "The only taint on it was yours, and I freed myself from that long ago."

"It saddens me that you think so, Harry," Dumbledore murmured. "But that just proves even further that I must do what is necessary." He finally released Harry's forearm, stroking his beard. "The difficult decisions have often fallen to me — it is a burden that most would not bear, but it is necessary nonetheless. Once I have dealt with you, I can find the remaining

horcruxes and finally rid the world of the darkness that has plagued it for so long now.” His smile turned sharp. “Maybe then everyone will stop believing those silly lies of yours and be properly grateful for everything I’ve done for them.”

He paused, chuckling to himself, glancing at Harry. “The thing they don’t tell you about power, my boy, is that once you have it, the people who gave it to you often have no idea what it truly takes to keep it. They think you can solve all of their problems, without the faintest idea of the work you do just to keep them alive and well.” He chuckled again, shaking his head. “But it is no matter.”

The headmaster leaned back in his conjured chair, expression turning thoughtful. “It surprises me to hear you speak of horcruxes — though perhaps it shouldn’t, considering how long you have been one. How long has he been whispering in your mind, I wonder?” He surveyed Harry sadly. “You never stood a chance, did you, my boy.”

Finally, he stood, pulling his wand from his pocket. Harry tensed. “I must return to the castle for a while — no doubt someone has noticed your absence. I must calm the students and direct the search to the appropriate places.” With a wave of his wand, the chair vanished. “Perhaps, if I play this carefully, your tragic demise at the hands of Death Eaters will be enough for Horace to finally tell me the truth of what he knows.” He pursed his lips. “How the man doesn’t see that we’re running out of time, I’ll never know. He’s always been a fool.”

Abruptly, he seemed to remember where he was, that he had company. He smiled that grandfatherly smile at Harry, raising his wand. “I am sorry about this, my boy, but I cannot risk you doing anything reckless before I can return.”

As magic began to gather around him, a stream of Latin pouring from his lips, Harry could do nothing but lie there and scream.

.-.-.-.

Neville didn’t care that he was missing classes. His teachers would understand — they, too, knew that Harry was missing by now. *Everyone* knew that Harry was missing by now.

After he’d left Snape’s office, Neville had gone to the Room of Requirement, asking for the Wardstone, hoping against hope that with his hands on the crystal he might be able to get a better view of what happened. Hogwarts obliged, but there was nothing more it could offer — just that darkened vision of Harry getting hit in the back with a Stunner, falling like a sack of soil.

That vision would haunt Neville’s sleep for a long time, after this.

He called Lord Black — *Sirius* — again, to tell him he’d gone to Snape as asked. Sirius was with Tonks and Kingsley Shacklebolt, which instantly made Neville feel better. He’d told them, what Snape said, about it being Dumbledore rather than Death Eaters. They looked like they’d come to that conclusion all on their own.

Neville felt so useless — he wasn’t powerful like Harry, or connected like Draco. He didn’t know half of what really went on in Harry’s life these days, only the things it was safe

enough for him to know. Snape had told him to keep his head down and look out for anything suspicious. How was that possible, when *everything* could be suspicious? Ron and Hermione not looking remotely bothered by Harry's disappearance was suspicious. Lisa Turpin and Tracey Davies laughing about it was suspicious. The continuation of daily Hogwarts life was suspicious.

How could they all be expected to just keep going to classes as if nothing was wrong??

Finally, it was lunch time, and Neville immediately went to Hannah at the Hufflepuff table. Luna was there too, and half their friends, all with anxious and drawn faces. "Still no sign of him?" Susan asked Neville, and he shook his head.

"There's people on the case. Outside the school. The usual crowd," he told her, not willing to use names in such a public space. Susan nodded, brow furrowing.

"That's good. Merlin... how could this happen? Harry's usually so *careful*. You've seen what his reflexes are like!"

Indeed, it had become a bit of a game for a while in the HA, trying to catch Harry off guard. Sending spells at all moments, from all angles — every time, Harry was too quick on the draw with a shield or just ducking out of the way. Neville knew he'd trained for it — now, thanks to Draco, he knew it was Snape who'd done most of the training — but that meant it had to have taken a hell of a lot of power to take him down in one spell.

"He was a bit preoccupied," Neville did point out; Draco had admitted that they'd both been sleepy and satisfied when they'd parted ways, that Harry might not have been at his most alert.

But Neville had seen Harry go from dead asleep to awake and fighting within seconds before. With the castle's awareness around him, even being addle-brained from orgasms wouldn't leave him that unguarded.

Then again, this was Dumbledore they were talking about. Even with the heirs taking the wards, he was still headmaster of Hogwarts, still connected to the castle. And he had been doing shady business around the school for longer than all four of the heirs had been alive.

"Have you Seen anything, Luna?" he asked in an undertone, but the Ravenclaw shook her head sadly.

"There's too many wrackspurts," she told him. "Things are so shrouded. So many paths it could take."

That, more than anything else, made Neville feel sick. A future so uncertain... it didn't bode well for Harry at all.

"Budge up." He turned — it was Ginny, and she had Draco with her, the blond's face drawn. "You need to eat something. Both of you."

Neville looked down at the empty plate in front of him, then guiltily meet his girlfriend's brown eyes. "I can't stomach anything, Gin."

She huffed, and in a few moments there were two sandwiches in front of her — she nudged one towards Draco, then practically forced the second into Neville's hands. "Eat," she repeated firmly. "Starving yourself won't help Harry any."

She was right, and they both knew it. The sandwich tasted like cardboard, but Neville ate it anyway, his mind firmly elsewhere.

He hated this part of being Harry Potter's friend. The waiting. At least last year, when shit went down, he'd been able to go along, able to help and be useful and stand at Harry's side. This was like the third Triwizard task all over again — staring at a maze, worry bubbling in his gut, knowing Harry was in danger but not able to do anything about it.

Neville finished his sandwich, and was just about to ask Draco if he'd heard anything else, when all of a sudden the tension in the hall seemed to rise abruptly. He looked up, and saw red.

Dumbledore had just entered the hall, looking entirely unbothered, that damned genial smile on his face like there was nothing wrong at all. He strolled between the house tables as if it were any other day — as if he hadn't just kidnapped Neville's best friend.

Before he knew it, he was on his feet and stalking towards the headmaster. "Where is he?" he demanded, drawing his wand on the man. Dumbledore paused, brows rising — like Neville was a mild surprise, and not a legitimate threat.

He didn't know what Neville could do. He didn't know what Harry had taught him.

"Mr Longbottom, I'm quite sure I have no idea what you mean," Dumbledore began, but Neville wasn't cowed.

"Harry," he spat. "What have you done to him? I know you took him!" Everyone was staring at them. A vein in Dumbledore's temple twitched.

"You're mistaken, Mr Longbottom — perhaps Mr Potter has merely left of his own accord? His behaviour has been rather... erratic, this year. It is entirely likely he has decided the castle is no longer where he wishes to be." He frowned sadly. "I know how upset you must be by his betrayal, Mr Longbottom, and I would be happy to offer you a friendly ear. Or perhaps Madam Pomfrey; she understands how difficult grief can be to process."

Neville growled, and it was only the headmaster's quick reflexes that prevented his silent stunning charm from hitting. "Really, now!" Dumbledore scolded, frowning at him. "Attacking your teachers, no matter how upset you are, is not acceptable in this school! Ten points from Gryffindor, Mr Longbottom, and detention with Professor McGonagall tonight."

"I don't care about detentions!" Neville shouted. "I just want to know where you've taken Harry! I know it was you — you've wanted him out of the way ever since he broke out of your compulsions!"

“That is *enough*, Mr Longbottom,” Dumbledore scolded, his booming voice sending shivers down Neville’s spine. “Control yourself, and cease spreading the lies Harry Potter has told you.”

He strode past Neville, his lurid blue robes swishing as he went, and while Neville desperately wanted to throw another hex he knew it would be no good.

He turned away, eyes trailing over the students who had watched the entire exchange. They stared back, silent, knowing.

No one would believe that Harry had left Hogwarts of his own accord. Not after everything he’d done to protect it — not after everything he’d suffered within these walls without breaking. And *especially* not without taking Draco with him.

Dumbledore might have given him detention, but the damage was done. Neville could see the last vestiges of trust in the headmaster die a hundred times over, fading away in every pair of eyes looking back at him.

He straightened his shoulders, nodding decisively. He didn’t care what it took, how many detentions Dumbledore might put him in.

He would find Harry if it killed him.

Chapter 95

Albus Dumbledore was a very intelligent man, but he had been underestimating Harry Potter for most of the boy's life, and that didn't seem to have changed.

Harry lay on the bed, ropes still holding him down, his eyes closed as he sank through the thick, crushing barrier between himself and his magical core.

Or, rather, between his magical core and the outside world, the ability to actually *use* that magic.

He wasn't sure how long he'd been unconscious, after Dumbledore had left. There was no window, no way for him to tell the time. It could have been days, for all he knew. His stomach didn't ache yet, but he'd faced starvation before — he knew he could go at least a couple of days before he'd really start to feel it.

He'd woken with a strong, unquestioning faith in Albus Dumbledore, and a burning desire to do whatever the man bid. Even through the thick blanket keeping his magic locked up tight, he knew that sensation wasn't right, squirmed at the constriction of the brand new compulsions, stronger than anything he'd felt before. So strong it took a long, long time for him to even notice there was something wrong.

Harry dreaded to think what might have happened had Dumbledore returned while he was in that state, pliant and trusting with every truth he knew about the headmaster turned to insignificant chatter in the back of his mind.

But his magic was strong, now. His awareness of himself even stronger. He recognised the compulsions for what they were, spent what felt like hours trying to slough them off his magic. Had to use all his strength of will to dive deep within himself despite the barriers in place — whatever blockers Dumbledore had put on him, it stopped him using magic externally, stopped him blasting his way to freedom. But the magic within him, the magic trying to dig tendrils into his mind and whispering for him to trust his headmaster — that was a whole different matter. That was something Harry could work with.

And once those were out of the way, he could work on the rest.

He was sweating with exhaustion, straining everything he had within him. His muscles ached, his head pounded, but none of it mattered. His only awareness was his own magic, pushing as hard as he could against Dumbledore's vice grip. Harry had no idea how much time he had before his captor returned; every second was vital. Sure, if Dumbledore returned soon Harry could pretend to be under the compulsions, hope the old man let his guard down long enough for Harry to make a move. But that was relying on far too many chances.

Namely, the chance that Dumbledore wouldn't immediately kill him, determined to rid Harry of *the evil within*.

He could do this. He was far more powerful than Dumbledore realised, with the Slytherin family magic within him — the *full* family magic, awakened by the connection between the heirs.

Dumbledore, on the other hand, was old and dying and not nearly as strong as he once had been.

Harry could do this.

He pushed even harder, feeling things start to *shift*, like water pressing against a dam with a single crack in it. All that pressure, focused on the weakest spot, and eventually... *it breaks*.

The candles on the walls streamed with fire as Harry's magic surged out of him. At the same moment, the door slammed open — Dumbledore stood there with a thunderous expression, his wand raised. "How?" he gasped, gaping at Harry. Harry just smirked.

In an instant, his form twisted, shrinking down and sprouting fur — the ropes around him might be magical, but they still fell loose to the mattress when his skinny fox limbs slipped through them. He jumped off the bed, becoming human once more; his animagus form was good for subterfuge, but right now he needed to fight.

His wand was still in its holster, invisible to all but Harry, and it shot out at the twist of his wrist, smacking into his palm.

"Impossible," Dumbledore murmured, making Harry laugh.

"Not hardly," he retorted, ducking the spell sent his way and shooting one back in return. "You're not as strong as you think, old man."

He danced to the side, trying to draw Dumbledore in closer. He had to get out of there. He'd used up so much magic just breaking the spells on him, he didn't have much left for a proper duel.

As soon as Dumbledore stepped further into the room, Harry barrelled past him, putting up a shield at his back — stronger than anything they were taught in schools, enough to block even the dark hexes that Dumbledore was sending his way. The headmaster was not holding back; he wanted Harry under his control, or dead in the process.

Harry wasn't a fan of either of those options.

They seemed to be in a small cottage; at the end of the hallway was a cosy living room, and Harry's eyes widened at the sight of the front door. Then a spell seared past his temple, and he cursed, whipping around and firing a sickly yellow Compression curse in return. Dumbledore's eyes narrowed.

"And you say you haven't fallen to his influence," he said. Harry scoffed.

"It's no worse than what you've tried to hit me with," he taunted, gaze flicking between Dumbledore and his way out.

“You’re making a mistake, Harry,” the headmaster insisted, charming the curtain ties to try and wrap around Harry’s wrists. Harry burnt them to cinders, snarling. “You must accept the sacrifice you’re destined to make. For the sake of your loved ones, if nothing else. Whatever Tom has promised you, he’s lying.”

Harry couldn’t believe Dumbledore was still so stuck on the idea of Harry being warped by the horcrux in his head, having some sort of *alliance* with Voldemort because of it. Was he so arrogant, so blinded by his own actions, that he truly thought the only way Harry would turn against him was if he’d gone Dark? Not just because he was pissed the man had been *controlling him* since he was a baby? Had left him with the Dursleys, tried to separate him from the few people who genuinely loved him?

Dumbledore might have been a great man, once, back when he’d first fought Grindelwald. But he’d lost that long ago, in his search for *more*.

“He hasn’t promised me anything,” Harry spat, edging closer to the door. The Marauder’s Map, entirely blank, was on a table nearby, and he whipped out a hand to grab it. “But I’ve promised *him* death, and I can’t do that if you kill me for nothing. The horcrux is gone — all the horcruxes are gone. Barring one or two.” He didn’t need Dumbledore knowing the specifics, lest he do something foolish. “I’ve done more for this war in the last year than you’ve done in the last *decade*, and I will end this. And then I’ll end you, too. Everyone will know the truth of what a manipulative, selfish, *dangerous* person you really are. Your legacy will be nothing but ashes and spite.”

He grinned at the rage in the headmaster’s blue eyes, dodging the spell fired his way — straight towards the door, which opened under another strong blast of his magic, so strong it almost made his head spin.

Severus always told him that fury was a person’s worst enemy. It made them sloppy, impulsive. It seemed even the glorious Albus Dumbledore was not immune to such flaws.

Harry ran through the open door, stumbling on weak legs, clumsy as the adrenaline burning through him finally began to run out. His magic was barely a sputtering flame within him. But as he crossed the line of the wards around the property, felt them tingle on his skin, he hoped it was enough. He thought of home, turning on his heel, and with a sensation like being turned inside out and a crack as loud as a gunshot he was gone.

He hit grass, and fell to his knees. It was dark, but a faint sliver of sunshine brushed the trees around him — sunrise. He’d been gone more than twenty-four hours.

There was a shout, his name maybe, and footsteps. A hand on his shoulder, amber eyes glowing in the low light. Harry smiled. “Remus,” he rasped, reaching up to grasp the man’s cardigan. His shoulder burned with the effort. “Was Dumbledore. Got me. Wants me dead.”

“Harry, what happened? Are you hurt?” Remus kneeled in front of him, but Harry’s brain finally decided it had had enough.

The world turned sideways, and Harry was out before his head hit the ground.

.--.

Remus stared at the boy in the bed before him. Sleeping — or unconscious — the blanket pulled up over his bare chest, several thin pink lines tracing across his dusky brown flesh.

Harry was lucky. Whatever he'd done, wherever he'd apparated in from, he'd been so close to magical exhaustion he'd splinched himself to high hell. Chunks missing from his arms, his legs, his sides — only that damned Potter luck had kept him from losing anything important.

He'd been lucky, too, that Severus had been at the house for the night, the pair of them headed back out for another day of searching — Severus to the school, Remus to talk to Aberforth Dumbledore and see if he knew where his brother might be hiding away. Any later and Harry would have laid there all morning and bled to death. Much earlier and he'd have done the same all night.

So many things could have gone wrong; so many ways he could have lost his cub. Remus swallowed back a sob, squeezing the bony hand wrapped securely within his own.

The door creaked. He looked up, something in his chest easing at the sight of Severus sweeping in, black teaching robes billowing out behind him, The Slytherin's dark eyes trailed over the unconscious boy, lips pursing in a worried frown. Then he turned to Remus, gaze softening. "No change, then?"

"Not so much as a twitch," Remus reported. Two long strides had Severus across the room, standing at Remus' side. The werewolf leaned his head against Severus' hip, shoulders slumping. "I just want him to be okay, Severus."

"You and I both," Severus agreed quietly, his hand settling on Remus' shoulder. "Word has reached the school — of Harry's return, and Albus' betrayal. The headmaster's office has been emptied; he's fled, it seems. In and out before anyone even knew to look for him."

Remus scowled. "Fucking coward."

"Quite." Severus' long fingers squeezed his shoulder, sliding up to stroke the back of his neck. "But at least we no longer have to put up with him. He will never set foot on Hogwarts grounds again — Longbottom and his compatriots have promised that much."

That cheered Remus up a bit — Severus had told him all about Neville standing up to the headmaster at lunch the day before, even going so far as to trying to hex him. Harry would be proud of his friend, when he woke up.

If he woke up.

He shook the thought off — Harry was stable, they'd healed his injuries. He only had the magical exhaustion to recover from, and that would come with time. He would wake up.

He leaned further into Severus' side, burying his face in the soft wool of the man's robe, inhaling the scent of potions ingredients that always lingered on his partner. Severus stood as

strong as always, holding Remus up, never faltering. He had to be just as exhausted — more so, even, after the magic he'd expended keeping Harry alive.

"Where's Sirius?" he asked absently, arm winding around Severus' leg.

"Spreading the word amongst the Weasleys," Severus replied. "He promised he would not go off on his own in search of revenge. Let's hope he has not persuaded one of those red-headed idiots to do so on his behalf."

Remus snorted weakly. He opened his mouth to reply, but his breath caught in his throat.

Harry's hand had tightened around his, just a bit.

He sat up, eyes intently on his cub, looking for signs of wakefulness or distress or *anything*. "Harry? Harry, love, can you hear me?" Beside him, Severus tensed. The pair of them waited — Harry shifted ever so slightly, his lips curling in a faintly pained expression. Remus ignored his partner casting diagnostic spells, gaze fixed hopefully on the closed eyelids behind wire-framed glasses, watching them twitch until they eventually fluttered open, revealing confused green eyes.

He saw the moment of panic, felt Harry's hand clench around his. "It's okay," he soothed. "You're safe. You're home. We've got you, cub."

Harry's gaze flicked towards him, tension draining from his shoulders. "Hurts," he said, grimacing.

"Yes, I'd imagine it does. Drink this," Severus instructed, pulling a vial from his pocket and holding it to Harry's lips. The Gryffindor boy drank without hesitation, the pain potion flooding his system and bringing a relieved smile to his lips.

"Thanks, Sev," he murmured, and Remus hid a smile at the faintly taken-aback look on his lover's face — hardly anyone dared call him Sev, these days. "What happened?"

"We were rather hoping you'd tell us, actually," Remus said, thumb stroking the back of Harry's hand. "Neville called Sirius on the mirror yesterday morning — he said no one had seen you since the night before, and they were worried. He knew you weren't in the castle, so we searched everywhere; every known residence of Dumbledore's, every connection we could think of, every lead we dared follow with the Ministry under Voldemort's control."

"You apparated in to the wardline just before eight this morning, told us that Dumbledore wanted you dead, and passed out," Severus revealed. "You'd splinched yourself in eight different places, you foolish boy."

Harry grimaced again. "Explains why I feel like I've been sent through a wood chipper." He craned his neck, looking down at himself. "I was only gone a day, then? Good. That's— that's good."

Remus' stomach clenched; how long had he thought it had been. "Cub," he started softly. "Can you... will you tell us what happened? What he did to you?" The longer he sat there

imagining it, the worse it got in his mind.

Pain flickered across Harry's face. "Help me sit up," he requested. Eagerly, Remus did so, piling up the pillows and bracing Harry as he shuffled up the bed. "I... I was out of it for most of the day, I'll be honest. But I'll tell you what I remember. And—and then I need to go back to school."

"Harry, you need to rest—"

"I need to see my friends," Harry insisted stubbornly. "I need them to know I'm okay. I'm fine, I'm just tired and a bit sore. I can rest at school." He reached up a hand to rub at his face. "I need to go back, Moony. I—I can't let him win."

His heart clenched fiercely in his chest. This boy... he'd already dealt with so much, and he still got up fighting.

Lily and James would be so very proud of their son.

"Once you have told us everything," Severus drawled, "then we shall see if you can remain awake long enough to get dressed. *Then* we will consider returning you to school."

Harry grinned at them both, and Remus knew then that he would absolutely be escorting the determined little idiot back to school before the day was up.

God, what he wouldn't give for his cub to just get a *break*, for five minutes.

.-.-.-.

As soon as Harry let go of Ceri's hand when they arrived in Snape's office, he was crushed in a tight hug, the scent of Draco's aftershave tickling his nose and turning him to jelly in his boyfriend's arms. "Don't you dare scare me like that again, Scarhead," Draco growled, lips pressed to his temple. "Fuck. I thought you were dead!"

Harry swallowed tightly — he'd thought the same, for a while there. "I'm okay," he promised instead, pulling back to give Draco a soft, tender kiss. "I'm back. It's fine."

"It's *not* fine." Harry's head snapped up in surprise — Neville was there too, glaring at him. "Do you have any idea how worried we all were?" The tall Gryffindor squeezed his way past Draco, giving Harry a brief hug of his own. "Swear to Merlin, you're not allowed to go anywhere on your own anymore." The relief in his hazel eyes was clear, and Harry chuckled lightly.

"If you want to wait outside the Room of Requirement while I'm with Draco, by all means, be my guest," he drawled teasingly. "But people will talk."

Neville snorted. "Git." He squeezed Harry's shoulder. "Are you okay? Are we taking you to the Hospital Wing?"

A look of disgust flashed across Harry's features. "Merlin no. Dinner's still going, right?" It had taken him long enough to convince the two overbearing fusspots he called his godfathers

that he was fine to go back to school. Only Snape's assurance that he would keep a stern eye on Harry and make sure he didn't get up to any shenanigans kept them from coming to Hogwarts with him!

Harry was fairly sure that between Snape, Draco and his friends, he wasn't likely to be able to do much as take a piss by himself without someone trying to help.

He knew it came from a place of love, but it was going to get old *very* quickly if they kept it up.

After a nod of approval from the Slytherin professor, the three boys left the office, taking a castle-provided passage to make it look like they were coming to the Great Hall from upstairs; there would be far too many questions if Harry arrived from the dungeons. Snape was still keeping cover as a Death Eater, after all.

"Harry's back!"

"Look, it's Potter!"

"He's alive!"

All through the hall, shouts of Harry's name went up, all in varying levels of surprise and awe. Harry grimaced to himself; the rumours that were likely to come from this little escapade were going to be *ridiculous*. Already people thought him some sort of super-human; now he'd have to admit he sort-of duelled Albus Dumbledore and lived.

He barely made it ten feet in before he was surrounded by his friends, all of them skidding to a halt just shy of actually hugging him, curtailed by Draco's glare. "Give him space," the blond muttered, and Harry rolled his eyes.

"I'm fine," he said, kissing the boy's cheek. Then he raised his eyes to the rest of the group. "I'm fine," he repeated, louder. "Not allowed to use magic for a day or so, but fine." His core was recovering nicely, Snape had assured him. By Monday he'd be totally back to normal — he wouldn't even have any scars from his splinching.

"Are you actually fine or just pretending because *Merlin forbid* Harry Potter show weakness ever," Ginny cut in sharply, rolling her eyes.

"You can come with me to get checked out by Pomfrey in the morning if you want?" Harry offered, shrugging.

"I think I will." Only then did the redhead's stern expression crack, and she darted forward for a quick hug. "Good to have you back, Harry."

"Thanks, Gin."

"What happened?" Parvati asked, then blushed brightly as all eyes turned to her. "Sorry. You don't have to tell us."

"No, it's fine. I was going to," Harry assured. "Just — let me sit down, first?"

He was all too aware of the entire school watching him; he only wanted to have to tell this story once. Relaying it to Remus and Snape had been bad enough. So, with that in mind, he sat on top of the Ravenclaw table, his feet on the bench, his body half propped up by Draco at his side. The blond thrust a plate of shepherd's pie in his lap, giving him a pointed look. Harry could eat and talk, he supposed.

"I was walking back to Gryffindor late on Wednesday night. After curfew, sorry professors," he added with a wink towards the blatantly eavesdropping staff table. A few people giggled. "I was tired, so I wasn't really paying attention. Next thing I know I'm getting a high-powered Stunner to the back."

He told the enraptured crowd everything he remembered — glossing over the specifics of horcruxes and the weird *Master of Death* thing, just saying that Dumbledore kept insisting there was evil in his scar and he needed to die to get it out. He made it clear that the headmaster had admitted to the compulsions, with his reasoning that it was a 'precaution' to stop Harry going evil. He also, finally, confessed about the blocks on his magic. That revelation caused more than a few horrified faces in the crowd; those who understood exactly what it would mean to block the family magics of someone like Harry.

"His original plan was to keep the blocks up and then release them while I was fighting Voldemort — kill me, kill the Dark Lord, end it all. Probably kill everyone in a thirty-foot radius, too, but... I don't think Dumbledore really cared about those kinds of consequences, anymore," Harry said with a shrug. "When he realised I'd broken the blocks, I guess he decided he had to kill me himself."

"That's barbaric," someone whispered, their voice carrying over the shocked silence in the hall. Harry's lips twisted wryly.

"So now everyone understands why I've been ignoring the headmaster all year, yeah?" he joked, earning a few weak chuckles.

"Why didn't you say something sooner?" came a bold call from the Gryffindor section of the hall. Harry raised an eyebrow.

"Would anyone have believed me?" he retorted. "Half of you thought I was mad anyway." A lot of people ducked their heads abashedly. "It doesn't matter, now. Dumbledore's out of Hogwarts, and he's going to stay that way." There was no way the headmaster would recover from this. Harry wasn't going to let him.

"What happens now?" someone asked loudly. "Dumbledore was the only reason You-Know-Who stayed away from the school!"

That sparked a flurry of worried mutters, but Harry didn't falter. "If Voldemort thinks the school is vulnerable now that Dumbledore's gone, he should remember that I just duelled Dumbledore and won," he said plainly. "We don't need Albus Dumbledore to protect us. We can protect ourselves."

He looked down at his left, where Luna sat on the bench, her pale eyes intent. She nodded, ever so slightly. Harry smiled. "More than that, Hogwarts can protect itself," he added. "The

castle has woken the heirs for the first time in centuries.” He smirked, eyes flashing. “And for all Lord Voldemort calls himself the heir of Slytherin, only one of us has the family magic running through our blood.”

He flicked his fingers, and — much like at the end of year feast — all the drapes in the Great Hall turned green and silver, replacing the school crest with the Slytherin crest. Gasps rang through the room.

Then, Hannah scoffed. “Stop showing off, Potter,” she scolded, getting to her feet. With a flourish of her hand, half of those drapes were black and yellow, flying the badger rampant.

“Both of you are ridiculous.” Neville waved his arm, bringing the Gryffindor banners into the mix. Amused, all three of them stared expectantly at Luna. She giggled, clapping her hands together, completing the set — all four houses were represented equally, as they should be.

“This is fun!” she enthused.

You could have heard a pin drop. Harry looked to his fellow heirs, chin tilting in a slight nod; they knew what they had to do. He got off the table, taking Luna’s hand, Neville and Hannah joining them as they walked towards the staff table.

“Minerva McGonagall,” Harry called, and the woman sat up straighter in her chair. “You stand as deputy headmistress of Hogwarts school. Due to the unsuitable nature of Albus Dumbledore to continue his position; we, the heirs of Hogwarts, entrust our school into your protection. You have served the castle well for many years, and we know you will continue to do so for many more. For the benefit of your students, not for yourself.” He grinned at his housemistress. “Do you accept, Headmistress McGonagall?”

McGonagall sat there for a moment, speechless - a first for the Scottish witch. When she regained her senses, she stood, bowing to them. “I am honoured to accept, and vow to do everything within my power to protect the inhabitants of Hogwarts school, to see them safely through their education and prepare them for life to follow.”

A spark of magic shuddered through Harry, through all four of them, into McGonagall — connecting her to the wards of the school. And, more importantly, disconnected Dumbledore for good. At once, the drapes all furled up again, and when they unrolled they were back to their usual black, proudly displaying the Hogwarts crest. A school united once more.

Hogwarts had accepted the appointment. Minerva McGonagall was the new headmistress.

As a cheer went up around the hall, particularly loud from those dressed in red and gold, Harry watched McGonagall blink, no doubt startled by how intimate the connection to the castle truly could be. “It takes a bit of getting used to,” he told her, and her eyes narrowed in his direction.

“And how long exactly have you been getting used to it?”

He laughed, winking. “Only since Hannah turned seventeen,” he assured. “As far as the castle is concerned, one of us of age is as good as all of us of age.”

She shook her head in faint amazement. “Just when I think you’ve run out of ways to surprise me, Potter.”

He laughed again, louder this time — and swayed, his shoulder bumping Neville’s. His taller friend steadied him with an arm around his waist. “That’s enough for you for one day, then,” he declared, voice lightly chiding. “Pretty sure even castle-magic counts as magic that you’re not supposed to be doing.”

Harry wanted to argue, but his vision was starting to swim, his blood feeling sluggish in his veins. Maybe he had overdone it a little bit.

“You disaster of a wizard.” That was Draco, as affectionate as he was deeply unimpressed, and Harry smiled when he half leaned, half fell into his boyfriend’s embrace. “Come on, up to bed with you.”

“Mm, as long as you’ll be there too.” This whole damn problem had started because Harry couldn’t stay the night in the same bed as Draco; to hell with that, now.

He gave a vague wave to the people who called out to wish him goodnight, letting Draco lead the way out of the hall. The blond poked him gently in the side. “Go on, then, give us a shortcut.”

Harry grinned, nudging the castle in the back of his mind. Hogwarts was more than happy to oblige — he thought it still felt bad for not doing more to warn him about Dumbledore lurking in the dark. He tried to send reassuring thoughts in its direction; the castle couldn’t be blamed for that. Dumbledore was a tricky little bastard at the best of times.

One staircase behind a tapestry magically took them up seven whole flights, spitting them out behind the tapestry of the trolls doing ballet. The Room of Requirement was already waiting for them, looking exactly like Harry’s room back at Seren Du. Harry let out a long sigh as he collapsed onto the bed, the strain finally starting to catch up with him, pounding at his temples. “I’m going to feel like shit in the morning,” he announced.

“Good thing you promised Ginny you’d go to Pomfrey, then, isn’t it?” Draco replied, unsympathetic, even as he pulled Harry’s shoes off his feet. Harry undid his Gryffindor tie with clumsy fingers, feeling almost drunk as he tried to help Draco undress him, the blond patient and gentle even as the worry returned to his grey eyes. Draco stripped himself quickly, tugging back the duvet and crawling into bed in just his underwear. Harry rolled over, claiming the blond like his own personal teddy bear, burying his face in the curve of Draco’s neck.

“For a while I thought I’d never have this again,” he admitted in a heartbroken whisper. “Never hold you again.”

Draco’s arms wound around him, pulling him impossibly closer, like the two of them were trying their best to merge into one being. “You’re stuck with me, Potter,” Draco reminded fiercely. His voice was thick — was he crying? Harry couldn’t tell. “You promised me that.”

The lights dimmed of their own accord, and the only sound was the steady breathing of the two boys, entwined together like they would never again let go, slowly drifting off to sleep.

.-.-.

McGonagall's first act as headmistress was to cancel all of Friday's classes, so everyone could adjust to the events of the week. None of them were going to argue with that. At breakfast — after a brief detour to the Hospital Wing, where Madam Pomfrey confirmed Snape's findings on Harry's health — Harry sidled up to the staff table, where the new headmistress was reading a scroll with one hand and eating toast with another. "Is there anything myself or the other heirs can do to make things easier for you?" he asked, earning a keen-eyed look from the woman.

"I daresay you've enough on your plates as it is," she returned. "Not to worry, Mr Potter — there has been enough disruption to this school year that I feel a little more cannot make things much worse." Her lips quirked ruefully. "Though for future disruption, a warning would be appreciated."

Harry laughed. "I'll do my best, but no promises." In response, McGonagall just clicked her tongue and shooed him away, back to where Draco sat with their friends. The mood in the hall was somber, almost shell-shocked. Even those who knew the truth of Dumbledore had not expected him to fall so far so fast.

"I wonder how long it'll take for word to spread," he mused, glancing around as the morning post arrived. It was barely a handful of owls these days, most of which were *Prophet* delivery birds. Since returning after Christmas, the whole population of the school seemed to have agreed that they were buckled down for the long haul, a small pocket of sanctuary away from the disruption of the rest of the world. Letters to loved ones were risky, now.

The news that Albus Dumbledore had kidnapped and tried to murder Harry Potter would likely make it out of the castle sooner rather than later, but with practically everyone outside of Hogwarts either in hiding or under Voldemort's thumb, it may not make it much further than that.

"Likely just rumours, until after the war," Draco pointed out. "Even if the *Prophet* did write anything, no one would believe it these days." He sent a disparaging glance at Susan's copy of the paper; she was the only one of their group who bothered, insisting that *someone* needed to be aware of the enemy's propaganda.

"It's a shame we can't spread word some other way," Harry sighed. "I can't—I don't want this getting swept under the rug as just more war bullshit." A lot of questionable actions would be forgiven in the name of wartime, and he worried most of Dumbledore's crimes would end up under the same umbrella. Even with the old man dying from a dark curse, the idea of people heralding his name and idolising him long after he was dead made him sick to his stomach.

Albus Dumbledore deserved to be thought of with disdain, posthumously.

Better yet, he deserved to be forgotten. A footnote in the passage of history. At best, a tale of warning about how power could corrupt even those who seemed the most trustworthy of souls.

“Over Christmas, Fred and George were talking about setting up a secret Wireless station,” Ginny volunteered. “But I don’t know if they’ve managed. Whether they could do it safely.”

That was an interesting idea. Harry had mostly given up listening to the Wireless these days — all of the stations were either pretending everything was fine, or broadcasting from mainland Europe with very little understanding of just how dire things were in the UK.

“Daddy will have to go into hiding soon anyway,” Luna piped up, in her usual dreamy voice. “The time is coming. He won’t mind one last rebellion in the *Quibbler*.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “Are you sure? I don’t want to put him in danger.” He’d never met Luna’s dad, but she spoke so fondly of him, and he was the only family Luna had left these days.

She smiled and nodded. “It will be worth it.”

“If he needs somewhere to go,” Harry said, meeting Luna’s gaze seriously, “I can get him in and out in less than an hour.” It would only take a quick message to Sirius and Mr Lovegood would be safe at the Pottery.

“Thank you, Harry. But I think Daddy is going to take a nice long trip to Finland. He’s been wanting to get a close look at the Peikko for a while now anyway.” She smiled sweetly — a smile that brightened when Daphne strolled over, dropping a kiss on her girlfriend’s lips.

“I’m going to get some air, since we don’t have classes. Care to join me, hun?”

“Bring me whatever you write before dinner, and I’ll make sure it gets to Daddy safely,” Luna said to Harry, before slipping her hand into Daphne’s and skipping from the hall.

Harry turned back to Susan, who already had a quill and parchment out, an eager light in her eyes. “Guess I know what we’re doing today, then,” he mused. Turning to Draco, he gave an apologetic half-smile. “You’re welcome to go find something else to do, love. This is probably going to take most of the day.”

“If you think I’m letting you out of my sight for even a second, you’re more of an idiot than I thought you were,” Draco replied without hesitation. Susan wasn’t quick enough to mask her giggles. Harry just sighed, swiping a quick kiss across Draco’s cheek.

“Your loss. Let’s find somewhere more private, then, shall we?”

There was a lot of work to do in a very short time.

.-.-.-

Despite Draco’s insinuation that he was just there to make sure Harry didn’t get into trouble again, he ended up being a huge asset to the process — as Lucius Malfoy’s son and heir, he

knew a lot more than either of them about political machinations and how best to uncover them.

Between the three of them, they managed to write out a fairly large exposé of Albus Dumbledore's true crimes, as they pertained to one Harry James Potter — with the note that a full legal case against the ex-headmaster, including *other* crimes, was being assembled by Harry's lawyer and Amelia Bones.

"Will your aunt appreciate us naming her like this?" Harry asked warily. Susan gave a sharklike grin in response.

"Oh, she'd kill me if we didn't," came her cheerful reply. "She's safe as houses at the Longbottom's, and it'll be one hell of a feather in her cap once we're back to having a Ministry that actually cares about these sorts of things. She'll want to be at the head of the whole affair." She reached in with her quill, correcting a sentence regarding Dumbledore's belief that Harry had evil in him due to his brush with the Dark Lord. Harry was most wary of including that part — he didn't want Voldemort to catch wind of it and start making assumptions. Even though there was no longer a horcrux in Harry's scar, if Voldemort grew concerned... he might decide to go and check on the rest of his precious treasures.

Much better to paint it as the ramblings of an old man who decided to condemn a toddler to death before he reached maturity, just because he'd decided that was the way the world must be.

"Your lawyer is already in hiding, isn't she?" Draco checked, a small frown worrying at his lips. Harry nodded.

"Called Sirius about it just before Yule." It was the reason Vicky had stayed at school over Christmas — not that she seemed to have minded, considering how close her and Colin had grown over the break. Mr and Mrs Frobisher were safely at one of the smaller Black properties, a cottage off the coast of Devon. There were one or two others hiding out there with them, as far as he knew. With their known connection to Harry from the Rita Skeeter debacle, no one had wanted to risk them.

"Good. Then go ahead and name them, it'll give it more clout."

Harry's eyes were drawn to the cobalt blue tail of Draco's quill, resting lightly against the swell of his lower lip. It would be so tempting to knock it out of the way, replace that touch with his own mouth. As Draco leaned in to write something else, Harry's gaze trailed lower, down to where the sleeves of his green silk shirt were rolled up to his elbows, revealing porcelain-pale forearms dusted lightly with fine blond hair. His right hand held his quill, his left splayed on the table beside it, and for a while Harry fantasised about the ring in his room back home, how it might look sat on that fine-boned hand.

"—rry. Harry?" He snapped back to attention, blushing slightly under Susan's knowing gaze. "Come on, Harry. We just need to finish this up, then you can ogle your boyfriend all you like."

That made Draco whip his head around to look at Harry, almost—surprised? Harry just shrugged unrepentantly at both of them.

“Why are you ogling me, I’m not even *doing* anything,” Draco muttered, rolling his eyes, a faint flush rising in his cheeks. Harry winked.

“You’re pretty, I can’t help myself. And you’ve got your sleeves rolled up. You know how I feel about that.”

“His sleeves?” Susan snorted. “What are you, a Victorian maiden, going faint at the sight of bare skin?”

“Look, I can appreciate a man with great forearms, alright?” Harry defended. “Let me stare at my boyfriend in peace, honestly. Give that over.” He held out a hand for the parchment they’d been using, brow furrowing as he read through what they’d written so far.

“I think this ought to do it.” Any more detail and they risked exposing one of the many things Harry would prefer to keep hidden. “God, this is weird. We spent so long trying to hide this stuff...”

“Feels strange to just put it all in the open like that,” Susan agreed. “But Dumbledore kind of forced your hand.”

“Understatement,” Draco muttered derisively. “You’re happy with it, though, Harry?” His face was earnest, concerned. “None of that has to go public if you don’t want it to. I’m sure Amelia has plenty of other things to pin on him once the Wizengamot can safely reconvene.” He placed a hand — the hand Harry had just been daydreaming about — on Harry’s knee, squeezing gently.

Much like his previous articles for the *Quibbler*, Harry knew he just had to say the word and the whole idea would be scrapped. No one was going to force him to air his personal trauma for public consumption.

He shook his head. “Dumbledore might have targeted me, but his actions impacted all of us. I don’t want to risk even the chance that he might worm his way out of this one — and that means piling as much shit on him as possible.” Amelia might be able to find plenty more to bury Dumbledore with, but Harry doubted much of it would be quite so cut and dry as what had been done to him, nor half as impactful. Especially once he killed Voldemort and became the darling of the wizarding world once more.

Giving the statement one last scan over, he set it back on the table. “I’m happy with it if you two are.” He paused, smirking. “And I’m not just saying that so I can go back to ogling my boyfriend.” As he spoke he twined his fingers with Draco’s, bringing the blond’s hand to his lips. Susan just huffed.

“One day the two of you will get over this honeymoon phase thing you’ve got going, and the rest of us will be able to spend time with you without wanting to vomit,” she declared bluntly, making Harry laugh.

"I dunno, Sooz — it's been over two years. I think this might just be us forever," he said, only half-joking. The Hufflepuff's only response was a despairing groan, and her chair scraping stone as she got to her feet.

"If we're done with the article, I'm out," she said, throwing her hands in the air. "Don't forget to take that to Luna, alright?"

Harry murmured an affirmation, gaze fixed on Draco's — only once the redhead was out of the room did the two boys start laughing.

"We're not *that* bad, are we?" Harry asked. Draco's answering look was fond.

"Darling, we're *exactly* that bad," he informed his boyfriend.

"Oh. Well, I'm not sorry. You're gorgeous and I like looking at you."

The blond boy preened, smirking in satisfaction. "You're not so bad yourself," he returned magnanimously, leaning in for a languid kiss. "Besides, Susan's just jealous. The only kind of PDA Theo understands is offering to murder her enemies for her."

Harry snickered — the quiet Slytherin wasn't *that* reserved, just a bit... aggressively bloodthirsty, sometimes.

Theo and Susan were alike in many ways, except she preferred to go for the metaphorical jugular while he went right for the literal one. Harry felt very sorry for any politician that dared attempt to stand in their way.

And very sorry for any of his friends that were hoping he and Draco were going to get less sappy in future — Harry had *zero* intentions of reeling that in, and with a role model like Sirius Black, he was fairly certain he couldn't even if he tried.

.-.-.-.

Since he'd promised his friends and family that he would take it easy in the wake of his kidnapping and near-death, Harry declined the afternoon invitation from some of the quidditch team to go flying with them, instead lying on the sofa in Snape's private quarters, working on plans for the HA while Snape and Draco brewed together. Then, an hour before dinner, he promised both of them he would do his level best to not get kidnapped again, and set off to find Luna.

With the castle pointing the way — the heirs were always the easiest to find — Harry discovered the blonde girl out by the edge of the lake, her bare feet dug in the muddy bank despite the fact that it was still January and there was snow on the ground. "If you get frostbite, Daphne is going to kill me before Voldemort can," he said, and Luna giggled.

"I put on a Warming charm," she assured. "Sometimes I just like to feel the earth between my toes."

"If you like." Harry shrugged, then held out an envelope containing the article he and Susan and Draco had spent all morning working on. "It's all in there. Your dad can tweak it a bit if

he wants, but... that's all the important facts.”

“I doubt Daddy will need to edit anything. You've always been a very compelling writer.” Luna tucked the envelope safely in her cardigan pocket.

“Thanks, Luna. I hope everyone who reads it thinks the same.” There was still a very stubborn, very real part of Harry that was convinced everyone who read it would think he was a lying, attention seeking little brat.

That part of him usually spoke in Dolores Umbridge’s voice.

“Your voice is going to change the way that thousands of people view the world,” Luna told him, a confident Otherness to her voice. “Not just in this article, but in many things.”

Something uneasy squirmed in Harry’s stomach. He leant back on his hands, the wet dirt cold under his palms. “I just want to kill a Dark Lord and play quidditch,” he sighed forlornly. “I don’t want to change the world. That’s for people like Susan. All I want is to have a world I’m happy to live in.”

“And that’s why you’re the best person to help change it,” Luna insisted with a secretive curl of a smile. “You’re not like him, Harry. You’re not like either of them.” Her eyes fairly glowed in the evening light. “Don’t let his poison stop you from doing the right thing. Trust your instincts.”

It was like a hand reached in between his ribs, gripping his heart tight. Harry coughed out a startled laugh. “Can never get anything past you, can I, Lu?” There was no use hiding from a Seer. “You’re sure, this isn’t too much?” The last thing in the world he wanted was to get into the habit of using his influence as the Boy-Who-Lived to sway public opinion around to his way of thinking. He didn’t want to become like Dumbledore. Or worse, like Tom Riddle.

“Presenting people with the truth and allowing them to make up their own minds is never too much,” Luna assured. “It’s not your fault the truth leads to only one sensible way of thinking.” She smiled, covering Harry’s hand with her own. “If you can’t trust yourself, trust that none of us who love you will let you turn into the thing you’d hate.”

Her words echoed through Harry’s mind, quashing the cruel, Umbridge-like voice into silence. The tension in his shoulders eased, a long breath escaping him.

She was right. He had plenty of people to keep him grounded. He would be alright.

He was only sixteen, after all. Even if most days he felt three times that age. He still had plenty of growing to do.

Chapter 96

Things were very different, with Dumbledore gone.

The heirs adjusted the wards as soon as Harry was cleared to do magic again, making sure the former headmaster couldn't set a single foot on Hogwarts grounds. Luna sent off the article for her father, assuring it would likely be out fairly soon — one last issue, and then Xenophilius Lovegood would pack up his printing press and hide out until the storm had passed.

By Monday, Harry was more than ready to get back to classes and start doing something *normal* again. Draco had finally stopped watching him like he'd disappear if the blond turned away for more than a few seconds.

He could have done without their mutual decision to go back to their dorms at night instead of sleeping in the Room of Requirement, but it was necessary. If only to stop giving Neville a tiny heart attack every time he woke up and saw Harry's bed empty.

It was a relief, to walk into the DADA classroom after Ancient Runes. Finally, someone who wouldn't treat him like fucking glass.

At the front of the classroom, Professor Snape sneered at Harry in contempt, dark eyes flashing. Harry smirked back. He might be 'taking it easy' on his magical core, but there was still a lot of wiggle room there. A lot of ways Snape could take out his *annoyance* at Harry's continued existence, though they both knew Voldemort would have thrown a fit if Dumbledore had taken away his opportunity to destroy his fated enemy.

It was a mildly exhausted, but much more relaxed Harry who slumped into a seat at the Gryffindor table for lunch. Neville slid in beside him, looking shell-shocked. "That was *brutal*," he whispered, making Harry chuckle.

"He doesn't mean it," he said quietly, grinning. "It's fun."

Neville shot him a look that said he thought Harry had lost his mind, but didn't question it.

Potions after lunch was the opposite. Slughorn was bending over backwards to accommodate Harry, practically going so far as to brew his potion for him. "Just do whatever you feel up to, Harry, my lad!" the man kept saying, smiling slightly anxiously every time.

It would have been supremely annoying, had Harry not decided this was a perfect chance to get some answers.

When the class ended, Harry took his time packing up, brushing a kiss across Draco's cheek and murmuring that he'd follow in a moment. Draco caught on quickly, though still didn't look thrilled about leaving Harry alone with their teacher.

Maybe he hadn't *quite* stopped watching Harry like he'd disappear. But they'd get there.

“Can I help you, lad?” Slughorn asked when it was just the two of them. Harry perched on the edge of one of the worktables, thinking over his next words carefully. He’d only get one shot at this.

“I... I had a question, sir,” he started tentatively. “About— well. About something Dumbledore said when he...”

Slughorn paled behind his moustache. “Indeed? Something you think I can help you with? Not, say, Professor McGonagall?”

Harry shook his head. “He said... he was going to kill me and blame it on the Death Eaters. And then he said something about that prompting you to ‘finally tell him the truth about what you know’.”

“Oh.” Slughorn inhaled sharply, one hand flying out to brace himself on his desk. “He, ah, said that, did he?”

Harry fixed his features in a politely bewildered expression. “Do you know what he means, sir? He said that we were running out of time... what does he think you know?” He turned the full force of his plaintive green eyes on the man. “Is it something important?”

He tried not to fidget, as the silence stretched between them. This was the tipping point. This was where Slughorn either dismissed it as the ramblings of an insane old man — or Harry finally got some answers.

Slughorn sighed, running a hand over his balding head. “I never wanted it to come out like this,” he confessed. “A mistake of a much younger man, drawn in by a startlingly bright student of mine.”

“Tom Riddle,” Harry guessed, and Slughorn’s lips quirked.

“Indeed. You know who he became, I suspect?” Harry nodded. “Yes, well. These awful truths have a way of catching up to a person — remember that, Harry, when you get to my age.”

Harry was patient, watching Slughorn as the man’s eyes filled with the haze of nostalgia. “Tom was such an incredible young lad. Top of every class, liked by most students, absolutely adored by his teachers. Except Albus — he managed to see what the rest of us couldn’t.”

A sneer fought to take over Harry’s mouth, but he forced it away; how much of that was Dumbledore’s *insight*, and how much was him pushing young Tom Riddle away due to his dislike of Slytherins, and his distrust of those who could become more powerful than he was.

How much of Voldemort was Dumbledore’s creation, after all?

“The standard Hogwarts curriculum was child’s play for Tom, you understand. Much like I’m sure it is for you, eh, my boy?” Slughorn added with a chuckle, which faded with an awkward croak as he realised who he was comparing Harry to. “What I mean is, he often did

his own research about forms of magic not commonly taught in school. And, as his housemaster, I was often the one he came to with questions on such things.”

Harry held his breath, not daring to interrupt in case it knocked Slughorn back into his shell. “One day, after one of my little suppers... Tom asked me about a rather obscure piece of magic he’d read about in a book. Dark, dark magic. Magic I was horrified he’d even *heard* of.”

Immediately, Harry knew what that was. “Horcruxes,” he whispered, and Slughorn flinched.

“You know about them, then?” he asked, voice wavering. Harry nodded. “I suppose you’d have to, considering...” The Potions Master shook his head. “Albus is a very persuasive man, you know. He wormed it out of me that I’d told Tom about them. Of course, I told him I’d shut Tom down and sent him packing!” He chuckled bitterly. “My greatest shame, Harry, is that one conversation with a fifteen year-old boy. Had I truly done what I told Albus I’d done, perhaps the world would not be where it is today!”

“He would’ve found the information elsewhere, sir,” Harry said gently. “People like him always do.”

Slughorn looked up, attempting a weak smile. “Kind of you to say so, my boy. And perhaps true. But perhaps not.” He sighed. “Nothing I can do about it now, though, is there?”

“So... what happened, when Tom Riddle asked about horcruxes?”

“Truly, Harry, I thought his questions were all academic,” Slughorn whispered. “Boys his age, of his ability — it’s not unusual for them to be drawn to the darker side of magic. Particularly the Slytherins. Ambition does not always follow morality, I’m sure you understand. But Tom was a good lad — I never... I didn’t think. Even after he graduated, when the whispers started rising... I truly thought he had dismissed that type of magic when I warned him away from it.”

The old professor shook his head mournfully. “It wasn’t until the night your parents were killed that I even thought of the possibilities. I spent years telling myself to stop worrying, stop assuming the worst. I almost believed it, too. And then he came back.”

When Slughorn met Harry’s gaze, it was with haunted, watery eyes. “This may not surprise you, Harry, considering what you must know by now. But when Tom Riddle asked me about horcruxes, he was not satisfied with the idea of only creating one.”

Harry’s breath hitched, but not from shock. “How many?” he pressed, hoping against hope that he would finally have a confirmation, an answer. Some relief. “How many did he want to make?”

“Tom was fascinated with Arithmancy,” Slughorn said, and it would have sounded like an entirely different conversation had Harry not known where it was leading, his heart in his mouth. “The way numbers could change the flow of magic. And by then, he knew that seven was the most magically powerful number...” The man trailed off, voice shaking too much to speak the rest aloud. Harry leaned in closer.

"Sir, this is really, really important," he said quietly. "When he spoke of the number seven — did he mean seven horcruxes, or seven soul pieces?"

Slughorn gaped at him soundlessly for a moment, then swallowed. "Soul pieces," he rasped. "He only mentioned soul pieces. I — you truly think he did it, then?"

When Harry nodded, Slughorn let out a gasp like a wounded man. "I know he did, sir. But if he only made six... that's very good news for us."

"*Only,*" Slughorn echoed, choking on a laugh. "I suppose six murders were nothing compared to the rest he's done." He reached out, gripping the front of Harry's robe. "Please, Harry, do not think poorly of me for my mistake, terrible though it may have been. I didn't know. I *couldn't* know. He was only fifteen!" There was a wildness in Slughorn's eyes that alarmed Harry, and he put his hands over the man's pudgy fingers.

"It's okay, sir." How long had Slughorn been carrying this weight, this knowledge?

How long would he have kept it quiet, a bitter voice muttered in the back of Harry's mind.

If the Order had had this information back in the first war, when so many capable fighters were alive...

No. He couldn't think like that. They were still headed by Dumbledore, then, and the old man would have been just as tight-lipped on the subject as he was even now, determined to be the one to save everyone else.

But if Slughorn had taken the knowledge to a curse-breaker, to Gringotts...

Harry could go mad, thinking over the possibilities, the what-ifs. Looking at Slughorn, he wondered if the old professor hadn't done just that.

"Can you kill him, Harry?" Slughorn breathed, grip tightening. "Knowing what you know, what I've told you — can you truly destroy him? Is it... I could rest easier, knowing I may have absolved myself, just a little. Knowing there is a chance for someone to right the deep wrong I began all those years ago."

"I can do it," Harry said, not an ounce of doubt within him. "I'm a lot more prepared than Dumbledore ever thought I was. When the time comes, I can kill him."

Slughorn stared at him for such a long time Harry began to feel uncomfortable, the man's fingers still tight around his robe. Then, slowly, the professor released his grip. "Your mother was one of my favourite students, you know," he said softly. Eyes glassy, looking at Harry but not *seeing* him. "You're so much like her."

Harry smiled slightly. "So I've been told, sir."

Suddenly, Slughorn pulled back, wringing his hands anxiously. "You mustn't share what I've told you, Harry," he urged. "This knowledge — this knowledge should die with me. With us. With Tom Riddle. Should any of his followers discover the truth, decide to try their own hand at it... we would never be free."

It was too late for that, Harry wanted to say, but it was no good telling Slughorn how many people already knew about horcruxes.

Besides, they could all keep a secret.

“My lips are sealed,” he promised, watching the professor slump visibly.

“Good. Good lad.” Slughorn was shaking, eyes darting around nervously, desperate to get out of the conversation. “Merlin, is it too early for a drink?” he muttered to himself, turning towards his desk.

“Thank you, sir, for your honesty,” Harry said, shouldering his satchel. Slughorn scoffed.

“It’s far too late to be thanking me, Harry. Not after what I’ve done.” He smiled a thin, fragile smile. “But I appreciate your compassion. Now, off you go, before that young man of yours sends out a search party.” His eyes bulged, like he was worried he’d offended the Gryffindor, but Harry just laughed.

“Yeah, you’re probably right. I’ll see you later, Professor.”

Then he left the classroom, hardly daring to breathe until he was at least a corridor away. Only then did he lean against the wall, letting out a long sigh of relief.

That was the big reason Dumbledore had brought Slughorn back. Just horcruxes — conclusions Harry had already come to himself, though it was reassuring to have that confirmation.

He hadn’t realised until Slughorn had spoken just how afraid he was that there was something more, some other aspect to Voldemort’s immortality that he hadn’t known about, something Slughorn knew that Dumbledore wanted that would change everything for Harry.

He shouldn’t have worried. As always, he was several steps ahead of Dumbledore.

A breathless, slightly giddy laugh escaped him, head tipping back to hit stone.

Six horcruxes. Seven, including his scar. Only the snake remained.

They might actually be able to win this war, after all.

.-.-.-.

He didn’t tell Draco what he’d spoken to Slughorn about, promising his boyfriend it was nothing urgent. He would tell Snape later, assure him that it was just confirmation of what they already knew. Something Dumbledore didn’t know, evidently.

The Slytherin part of Harry took a great deal of amusement in imagining Dumbledore hiding out there, trying frantically to find horcruxes that no longer existed, with no idea how many there might even be.

But with the mystery of Slughorn's return from retirement finally solved, there was another mystery lingering in the back of Harry's mind. A far more recent one.

When he was alone that night, safely behind the drapes of his bed and a thick layer of privacy spells, Harry whispered a name.

With a quiet pop, a house elf appeared at the foot of his bed. "Master Harry is needing Ceri?" she asked, keeping to a whisper, glancing around fearfully. "Is Master Harry in trouble?"

"No, I'm fine," he assured. "I— could you bring me a book from my room, please? It's the Peverell family book. Should be on my shelf." He was going to get to the bottom of Dumbledore's weird *Master of Death* comments, one way or another.

Ceri brightened up, nodding exuberantly and disappearing, only to reappear moments later with the book in hand.

"Thanks, Ceri."

The elf's expression turned chiding. "Master Harry is not to be staying up late reading on a school night," she scolded. "Master Harry needs his rest."

He bit back a smile. "I won't stay up much longer, promise." It wasn't a particularly large book, not like the Potter or Black books.

Ceri eyed him shrewdly for a moment more, but was apparently satisfied with that vow, as she vanished once more.

Eagerly, Harry propped the book open on his lap, skimming the contents page. '*Family tree... History and Origins... Three Brothers and Death*'. Well, one of those things was not like the other.

He flipped it open to the page indicated, which was headed with a strange symbol — a circle inside a triangle, with a line neatly bisecting both. Harry had seen that symbol before; it was all over the things in the Peverell vault. It was even in the family crest. But what did it mean?

In the silence of his dorm, Harry read a story — a story of three Peverell brothers, and a river. The story said that while future tales would declare the brothers had conjured a bridge over the river to cheat death, the truth was that the youngest fell in, and died. His two older brothers rescued and revived him, almost expiring their family magics to do so. This burst of energy summoned Death himself, who was curious about these men and their love so strong it could thwart his clutches. Death offered the men a boon each — supposedly, a reward for having escaped him. It would not be for decades more that they would discover Death's true plan.

The eldest brother asked for a wand. More powerful than any other. And his wish was granted; a wand, crafted by Death himself, from a branch of elder off a nearby tree.

The second brother, believing his magic the strongest and the true reason Death had been denied, decided to take that a step further and ask for a way to recall deceased loved ones

from beyond. Death granted his wish, in the form of a stone from the riverbank.

The youngest brother, still shaken from his experience, merely asked for a way to avoid such a traumatic thing happening again — he asked for something that would let him leave, and stop Death from following. So Death granted his wish, too, and gave the brother a cloak torn from the fabric of his own. A cloak that would make him invisible to all — even Death.

Harry was enraptured as he read about the power-hungry eldest brother killing his enemy, bragging about his unbeatable wand and then being killed for it that very night. About the arrogant second brother, who went mad in front of the shade of the girl he had once loved, unable to fully breach the gap between life and death — except by joining her at his own hand.

And about the third brother, who avoided Death using his cloak, until he reached a grand old age. Only then did he pass the cloak down to his son, and greet Death willingly.

And only then did he learn the truth of the *boons* Death had offered.

It seemed, in rescuing their younger brother, the Peverell boys had tied all three of their magics to Death himself, sacrificing part of it for the life of their brother. Death became the head of the family, in a sense — the brothers had no one left but each other. So in those boons, Death left enough of his own magic to strengthen his connection to the Peverell boys, and their offspring. He had always known how things would play out, he told the third brother — but he'd been waiting for such an opportunity for a very long time.

With those three objects now in the world — the stone and the cloak passed down through the family, the wand leaving a trail of death and destruction behind it — Death's magic could spread further, grow stronger, *understand* the strange thing called humanity better. The Peverells would always have an... *affinity* for death, thanks to their ancestors' works.

And one day, so Death told the third brother, a person would come along who could unite all three objects — all of Death's Hallows — and the cycle would be complete. That person would have Death's power at their fingertips. That person would have *earned* it, Death insisted. That person would know what to do with it.

But Death did not tell the third brother what would happen when that time came. He only sounded far, far too pleased about the outcome.

At the very end of the story, there was a warning.

Our family has been Changed by our connection with Death. We are followed by Him in our every waking moment. Many a Peverell has greeted Him far too soon.

Only a Peverell can truly understand the power of the Hallows. This bloodline has been tasked with the solemn duty of keeping the Hallows safe and protected and apart from one another. To betray their knowledge is to betray the family — to seek their union is to seek only Death. This is our family's power, our curse — we are friends of Death, but Death is not always a friend to us in return. Be wary of the Hallows, and teach your children the same. Such power does not come without a price.

Harry set the book down, eyes wide. That was... quite the story.

It was familiar to him, of course. He'd read the Tales of Beedle the Bard, after seeing so many copies of the book in the Peverell family vault. He knew the Tale of the Three Brothers — altered, sanitised to become a children's story. Had Beedle been a Peverell? Or merely spoken to one, thinking it a fanciful tale?

To think that the Hallows were real... a sick sense of clarity curled within Harry, icy and sharp. His cloak, handed down from father to son — making him invisible to even Dumbledore's eye. The true Invisibility Cloak.

Dumbledore's wand, rumoured to be won in the battle with Grindelwald himself.

He flipped to the front of the book, to the family tree, following generation after generation down from Cadmus Peverell all the way down, eventually marrying into the Gaunt family — culminating at one Tom Marvolo Riddle, Jr.

The ring horcrux, the one Dumbledore had been so obsessed with, had almost died over. Snape had said there was a stone set in it, hadn't he?

A wand, a stone, a cloak. Three Hallows — all now in Dumbledore's grasp. Harry's blood ran cold.

Was he truly the Master of Death, now? If so, what did that mean for the future? What power would that give him?

And why hadn't he used it against Harry while he had him?

Unless it took more than just the Hallows. A spell, or a ritual. The book just said that the person who united the Hallows would *know what to do with them*.

Harry had promised Ceri he wouldn't stay up all night reading. But even when the book was returned to Seren Du by the elf, Harry lay there for a long time, staring at the crimson drapes above him, mind full of all the horrible things that could come from Dumbledore having access to the power of Death itself.

Sleep did not come easy, that night.

.-. .

Sirius had to hand it to old Xeno Lovegood — he might be mad as a box of frogs, but he was a brave bugger.

The *Quibbler*'s final issue had arrived in the talons of every owl they could afford, printed as many times over as the printing press could handle. Copies spread far and wide, through the UK and beyond — to European magical newspapers, telling them the sordid truth of Albus Dumbledore and the lengths he would go to just to remain a hero in the eyes of the world.

Since then, Sirius could hardly keep up with all the requests for sanctuary. The Pottery was full to bursting, and the other safe Black properties close to the same. Malfoy Manor held

dozens of people, most of whom the general public would swear up and down were Death Eaters — some of whom were even Marked, but Narcissa did not judge. She knew better than most what it was like to have no real choice at all.

With Dumbledore out of the way, he'd finally been able to break and reset the Fidelius on Grimmauld Place, with Remus as the Secret Keeper this time. When a pair of healers asked for refuge, Grimmauld quickly became the place for the trusted members of the Order to bring those who had been injured trying to flee, who needed somewhere safe to recover. Most days, Sirius was there, helping the healers the best he could.

Charlie helped where he could, bless his enormous Weasley heart. With the dragon reserve on high alert, he did his best to bring healing supplies to Grimmauld when he could — the reserve had its own greenhouses for ingredients used in the most common remedies, as it liked to be as self-sufficient as possible. Sirius didn't see his partner nearly as often as he'd like these days, despite the reserve only actually being perhaps twenty miles away from Seren Du itself. They had to be careful about moving through the wards, now that Voldemort had control of the Ministry and its ability to track magic use throughout the British Isles. More than once, Sirius had seen dark cloaked figures skulking about the woods on the other side of the Seren Du wardline, muttering about having seen apparition signatures in the area.

Luckily, Ceri was always good to aid with transportation, and very few wizards had thought to design wards to track or deny elf magic.

At the sound of the front door opening, Sirius straightened up — he was at Grimmauld again, waiting for Charlie and Fred to return with a group of muggleborns Kingsley had tipped them off about. They hadn't had new attacks to fend off in a while — either Voldemort had run out, or he had bigger plans to focus on now — so most of their work was just finding people who needed safety.

He hurried into the main hall, skidding to a halt in the doorway, jaw dropping.

Kingsley hadn't said they were *children*.

The two redheads each held a child on their hip, around six or seven years old. At their feet stood three more kids, all of whom looked old enough to be at Hogwarts. "What happened?" Sirius pressed. "Where are their parents?"

The tallest child, a spindly-limbed boy that reminded him painfully of the first time he'd ever seen Harry, storming out of the Dursleys' looking like he hadn't eaten in months, scoffed.

"Haven't had those for a long while, sir," he replied mulishly.

"We've been on our own since the summer," the auburn-haired girl beside him explained, softer, her eyes full of apology for the boy's attitude. "When my parents — they're muggles — found out about the war, they pulled me out of Hogwarts and decided that was that, I was done with the whole magic business. But I knew it wouldn't be that simple — not with my address on record at the Ministry. Not since the twins started doing accidental magic of their own." She glanced up at the kids still held by the Weasley brothers. Sirius could see the family resemblance. "When muggleborn families started getting targeted, I figured it

wouldn't be long 'til they came after us. So I took the twins with me and ran away, to keep my parents safe. I went to Frankie's house — his big brother is his guardian, and he's never around anyway." From the scowl on the tall boy's face, Sirius figured he was Frankie. "Kevin found us about a month in, and we've stuck together ever since. We— thank you for saving us, sirs." She glanced back at Charlie and Fred, dark blue eyes wide with fear. "I don't know how much longer we would've lasted."

Sirius' heart broke for her — for all five of the kids, half-starved and terrified, having been on their own for months. It was a miracle they'd lasted this long, especially with the two little ones. He felt sick when he thought about how many other kids were in the same boat, stuck running for their lives with nowhere safe to go, no adults around to help them. Hopefully most of the muggleborns would have slipped into the muggle world, hiding in plain sight, keeping their magic tightly under wraps.

"How old are you?" he asked, and the girl smiled tightly.

"Thirteen, sir. Frankie and I are supposed to be third years now. Kevin would be in his second. The twins are only seven, but I know they've both got magic, I can tell." Her gaze dared him to argue, and Sirius held up his hands.

"I believe you," he assured. "Come on, let's get you fed and checked over by the healers, then we'll find rooms for you."

"We're staying together," Frankie insisted immediately, his hand reaching for the girl's. The boy in Charlie's arms squirmed to get down, and as soon as his feet hit the ground he was at his sister's side.

"We can do that," Charlie said, keeping his voice even — the kind of voice he used with startled dragons, or Sirius on Cold days. "There's rooms big enough to fit all five of you. It's fine." An amused flicker crossed his lips. "Just thought you might want a bit of space from the little ones, now you're somewhere safe. I have younger twin brothers, and they were a *nightmare* growing up," he conspired with a wink.

"Oi!" Fred yelped, offended. "You just didn't appreciate our enthusiasm, is all."

The girl in his arms giggled. "You're a twin?" she asked, voice filled with wonder. Fred beamed at her.

"Sure am! So identical even our own mum can't tell us apart," he said proudly.

"Amy, he's one of the Weasley twins," the older girl told her sister, a mischievous grin on her face that made Sirius' breath catch with its familiarity. The younger one gasped, her eyes going impossibly wider as she stared up at Fred.

"No way!"

"I see my reputation precedes me," Fred crowed in delight. "Tell you what — I'll ask my brother to come over tonight, and maybe he'll even be able to bring a few presents for you all. Did your big sister tell you we own a joke shop?"

With the youngest children utterly captivated, and the older three practically trembling with exhaustion, Fred had little trouble leading them through to the kitchen, where Sirius was sure Ceri would have food ready in an instant.

Sirius looked at Charlie, brows knitting together. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” he asked. Charlie sighed, stepping closer, forehead pressing to Sirius’ chin.

“Depends; are you thinking those kids need an inheritance test as soon as this damned war is over?” came his wry response. He tipped his head back, blue eyes knowing. “Fred and I thought we were imagining it, but we’re not, are we? Those *eyes*, Sirius. That smile. Those freckles. And *twins*.¹”

Sirius hummed in agreement, hands resting on Charlie’s hips. “Those are Prewett eyes if I’ve ever seen them,” he agreed quietly. It might not be obvious at first, with the tightly curled hair and tawny skin under the freckles that suggested one of their parents wasn’t white. But looking closer, something just felt so achingly familiar about those kids.

“They might be family, Sirius,” Charlie whispered, pressing in closer. “Long-lost squib descendants.” Thanks to Narcissa’s inheritance test push over the summer, they had discovered most muggleborns had connections to at least one magical bloodline, even if they were weak ones.

“We don’t want to jump the gun, sweetheart,” Sirius murmured, smoothing a hand up Charlie’s back. “Red hair and blue eyes aren’t exactly rare in Britain, y’know. Nor are twins.” They could be chasing ghosts — the kids could be nothing to do with the Prewett family. Other old pureblood lines carried the red hair gene; the Bones’, the Yaxleys, even some branches of the Goldsteins.

“I know,” Charlie agreed. “But, even if they’re not...” He swallowed tightly. Sirius knew what he was thinking.

“Their parents might be alive,” he reminded, talking more to himself, his traitorous heart that had picked up the moment Charlie had said the word *family*.

“I *know*.” Charlie’s voice was a heartbroken whisper. He rocked up on his toes for a kiss. “No getting ahead of ourselves. The important thing is they’re here, and they’re safe. Anything else... anything else can wait.”

When he pulled away, it was with a decisive set to his shoulders and jaw, and he squeezed Sirius’ hand before heading towards the kitchen.

Sirius stared after him, a vice tightening around his chest as the tiniest whispers began brewing in his mind, building a fragile possibility of *after*. He was only startled out of it by one of their healers coming down the stairs and squeezing past him, giving him an odd look on her way through.

Entering the kitchen, he saw soup and sandwiches had been shared around, the kids falling on the food like a pack of starving dogs. The girl immediately requested her siblings be seen to

first, once the healer opened her kit. Casually, Sirius reached over the redhead for a bowl, glancing her way.

“I never caught your name, Miss,” he said politely. “Or gave mine. I’m Sirius.”

She eyed him amusedly. “I know who you are, Mr Black,” she told him. “You’re Harry’s godfather.” Her casual, slightly starstruck use of Harry’s name made him strongly suspect she was a Gryffindor. Then she stuck out a hand. “My name is Nashira.” Her smile brightened, and she giggled. “Like the star in Capricorn. Our names sort-of match!”

Sirius shook her hand, hoping it didn’t show on his face how wildly his heart was beating. “They do, don’t they?” he croaked.

Some higher power in the universe was playing a fine trick on him, to be sure.

.-.-.

As always, Seren Du was a blissful sanctuary in the wake of the constant unease of Hogwarts, and Severus felt the tension drain from his exhausted shoulders the moment he and Ceri rematerialised. He snorted upon the realisation that the elf had deposited him straight in his bedroom, startling Remus, who was stretched out on the bed with a book in his hands — a sight that sent a strong shock of affection and *want* right through Severus’ whole body.

This was what he wanted to end every gruelling teaching day with; that man, in his bed, for the rest of forever. Having that would make everything worth it.

Instead of voicing any of these thoughts, Severus instead let himself fall face-first onto the empty side of the mattress, fully clothed. He heard Remus chuckle, warming Severus down to his bones, and a hand rested on the back of his neck, massaging the tense muscles. “Long day, love?” Remus asked lightly.

Severus groaned in reply, giving himself a few minutes of the glorious sensation before reluctantly rolling over, running a hand down his chest and murmuring the spell to undo all his buttons along the way. “I thought playing double-agent was exhausting *before* Albus left,” he grumbled. “This is *worse*.” With Albus gone, the levels of authority and power within the school were all to be rearranged; Slytherin house was in a quiet uproar as the students tried to figure out their standing now that all they knew had been turned on its head. They were pushing boundaries — with Minerva, with him, with Harry as the true heir of Slytherin. And those who were truly loyal to the Dark Lord were gathering, deciding their chance had come with Dumbledore no longer watching over things.

They were all idiots, thinking there was no reason to be wary of Harry Potter himself. Severus would enjoy watching them fail.

Not that he could do so publicly. He had to support those who came to him, and play his part flawlessly for those who didn’t — those he had no idea about, who would be reporting his every move back to their master. His master.

He said all this to Remus as the werewolf helped him out of his teaching robes, getting more and more irate with every thought that spilled from his lips. He was so used to having to keep such things bottled up tightly, locked in his own mind, his own burden to bear. Even after more than two years, he was still remembering how to share that burden.

"I *know* he's going to summon me soon — he'll want to know the truth about what happened with Harry. I'm surprised he hasn't already. Surprised I didn't get the Call the second he got wind of Harry being Slytherin's true heir." It still gave him a glimmer of smug pride to think about, remembering the moment the hall had draped itself in green and silver at Harry's command, the absolute shock on his Slytherins' faces.

"He probably just wants to make sure you get your loyalty cemented with Minerva, while the school adjusts," Remus pointed out, sending Severus' robe to hang on the wardrobe door with a wave of his wand. "Albus was always the one who vouched for you, after all. He may worry the headmaster being discredited has also put suspicion on you."

Severus snorted. "The Dark Lord has not worried about *me* for even a moment of his hideous life," he said firmly. "More likely he is occupied with trying to find Albus himself, now the old fool doesn't have the castle keeping him safe. He'll Call me when he's good and ready — and want to know *why* I did not give him all this information sooner. My job is to know things about Hogwarts that others do not, and I have been slacking as of late." He could already feel the Cruciatus burning through his veins, the punishment he would face for not letting his Lord know of Potter's family status, of Albus' machinations. He would not accept 'I did not know' as an answer.

A growl rumbled through Remus, his eyes flashing gold. "Have you considered it might be time to give up your spying, soon?" the greying man suggested tentatively. A spike of guilt drove its way through Severus' heart.

"I cannot, until the Dark Lord is dead." He shoved up the sleeve of his shirt, baring his greatest shame to the eyes of his love. The Dark Mark, black as night on his pale forearm. "I am bound to him, and he to me, tighter than most of his followers — he could kill me through this Mark, if he so chose. Until he is truly destroyed, I must pretend to be loyal — for him to doubt me is for my life to be forfeit." His dark eyes met Remus' intently. "And I find I have too many plans to allow that."

Remus' nostrils flared. "Damn right you do," he agreed roughly. "Merlin, I hate this. The only claim on you should be *mine*." That was said with a hint of a growl and another flash of gold.

"Soon, it shall be," Severus vowed. "Yours and no other." Harry's seventeenth birthday was creeping ever closer.

He ran a hand through his hair, grimacing at the feel of the fine strands clumped together with the greasy residue of hours worth of potion-steam. "I need a shower," he declared, then let his gaze trail slowly over Remus' supine form. "Care to join me?"

Remus perked up, book falling forgotten to the mattress as he scrambled to his feet. His eagerness had Severus' blood pounding, rushing southwards, following the broad line of the

werewolf's shoulders. Shoulders that, once the moon rose that night, would break and twist and reform into something most would consider monstrous.

They only had a few hours, before Sirius would come home and the pair would retreat off to play outside in the moonlight.

Remus' hand tightened around his, tugging him towards the bathroom. They had best make the most of those few hours.

.-.-.

The spring term began to earn its name, as January's chill started to thaw out into the first blossoms of a fairly mild February. The students got into a good routine, the staff banding together to help McGonagall run the school while still maintaining her positions as Head of Gryffindor and Transfiguration Professor. With secrecy no longer as vital, and the whole school shocked at their ex-headmaster's blatant move against Harry, more and more people begged to join the HA — so many that Harry eventually decided to hold weekly sessions in the Great Hall, for anyone who wanted to join. He still kept training with the smaller group, and many of them would help him out with the larger sessions, teaching students of all ages the basics of Stunning, Disarming and Shielding, as well as a few healing charms for good measure.

Despite all that, Harry was left feeling horribly guilty, as his fellow sixth years complained about how they would normally be learning to apparate at this point in their educations, ready to get their licenses as soon as they turned seventeen.

With the way things were at the Ministry, it was not safe to invite the usual apparition instructor into the castle. Nor was it safe to adjust the wards so the students could practice inside the castle.

"We are truly sorry," Professor Flitwick sighed for the dozenth time. "We can, of course, teach you all the theory of it. But I'm afraid the practical will have to wait."

Draco and Harry shared secretive grins, amongst the disappointed groans of their peers.

Still, the upset didn't last for too long, not with the arrival of the next quidditch match of the year. Slytherin versus Ravenclaw, with most of the school rallying behind the eagles.

But not Harry, who showed up to breakfast the morning of the match wearing a deep green hoodie with *Slytherin Quidditch Team* on the front and *Malfoy* emblazoned across the back, a green and silver scarf draped around his shoulders. Several of his friends booed and hissed playfully at the sight of him.

"How long have you been wanting to wear that in public?" Neville asked knowingly, and Harry grinned.

"Long enough." The hoodie was a little big for him, and it still smelled of Draco's aftershave. "I don't think he's getting it back."

“You better believe this means war when we play you,” Cho called from the Ravenclaw table, making a face at the sight of him in all that green.

“You’re on, Chang,” Harry replied, smirking. “Sorry, but boyfriend trumps friend in the loyalty department.”

“Understandable.” She winked devilishly at him. “I’ll let you off this time, only because we both know your boyfriend would dump you if he saw you in my team colours. I think green suits you better, anyway.”

“He does look good with my name on him, doesn’t he?” a familiar voice drawled smugly. Harry turned, eyes trailing over his boyfriend in his tight quidditch uniform, throat going dry. “We’re headed to the pitch. Kiss for luck?” Draco asked, grey eyes playful. Harry grabbed him by the front of his jumper, pulling him down into a kiss that had more than a few people wolf-whistling.

“Go get that snitch,” Harry said, smirking at the lust in Draco’s gaze.

“What do I get if I do?” The blond’s voice dropped to a husky baritone, too low for anyone but Harry to hear, sending delicious shivers across Harry’s skin.

“Oi, Malfoy! Get off Potter and let’s go!” Urquhart yelled impatiently, and Draco sighed. With one last kiss, he hurried to join his team.

“Where’s my lucky kiss, then?” Cho taunted, getting to her feet with the rest of her team. Harry shot her a sickly-sweet smile.

“Come over here and I’ll give it to you.”

A loud cackle came from the Ravenclaw girl. “You wish, Potter. Sorry in advance for kicking your boyfriend’s arse.”

Harry laughed, standing when he saw Blaise, Daphne and Theo headed over — they had promised he wouldn’t get murdered if he sat with them in the Slytherin stands.

“If you say so.” He waved her off, still grinning — this was how house rivalries should be. Good-natured competitive teasing.

Sadly, Cho’s prediction did not come true; Draco caught the snitch forty-five minutes into the game, making the final score 300-190 to Slytherin. Ravenclaw put up a fair fight, but after their loss against Gryffindor the Slytherin team had something to prove.

Filing out of the stands in a crowd of rambunctious, celebrating Slytherins, Harry felt a tug on his sleeve. “Fancy braving the victory party?” Daphne asked, wiggling her brows playfully. Her little sister Astoria was at her side, green and silver ribbons woven through her hair.

“I think that might be pushing it a bit,” Harry replied; just because most of the Slytherins tolerated him by now, didn’t mean there weren’t at least a handful that would happily see him

dead. “You guys have fun, though.” He smirked to himself — he had a different sort of victory party planned, and he had to move fast.

Once they were out of the stands, Harry ducked through the crowd, heading to the Gryffindor changing rooms. He had to be quick; he didn’t want to risk Draco leaving before he could get there.

He changed into his own quidditch gear, then put a Dissillusionment charm on himself and hurried around to the Slytherin changing rooms. This was the hardest part; sneaking into enemy territory.

Luckily, Harry was pretty good at sneaking, these days.

The door opened, Crabbe and Goyle barrelling through, and Harry slipped in before it could swing shut behind them. His heart raced at the sound of voices echoing from inside — Draco hadn’t left yet. Good.

It seemed only he and Vaisey were left in there, Vaisey taunting Draco about how long he spent worrying about his skin and his hair.

“It takes work to look this good,” Draco sniffed, and Vaisey laughed.

“Making yourself pretty for *Potter*, are you?” he drawled, leering. “Should I tell the lads not to expect you at the party, then?”

“No, I’ll be there,” Draco assured, buttoning up his shirt. Vaisey hummed.

“See you in a bit, then.” The fourth year left the changing room. When he was gone, Harry locked and silenced the door.

“Wouldn’t bother with those buttons, if I were you,” he called quietly, dropping the charm keeping him invisible. Draco jumped, whirling around, going wide-eyed at the sight of Harry in his Gryffindor gear. “I thought, since you were indisposed for our actual match, we could just pretend we played each other instead,” he said, stalking closer. Draco’s hands dropped from his buttons, leaving the shirt open to the base of his sternum. “I did say I’d come to the Slytherin changing rooms if you won, after all,” he added, winking. He was right in front of Draco now, and one gentle push had the blond sat on the bench. Harry straddled his lap, fingers tangling in still-damp hair. “Shame you’ve already showered. I was hoping to catch you all sweaty.”

Draco lunged up, pressing his lips to Harry’s, forcing his tongue into the Gryffindor’s eager mouth. “I beat you, then, in this fantasy of yours?” he breathed, hands sliding up beneath Harry’s jumper, skating up his abs. “Slytherin beat Gryffindor.”

“You did,” Harry purred, sucking in a sharp breath as fingers tweaked his nipple. “Means you deserve a reward.” He ground down against Draco, both of them moaning. Harry’s skin-tight quidditch trousers did absolutely nothing to hide the prominent bulge straining at them, and when Draco dropped a hand to squeeze his arse, he frowned, finding something hard in

Harry's back pocket. He reached in, pupils blowing wide when he plucked out a vial of lubricant.

"*Oh.*" His breath hitched. "That kind of reward, hmm?"

"Whatever kind of reward you like," Harry promised, arousal curling hot in his belly at the calculating look that crossed Draco's face.

"Get your kit off, Potter," he instructed, tugging at Harry's jumper. "Your arse looks good in those trousers, but it'll look even better bent over these benches for me."

Harry's head spun with the force of the rush of blood to his cock at those words. "Fuck, yes," he gasped, leaning back as Draco's fingers started working on the buttons of his trousers.

This was definitely better than whatever party was going on in the Slytherin common room.

Chapter 97

Chapter Notes

To make up for last Friday's cliffhanger, this week you can have a nice cute interlude of all our faves celebrating Valentine's Day. You're welcome ;)

This year, Valentine's Day fell on a Monday. That was generally regarded as a terrible thing by most of the occupants of Hogwarts — at least, the ones who cared about such things.

It was so terrible because the way the term scheduling worked out always had the February Hogsmeade weekend landing *after* Valentine's; which meant this year, couples would have to wait almost an entire week after the day itself if they wanted to go on a date in the village.

The younger years, still dazzled by the newness of being allowed to visit the village, happily delayed their plans until the weekend. But the older students just got a little more... creative.

Harry wasn't exactly sure how he was going to beat last year's Valentine's date — he didn't have anything as impressive as the Chamber of Secrets to show Draco this time around. And every time he mentioned the day, Draco just smirked at him and changed the subject, so he assumed the blond had something up his sleeve.

Needless to say, Harry was not expecting the truly enormous bouquet of roses to arrive with the morning post, carried by two owls who expertly deposited the arrangement in front of him. The roses were a mix of deep velvety crimson and bright shining gold, bound securely with green paper and a silver ribbon. A small red card was tucked into the ribbon, and Harry plucked it out, opening it. *This year it's my turn*, was all it said, and Harry laughed.

"Bloody hell, Harry," Ginny exclaimed, having to stand up to see him over the huge display of flowers. "He's not subtle, is he?"

"Not when he's being possessive, no," Harry replied with a chuckle, stroking careful fingers over the smooth rose petals. The handful of cards that had been delivered for him from other admirers went entirely ignored — exactly as Draco intended, no doubt.

"That's so romantic," Lavender sighed, further down the table. "They're so pretty!"

Looking up, Harry could see several envious glances being sent his way — and quite a few annoyed looks sent at partners.

"You like them, then?" Harry now knew why Draco had gone to sit at the Slytherin table that morning — the blond approached, as calm and confident as always, though Harry could see the uncertainty in his eyes. Harry beamed up at him.

"They're gorgeous," he complimented. "I love them, thank you."

The uncertainty vanished, and Draco took Harry's hand in his, kissing the back of it. "I did warn you you were in for a lifetime of grand romantic gestures," he said lightly. "I am a Black at heart, after all."

Harry pulled him down for a kiss, then reached for the bouquet and pulled out a single red rose — one charm had the stem cut off, and another had it affixed to Draco's robe, directly over his heart.

Others might have thought it was cliché, or overdoing it, or showing off — such a huge assortment of roses at this time of year had to cost a pretty penny, after all. And a year or two ago, such things might have embarrassed Harry, making a big deal out of him in public, putting him in the spotlight. But it wasn't about that — it was Draco showing his love in the best way he knew how, putting his heart out there for the whole school to see.

There was always one person who got embarrassed in the Great Hall on Valentine's Day with an over-the-top display, and Harry was quite happy for it to be him this year.

"You are worth far more than roses, darling," Draco murmured, a whisper of a kiss brushing his lips. "But they make a fine start."

Harry blushed, keeping still as Draco's deft fingers reached for a gold rose from the bouquet, clipping and pinning it to Harry's chest to match. Faintly, Harry thought he heard several people sigh dreamily.

"Need I remind you all," McGonagall's exasperated voice cut in, "that it is, in fact, still a school day. Class starts in five minutes."

That broke the spell, everyone scrambling to hurry out of the hall. Harry rose to his feet, looking wistfully at his flowers. There was no way he could carry those around all day.

"I'll take them up to Gryffindor for you, Harry," Neville assured. "Get them situated. You two go to Runes."

If there was anyone he could trust to take good care of his roses, it was Neville, and Harry beamed at the blond. "Thanks, Nev." He turned to Draco, twining their fingers together. "Shall we?"

They left the hall, hand in hand, uncaring of the stares that followed them.

. . .

Draco Malfoy did not have the monopoly on gifting flowers on Valentine's Day. After classes ended, Neville hurried to the greenhouses where his own bouquet was waiting for him under stasis charms, Professor Sprout giving him a cheeky wink as he eased it out of its hiding place. He kept it Dissillusioned on the way up to the castle — still quietly amazed he was actually able to pull off such a spell — and caught Ginny just coming out of the Charms corridor. With a flourish, he dropped the spell, holding the vibrant bouquet out to his

girlfriend. “Happy Valentine’s Day, Ginny,” he said, already feeling his cheeks go red. Ginny dropped her bag in shock, brown eyes wide.

“Oh, Neville, they’re stunning! I— when did you order that in?”

“I, uh, made it myself. Professor Sprout lets me grow what I want in the back corner of greenhouse four. So I thought… well. Yeah,” he finished awkwardly.

“You grew all these, just for me? But that must have taken weeks!” Ginny’s classmates were all staring now, and Neville tried not to squirm.

“I started planning early,” he said with a shrug. “I— you deserve pretty things on Valentine’s Day.” He hadn’t wanted to just buy her something — Ginny was amazing, and there was nothing in the world that would show her how much she meant to him more than plants. He hoped she knew that. He suspected she did, by the light in her eyes.

Next thing he knew, her hands were on his shoulders as she leaned up for a passionate kiss, right there in the hallway. “I love you,” she murmured, face almost as red as her hair as she too realised how much of a scene they were making. “Why don’t we, ah, go somewhere private, and you can tell me what all these flowers mean, yeah? I know they all mean something.”

The blood rushed to Neville’s face — they did all have meanings, of course they did. Red chrysanthemums, edelweiss, hibiscus, red salvia, violets. His heart laid bare in a single bouquet.

All the things he wanted to tell Ginny, but always found his tongue tripping over the words.

But blood rushed to other parts of him, too, at the idea of being alone together. At the spark in those gorgeous brown eyes.

“Yeah,” he croaked, Ginny’s small hand taking his slightly sweaty one, the bouquet still tucked in the crook of his arm.

“Ginny!” Colin called. “You forgot your bag!”

But Ginny’s stride didn’t falter as she half-dragged her boyfriend down the corridor. “Don’t care!” she yelled over her shoulder in response, face alight with joy. Neville’s heart thudded hard in his chest.

He’d never get over the feeling of utter bliss that hit him when he made Ginny smile like that. He wanted to see that smile for the rest of his life.

. . .

Several floors below them, behind a painting of a bowl of fruit, a cluster of house elves tried not to laugh as two teenagers stood amongst them, absolutely covered in flour.

“Oops,” Hannah said meekly, looking at the huge bag of flour that was now mostly empty. “I — sorry.”

Opposite her, Ernie looked down at himself; his Hufflepuff tie now as white as his shirt, his trousers suffering a similar fate. Then he looked back up, slowly, staring at his girlfriend. “Well,” he said, the flour on his lips making his mouth go dry. “It’s a good thing we hung our robes up before we started, I suppose.”

A quiet giggle escaped Hannah’s mouth. Then another. Then, both of them were laughing their heads off, getting even more flour on themselves as they leaned against each other, gasping through laughter — then choking on flour, which prompted even more laughter. A few of the elves sniggered too, though quickly clamped their lips shut.

“Winky will be cleanings this up!” one of the elves announced, stepping forward with her hands on her hips. With a snap of her fingers, the flour disaster was gone, leaving the workbench and their clothes spotless. The elf huffed, her huge brown eyes staring up at the two students. “Yous is being lucky that we elves is having a soft spot for badgers,” she muttered warningly. Ernie fought a smile — the relationship between the Hogwarts elves and Hufflepuff house was long-standing, with their common room being so close to the kitchen. All new badgers were taught about the importance of respecting the castle elves.

And since his girlfriend had become one of the four heirs of Hogwarts, that had only increased the elves’ eagerness to make her happy. Ernie doubted anyone else would be allowed to get away with making such a big mess in the kitchens during dinner prep, otherwise.

“Thank you, Winky,” Hannah said, bestowing her sunny smile on the elf. No one could stay mad in the face of that smile. “We’ll try and keep the mess to a minimum, from now on. I really didn’t mean to drop it.”

Winky huffed again, though she didn’t look nearly as scolding as before, and with one last nod she turned back to her kitchen duties. Ernie looked at the workbench they had been set up with, at the ingredients to bake chocolate chip cookies still laid out before them. “Let’s try this again, shall we?” he said wryly, and Hannah giggled once more. “Maybe I should pour the flour, this time.”

“That’s probably for the best,” Hannah agreed sheepishly. “And, wait a minute.” She waved her wand, and suddenly both of them were wearing butter-yellow aprons, the ties undone at their sides. “Just in case.”

Ernie wasn’t sure it was a look he could pull off — but Hannah looked adorable in hers, a cute frown of concentration on her face as she tied the strings at her hip. When she was finished, she glanced up with a smile, which soon became impish. “You’ve still got a little...” She reached up, cupping his jaw, thumb swiping at a spot just below his eye. Ernie stepped closer, settling his hand on the curve of her waist, while the other tucked her honey-blonde hair behind her ear.

“And you’ve got a little...” He tilted his head down, covering her lips with his. Her hand slid to the back of his neck, deepening the kiss while the sweet flowery scent of her perfume filled his senses.

The rest of the world fell away, the baking ingredients temporarily forgotten as the pair kissed, oblivious to the fond eyes of the house elves cooking dinner.

It was going to take them a while to get around to making those cookies, but Ernie didn't mind. The more time he got to spend with Hannah, the better.

.-. .

The bank of the lake was a popular spot for romance at Hogwarts; generations of students had taken romantic strolls along the edge of the still water, been waved at by the giant squid on their way.

It was cliché, but that made it all the more romantic in Susan's eyes, and she was glad her Slytherin was willing to indulge her on this.

It probably helped that they weren't just walking beside the lake — Susan had done one better, and set up a privacy warded blanket in a quiet spot on the grass. The best spot to watch the sunset from.

"I think the squid is a voyeur," Theo announced, eyes cast suspiciously towards the water. When Susan turned to follow his gaze, she saw the squid in question, drifting lazily across the surface of the water, its eerie unblinking eye visible.

"I don't think it's looking at us," Susan assured him wryly. "It probably can't even see us. I warded us in pretty tight." She didn't want to have to deal with lovestruck second years on their awkward first dates interrupting them. Private time at Hogwarts was a rare thing.

Theo's gaze darkened. "You did, did you?" he drawled. "Good to know."

They had a picnic basket, but Susan wasn't particularly hungry, especially not with Theo looking at her with that intense stare.

Everything about Theo was intense. She thought she'd be used to it after a year, but it still made the hairs on her arms stand on end, to have such undivided attention directed her way, from such a handsome boy.

Theodore Nott was the picture of pureblood elegance, the dark foil to Draco Malfoy's silver grace. He was tall and willow-thin, cheekbones sharp enough to cut glass, dark brown hair always effortlessly falling into his eyes. Those gorgeous, all-consuming eyes.

It still amazed Susan that a boy like that gave even a moment of attention to a girl like her, let alone the *fierce* devotion that Theo had.

"Are you mad I didn't get you flowers, like Draco did?" he asked almost carelessly, and she scoffed.

"Draco's a show-off, and I don't even like flowers." She sidled closer. "Should I have gotten *you* flowers?"

He laughed, a quiet sound, one she always cherished for its rarity. “What would I do with flowers?” he retorted, bemused. He beckoned her closer, cupping her cheek, his bright eyes studying her keenly. “The necklace suits you as well as I thought it would,” he said, satisfaction purring in every word. “I wasn’t sure, but I hoped.”

Susan’s fingers came up to play with the pendant, the silver twisted artfully around the most incredible polished piece of amber, making it look like the stone had captured fire itself. “It’s beautiful.” She hadn’t anticipated a Valentine’s present. She hadn’t thought Theo was that kind of a guy. “I’ll wear it always.” The only boy to have gifted her jewellery before was Harry, with the earrings he gave her for Christmas back in fourth year.

“Good.” Theo’s lips curled in a contented smile. “My fire-hearted badger.”

She blushed, ducking her gaze, and a startled sound between a yelp and a laugh bubbled from her lip as Theo suddenly pulled her onto his lap. She squirmed — she always felt like she would crush him, like this. Theo was so fine-boned, like a china doll, though she knew better than to think there wasn’t muscle hidden in that whip-thin frame. But she was taller than most other girls, with wide hips and thick thighs and belly rolls that Sally-Anne Perks had been quietly mocking since third year. She tried to pull away, to lift some of her weight off him, but Theo’s hands were firm on her waist. He shifted, and she gasped, his hardness pressing against her inner thigh.

“How good are your privacy wards?” he asked, voice low and urgent, strained around the edges. One of his hands slid up her thigh, under her uniform skirt, and her breath caught in her throat.

“Pretty damn good,” she told him breathlessly. He laid back fully on their blanket, hips canting up against her, a tease of what was to come. Susan’s blood ran hot — while she knew they had wards up, knew that no one could see them, it still felt like they were out in the open there, where anyone could stumble upon them. “We’re supposed to be watching the sunset,” she scolded lightly as Theo’s thin fingers untucked her shirt, starting on the buttons.

“I’d much rather watch you ride me,” came his immediate retort. The hot twist of lust in her belly hit her hard, and she bent over, kissing him hard, trapping his hands between them as her breasts pressed to his chest.

“If my wards fail and we get detention, I am absolutely blaming you,” she warned him, reaching behind herself with one hand to unclasp her bra. Theo’s lips curled, that smug look she couldn’t wait to wipe off his face as it turned to unguarded passion.

“It’d be worth it,” he replied, not missing a beat. He bucked up into her again, like he was trying to get started before she could even get his trousers undone.

People always thought Hufflepuffs were the meek, innocent ones.

People always thought that Theo was the shy, quiet Slytherin, reserved and restrained and overshadowed by Draco Malfoy’s shining silver brilliance.

Susan grinned as she stood up to slide her underwear off, settling back down over Theo, pulse racing as his fingers danced across her skin.

People didn't know *shit*.

.-.-.-.

Past the lake, in the Forbidden Forest, Daphne watched her girlfriend feed chunks of bloody meat an invisible flying skeleton horse and wondered how this had become her life, that she wouldn't want to be anywhere else.

She didn't like Valentine's Day. It was overly-sappy, commercialised bullshit.

This wasn't a Valentine's date. It was just a regular date, a chance for the pair of them to get out of the castle, for Luna to surround herself with the wild magic of the forest. Hell, it was hardly even a date; Luna came out here most evenings, and Daphne often followed, the lovesick *disaster* that she was.

Her fourteen year-old self would be ashamed to see her now, so utterly gone on another human being.

But her fourteen year-old self didn't know how great sex was, so quite frankly, Daphne didn't care.

"Daphne, come here," Luna called, and like a devoted sap, Daphne obediently followed. Her girlfriend beamed at her, reaching out a hand. "Come, stand where I'm standing." She stepped aside, just enough to stand with her chest pressed to Daphne's back, her hands on Daphne's wrists. "Persephone had a foal, look."

"I can't see them, honey," Daphne reminded dryly. Luna giggled in her ear.

"Look with your *other* senses, silly," she urged, moving Daphne's hand out to the side. Suddenly, her fingertips hit something warm and velvet-soft and alive.

"Oh," Daphne breathed, letting Luna guide her into petting the thestral foal. It had to be a small thing — she could feel its wing tip brushing her calf, feel its spindly body and tiny ears. It wasn't like petting a regular horse — more like a horse-shaped snake, though there were little tufts of fur at its ears, and its nose felt just like any other horse's. She heard a quiet whinny, then a huff, and something nudged her shoulder.

"That's Hades," Luna informed her, giving another quiet giggle that slid over Daphne like silk. "He's very proud of his baby."

"As he should be," Daphne agreed, lips curving ever so slightly. Hades nudged her again, and Luna moved Daphne's hand over, setting it on a large, muscular shoulder.

"He likes getting scratches there most," she whispered, letting go of Daphne's wrists so the Slytherin girl could figure out the creatures for herself. Luna hugged her from behind, pressing a kiss to Daphne's neck. "They like you," she confided. "I think Hagrid and I are the only ones who visit them. But they like people."

Before Luna, Daphne never would have thought twice about thestrals — would have recoiled from the idea of them, the omens of death that they were thought to be.

She turned around in Luna's embrace, dipping to kiss her, the hot breath of the thestral foal still puffing against her shin.

She could maybe do Valentine's day, if it looked like this.

.-. .

It was awfully handy, being pseudo-brothers with one of the heirs of Hogwarts. And being good friends with the other three. Certainly, it made sneaking into the castle a whole lot easier when the wards welcomed him like he was still a student.

George popped his Dissillusioned head out from the statue of the one-eyed witch, checking the coast was clear before hauling himself out entirely.

It might have been easier with the Marauder's Map, but he was George Weasley — he could do this in his sleep.

Quiet as a mouse, he hurried to the main staircase, heading down, dodging the students in his way. He made it to the third floor, then turned towards what, once upon a time, was a room the headmaster had threatened pain of death upon entering.

Now it was just a room. A room with a few scorch marks on the walls and ceiling from various Weasley experiments over the years.

A room with a double bed, and the most gorgeous man in the world inside.

George dropped the charm concealing him as soon as the door was locked behind him, throwing himself into Blaise's embrace. "I've missed you," he declared, loving the feel of Blaise's strong arms wrapping around him.

"I missed you too, tesoro," Blaise chuckled, his deep voice doing *things* to George's insides.

Before he could throw his whole wooing plan out the window entirely and shove Blaise onto the bed to have his way with him, George put a little space between them, trying to catch his breath. From his pocket, he drew a bottle of red wine, watching Blaise's eyes light up. "Ooh, my favourite."

"Only the best for my Valentine," George insisted, winking roguishly. "Got you these, too." From the same pocket came a box, which Blaise opened to find a dozen large chocolate-covered strawberries.

"Mm, delicious," Blaise murmured, stealing another kiss. "You'll share them with me, won't you?"

George imagined watching those lips close around a plump, juicy berry, a whimper creeping from his throat. "If you're willing to share. They're yours, after all."

"Then perhaps I will eat mine and you will eat yours, and we'll drink the wine together." Blaise was suddenly holding a chocolate box of his own — where the hell had that come from?

Inside were the incredible melt-in-the-mouth chocolate caramels that Blaise had introduced him to in Italy that summer. George's mouth watered just at the smell of them. "You do spoil me," he sighed, making Blaise smile.

"Every day I can," he promised. "Come on, let's get comfortable."

George's brown eyes trailed over Blaise's form. "Comfortable, or *comfortable*?" he drawled, wiggling his eyebrows.

Blaise set both boxes of chocolates on the end of the bed, then pulled his t-shirt over his head in one fluid motion. "Get naked and get in that bed, Weasley, or I'll drink all the wine without you."

George didn't need telling twice — in moments, his clothes were a heap on the floor and he tackled Blaise to the mattress, wanting to get his mouth on that smooth, ebony skin. Blaise's cock was already very much interested in the events, and George pinned the Slytherin down, sliding so his face was level with the impressive length.

"Thought you wanted wine and chocolates?" Blaise drawled, even as he made himself comfortable, bending his knees up to give George a better angle. George hummed deep in his throat.

"I can have those too," he pointed out. "But this first." Then, without hesitation, he took his boyfriend down to the root.

Blaise made the most incredible sounds like this. And George *really* had to learn Italian — he knew bits and pieces, knew the dirty words and the sweet words, but Blaise babbled in bed and George never remembered enough to look it up afterwards, his orgasm forcing it all from his mind. He worked Blaise's cock thoroughly, fingers slipping lower, playing with his balls in the way he knew drove his boyfriend wild. Soon, Blaise's hips jerked, his whole body going taut as he came down George's throat. George hummed in satisfaction, crawling up the Slytherin's muscular body — and reaching right past him for the open bottle of wine, necking it back like it hadn't cost a small fortune. Blaise had such expensive tastes.

He took a few swallows, then offered it to Blaise, who pushed his hand aside and lunged up for a hungry kiss.

"Wine always tastes better from your lips," Blaise breathed, fingers twined in George's hair tugging just the right side of painful. "I wonder if it'll taste better from the rest of your skin."

Oh, George liked the sound of that. He liked the sound of that *very* much — Blaise pushed him flat on his back, straddling his thighs, taking the bottle of wine and pouring a thin stream into the hollow of George's throat, chasing it immediately with his tongue.

Maybe the *wooing* part of the plan had ended up a little shorter than anticipated. George was only human, after all.

.-. .

One Valentine's date in Hogwarts was not a date at all. Rather, an avoidance of dates — an avoidance of everyone. Pansy and Millie sat together in their dorm room, an obscenely large plate of brownies between them, while Pansy watched Millie write a letter.

"Do you think you'll get to see him this summer?" she asked, somewhat hesitant. Millie sighed.

"I don't know. Depends what Potter's up to, doesn't it?" she pointed out with a derisive snort. "If it's all over 'round his birthday, like he says it will be..."

The two of them pretty much only saw Harry at heirs' meetings, these days. Everyone still believed them to be loyal Death Eaters in training, and that meant no socialising with Gryffindors. Or with other Slytherins who had turned their backs on the cause.

No socialising with any of their true friends, really. Not where anyone might see them.

At least they still had each other. Pansy wouldn't have survived half as long without Millie by her side.

"Harry's usually right about these sorts of things," Pansy said, reaching for another brownie. "If he says he'll be done by the end of summer, I believe him." She could hardly believe they were talking so casually about the defeat of the Dark Lord.

Being friends with Harry Potter made one do crazy things like that.

"Then maybe I'll get to see Otto at the end of summer. Or even Christmas." A dreamy, hopeful sort of smile took over Millie's face. Once upon a time, Pansy would have been eaten alive with envy, with a desperate need to find someone who made her feel the way Millie looked. Before she understood how much that was never going to happen, how much she didn't even *want* it to happen.

"Oh, you should invite him over for Yule!" Pansy urged excitedly. "He can meet everyone!" Sure, most of their Slytherin cohort had met Millicent's German fiancé at least once, but that had been a number of years ago now. And their friend group had expanded enormously since then.

Millie looked doubtful. "I'm not really sure I want to inflict *everyone* on him." Pansy snorted. Sure, they were friends with an astonishing number of Weasleys these days, but it wasn't that bad. "But having him around for the holidays would be nice." She sighed again. "I just want to *see* him."

Pansy knew that Millie hadn't seen Otto since the summer before their fifth year, when her mother had taken her over to stay with his family in Berlin — to avoid everything going on

back home. She also knew that despite what Millie's father thought, Otto's family were not actually the avid Dark Lord supporters they had once claimed to be.

The only reason they had not publicly turned away like everyone else — other than their own safety, of course — was that doing so would make Mr Bulstrode dissolve the betrothal for sure, and nobody wanted that. Not with the risk that he might betroth Millie to some *other* boy.

Not like Pansy was facing.

"I'm sure you'll see him soon," she soothed, offering her best friend a brownie. "But forgive me for hoping it's because he comes here, not because you've buggered off to Germany."

"I'm not going anywhere until things are safe here," Millie insisted firmly. She reached out, covering Pansy's hand with her own. "I'm not leaving you. If it gets bad, we'll go to Lady Malfoy, together."

It would have to get *very* bad, for that to happen. Going to Draco's mother, turning away from their parents, would get them disinherited in a heartbeat. They were at the mercy of their fathers, until they were married. At least for Millie that was something to look forward to.

"Harry will sort it," Pansy insisted once more. She shuffled in closer, peering over Millie's shoulder. "Now show me what you've written so far. Even the saucy bits. *Especially* the saucy bits." Millie's cheeks burned red as she tried to hide her parchment, and Pansy laughed.

They would have their happy endings. Even if she hadn't quite figured out what she wanted hers to be yet. She would have the chance to find out.

Draco would be awfully sad if they didn't, and Harry would rather burn the world to pieces than see Draco sad.

Pansy approved wholeheartedly.

.-. .

Technically, they could have gone out somewhere fancy. One day, they would — Charlie deserved to be taken to incredible restaurants where Sirius could shower him with good food and expensive wine, and ogle him in dress robes, and make all the other patrons uncomfortable with their blatant flirting.

But while that did sound fun on occasion, neither of them were really fancy restaurant people, and quite frankly it wasn't worth the risk or the faff that came with Sirius going out in public.

So with a little help from Ceri, Sirius had the conservatory at Seren Du decked out to the nines, a table for two with a crisp white tablecloth and two silver candles set in ornate holders, and the most incredible dinner waiting for them.

And this was so much better, because Charlie was in a t-shirt and well worn jeans, candlelight flickering gorgeously over the ink on his forearms and biceps, relaxed and smiling and looking at Sirius like he'd just handed him the world on a platter.

"You romantic old dog, you," the redhead teased.

"Oi, less of the old," Sirius mock-scolded. "Just because I'm in my *late thirties* now."

Charlie gave an over-dramatic gasp. "Practically ancient," he agreed dryly. Sirius barked out a laugh, pouring wine for them both.

"Happy Valentine's, Charlie," he said, raising his glass to clink against Charlie's own.

"Happy Valentine's, sweetheart. You didn't have to go to all this fuss."

"I wanted to," Sirius insisted. "We might not be able to do the traditional dating thing while the whole damn world is on fire, but that's no excuse for me to slack off." He always felt like he wasn't doing right by Charlie, wasn't doing enough — he didn't want to let their first Valentine's go uncelebrated.

"If you insist." Charlie's dimples returned, sapphire eyes sparkling. "Then I suppose you deserve your present, too."

Sirius' brows rose in surprise. "You didn't have to get me anything!"

"Technically I haven't, yet." Charlie pulled a folded piece of parchment out of the pocket of his jeans, handing it over to Sirius. Confused, Sirius opened it, and gasped.

It was a pencil drawing of a grim. *His* grim, Padfoot, stood proudly with his head held high, the level of detail incredible. "This is amazing! Did you do this?" He saw Charlie sketching sometimes, but it was mostly dragons.

"No. My, uh, tattoo artist did. He's a friend from Hogwarts, we kept in touch. He did most of my tattoos — there's a few I got out in Romania, but for all the big ones I came back home to see Nick."

Looking at the drawing closer, Sirius could see the similar art style to the tattoos over the rest of Charlie's body. When his gaze returned to Charlie's, the redhead seemed suddenly unsure. "I, uh, have a slot booked for next week. World-on-fire permitting and all. But I wanted to run it by you first. In case you think it's weird."

For a few seconds, Sirius had no idea what he was talking about, and then it clicked. "You want to get this tattooed on you?" he asked, holding up the drawing. Charlie nodded.

"Yeah. If you're alright with it."

Sirius couldn't think of anything hotter than seeing his grim on Charlie's skin, and he said as much, watching Charlie flush lightly. "Where were you thinking?" There weren't many spaces left, not for something that size — perhaps somewhere on his back, or maybe a calf piece.

Charlie bit his lip, anxious. “Well, ah. I’ve got some prime real estate here, I was thinking.”

And he held his hand up to his chest, right over his heart.

Sirius sucked in a sharp breath. *Oh.* “Chest tattoos hurt like a bitch,” he said with a weak chuckle, watching Charlie’s lips twitch.

“I know. But I can handle it, for this.”

Another good thing about not being in a restaurant was that there was no one around to care when Sirius abandoned his meal entirely and pounced on his boyfriend, straddling his lap there at the table. Sirius’ skirt, already scandalously short, rucked up around his hips, his arms twining around Charlie’s neck. Large hands pressed hot against his bare thighs.

“You like that idea, then?” Charlie gasped, tilting his head back so Sirius could attack his neck.

“Just a bit,” Sirius agreed breathlessly. “Your artist, how far in advance does he book?” He let his teeth rasp over Charlie’s jaw. “Been thinking it was a while since I got my last tattoo. Thought I might look good with a bear on my thigh.”

Charlie’s hooded eyes dropped to the thigh in question, fingers running reverently over the unmarked flesh, pushing the skirt up even higher. “Right there,” he murmured, stroking the upside of Sirius’ right thigh. “Low enough to see just a peek when you’re in a skirt. High enough that anyone looking to see your cock knows it’s mine.” He looked up, grinning devilishly. “For me? Give Nick a reference and he’ll have you booked in straight after mine.”

“Easy enough,” Sirius assured, excitement building in more ways than one. “I’m sure I’ll have no trouble conjuring a Patronus for him to look at.” Something he hadn’t ever thought possible, not after twelve years in Azkaban, but Charlie Weasley was a miracle in himself.

“One of these days I’m gonna take that damned Animagus potion and you’re gonna look really daft when I’m not even a bear,” Charlie teased, and Sirius snorted.

“That’s a bet I’m willing to take.” He knew his Patronus, knew exactly why it was the way it was.

His magic, his soul, his heart — they all belonged to Charlie. It was long past time he dedicated some skin to the man, really.

.-. .

Sat at a fairly similar table to his brother, but hundreds of miles away and *definitely* in a very public place, Bill Weasley tapped his glass of champagne against his fiancee’s, beaming.

“Our last Valentine’s before we’re married,” he said teasingly, feeling light as air every time he so much as thought the words. Fleur giggled, tossing her silky hair over her shoulder.

“So you keep saying, and yet we ‘ave not set a date.”

Bill waved a hand dismissively, still grinning. “Pfft, minor detail.” They hadn’t organised much for the wedding, in all honesty, but they knew it would be something in England; something fairly small, pretty informal. Bill might be a Wizengamot lord now and all, but he didn’t want all those airs and graces intruding on his wedding day.

“Tell that to Maman,” Fleur muttered, giving her steak a dark look for the moment. Bill grimaced — Fleur’s mother was not impressed by their wedding plans, or lack thereof.

“She knows we’ve been a bit busy, right? War on and all that?”

Fleur rolled her eyes. “She knows, she just does not care.”

The quarter-veela raised a hand, and immediately a waiter was at their side. A quick exchange in French had the waiter headed to get more water for the table. As he left, Bill looked around, catching several peoples’ eyes and smirking when they looked away hurriedly. It was something he was increasingly used to these days, whenever he was out with Fleur — people looking at him, blatantly trying to figure out what it was about him that made such a gorgeous woman spend time with him.

If they ever figured it out Bill would love to know, because he sure as hell had no idea even after a year and a half. All he knew was, he was here with the most beautiful person in the room, and that made him one incredibly lucky bastard.

“I love you, you know,” he told her, making her blink, her smile turning soft.

“I love you as well,” she said, reaching across the table to touch the back of his hand, just for a brief moment. “What brought that on?”

“Nothing, just — I really can’t wait to be your husband.” Despite his huge family, Bill had always thought it would take a bit longer for him to settle down. Thought that maybe he wouldn’t ever really do so, not in the way his mum wanted him to — wife, kids, the whole thing. He’d thought he’d keep travelling as a curse-breaker for another few decades, at least. The pay was great, and Gringotts were a fair employer. He liked his team, and the goblins. But he’d figured with all the people in the world, everyone he hadn’t met yet, it would take a while to find the one that he thought he could spend forever with.

Then he’d met Fleur.

When they were kids, his dad had joked that Weasleys were destined to find their soulmate early and stick with them through anything. Bill and his siblings had rolled their eyes and made gagging noises, especially as it had usually ended with their parents being mushy and gross in front of them.

Looking at his siblings, how their lives were playing out, Bill wondered if there might be a bit of truth to that whole destiny thing.

Fleur’s smile lit up the whole room. “I really can’t wait to be your wife,” she replied, whispering like it was some special secret, just between them. The waiter returned, pouring water, and Bill didn’t miss the way the man’s eyes dropped to the engagement ring on Fleur’s

hand, and then darted to Bill in consideration. Measuring him up, wondering if it was his looks or his money or something else entirely.

He snorted to himself — that could give a man a complex, being eyed up like that all the time. He was decent-looking enough!

“Stop paying attention to them,” Fleur interrupted his thoughts. He frowned, sheepish, leaning back in his chair.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean it. It’s just— they’re not even trying to be subtle.” He looked over Fleur’s shoulder, glaring at a pair of men a little older than him outright goggling in his direction.

“They are jealous, that is all,” the blonde dismissed. “They are not worth your worry.”

“I’m not worried,” Bill said. “I just wonder what they’re thinking, is all. What sort of story they’ve concocted for why a bloke like me is here with a lady like you.” He smiled lopsidedly. “Whether they think I’m actually loaded and you’re just with me for the cash. Planning on running away with it all as soon as we’re married. Or maybe they think I’m someone important in a business and you’re trying to get ahead.”

“All of these options make me sound like a terrible person,” Fleur remarked, unimpressed.

“And they make me sound incredibly desperate, so we’re even,” Bill replied, winking.

“Maybe they think we are both models, deigning to bless their restaurant with our beauty this evening,” Fleur suggested, and the curse-breaker cocked a skeptical eyebrow. “You are easily the most ‘andsome man in the room, Bill, look around.” The confidence with which she spoke made something in Bill puff up in pride, even as he smirked.

“You have to say that, you’re marrying me,” he pointed out.

“Because you are the most ‘andsome man in the room, yes, I am glad you follow,” Fleur agreed, giving him a mischievous smile that never failed to make his blood race. Suddenly, her foot was stroking his ankle beneath the table, sliding up the hem of his trousers. “Or maybe,” she continued, lowering her voice to a sultry murmur. “Maybe they are looking at us, deciding a pretty girl like me can only be interested in one thing, and assuming that you ‘ave a very big—“

Bill cut her off with a kiss — not because he didn’t want to hear it, but because hearing that word come from his future wife’s mouth in that tone would do things to him that were not *remotely* appropriate for a public space.

“If you want to stay for dessert, my love, you’ll change the conversation.”

Fleur leaned back, reaching for her champagne and draining the rest of the glass, looking back at him with a satisfied smile and come-hither eyes.

“My darling, who said anything about dessert?”

Bill had never paid for a meal so fast in his life.

.-.-.-.

“Oliver, we are *not* flying in on broomsticks.”

“Come on, Cass — where’s your sense of fun?”

Cassius sighed at his partner’s dancing turquoise eyes. “My sense of fun is in the quaffle centrepieces, and the quidditch-themed cake, and in letting you literally marry me at a quidditch stadium, which is *your workplace*, might I add,” he said pointedly, leaning over to kiss the pout off Oliver’s lips. “I plan to look so fucking incredible in my wedding robes that you will stop and stare in amazement. If you’re on your broom, you could end up being so gobsmacked by my beauty that you crash into a post. Then where would the *fun* be.”

Oliver laughed, squeezing Cassius’ thigh. “Fair point, love.”

They hadn’t *intended* to spend Valentine’s Day wedding planning, but they couldn’t exactly go out anywhere, and Ollie had a game in the morning so he couldn’t even drink.

Secretly, Cassius sort-of liked it; the pair of them in their pyjamas, surrounded by lists and pictures of flowers and cakes and Merlin knew what else, drinking hot chocolate and thinking up increasingly outlandish suggestions for their future nuptials.

It was so fucking *domestic* it was going to make Cassius’ teeth rot, and he wouldn’t change a second of it for the world.

“Have you picked out your robes, then?” Oliver asked curiously, tucking one leg beneath him to face Cassius a little better, even as he reached over to double check the menu. The stadium staff were going to cater the event, which was amazing, but also gave them a million options to choose from.

“I’ve narrowed it down to three,” Cassius told him. “How about you?”

“I thought I had it sorted. Then Da asked if I was gonnae wear the family tartan.” Oliver shrugged, cheeks going pink. “Said I’d ask how you felt about it.”

Cassius’ eyes roamed over his fiancé, mentally exchanging the Puddlemere t-shirt and quaffle-patterned pyjama bottoms for a kilt and all the accompanying regalia. Lust stirred within him. “If you’re wearing a kilt, you’re *definitely* not flying in on a broom,” he said decisively. “No one’s seeing your arse but me.”

Oliver laughed, winking at him. “Yes, dear.” He kissed his cheek, raising an eyebrow. “So you wouldn’t mind it? Having me in muggle-wear and all?”

“Ollie, love, at this point quite frankly I’d be so glad to call you mine officially I’d take you in your Puddlemere kit,” Cassius told him bluntly, watching the pleased and surprised glow chase across his partner’s face. “It’s *our* wedding. Yours and mine. If you want to wear a kilt, I’m entirely happy with that. Just be prepared for me to be grabbing your arse most of the night.”

“You’d do that even if I had robes on,” Oliver challenged. Cassius smirked, conceding the point.

“True. But all jokes aside for the moment, I don’t mind what you wear. Or if you want to add any other muggle traditions to our wedding, if they’re important to you.” Oliver’s dad was a muggleborn, and even though his grandparents had passed a few years ago, Cassius wasn’t so stupid to think that meant the family’s muggle connection was gone.

“I— but I’m already asking so much of you. With the pitch, and the cake, and all that.”

“Do you think I’d agree to it all if I really didn’t want it?” Cassius retorted. “Hell, love, do you think I’d be marrying *you* if I wasn’t at least halfway as quidditch obsessed as you are?” He pulled Oliver closer, their legs slotting together somewhat awkwardly, and pressed their foreheads together. “A Slytherin always gets their way,” Cassius murmured. “Everything I have strong opinions about, we’ve already sorted. I like the quidditch theme. I like the Puddlemere colours. And if you’re looking for an opinion, I very much like the idea of you in a kilt.” He smirked, kissing Oliver lightning-fast. “Not just because I know the whole thing will have my father rolling in his fucking grave.”

Oliver caught him before he could pull away, lips sugar-sweet and tongue languid and hot against Cassius’ own. Large hands held Cassius’ shoulders, grip achingly gentle despite the strength in those fingers.

“You’re a *lord* now, Cass,” Oliver breathed, voice cracking. “I don’t want to let you down with my nonsense on our wedding day.”

“You’ve never let me down, Ollie, and you won’t start now. I don’t want all that pureblood bullshit. The Warrington traditions I like, we’ve kept. The rest can go hang.” His brows drew together playfully. “Plenty of room for your *nonsense*.”

Oliver’s breath came out long and shaky, his eyes bright, full of love for Cassius. As always, Cassius’ heart clenched painfully tight.

“I’ll tell Da to book me a fitting at the kiltmaker’s, then. He didnae want to be the only one in a kilt, but he’ll get his out if I’m in mine.”

Cassius could see it now, the two men stood side by side in their family tartan, Ollie’s dad beaming with pride — beaming at Cassius, welcoming him into the family, like he’d always wanted but never truly felt he deserved.

Oliver’s parents had known about them since the beginning. Called Cassius another son of theirs before they even got engaged. Oliver’s sister was the same, calling him brother, teasing him just like she teased Ollie.

He didn’t deserve any of it, but he’d be so fucking grateful regardless.

“That’s settled, then,” Cassius agreed. “Kilt for you, dress robes for me, and no bloody brooms.”

A burst of laughter wrenched from Oliver, and then he was wrapping Cassius in a bear hug, kissing his neck. “I think that’s enough wedding planning for one night,” he decided huskily. “Don’t have to get it all done right now.” They didn’t even know when it would be possible, just a vague ‘after the war is over’, but by Cassius’ reasoning if they got it all ready to go early, they could move quickly once it was safe. He was not waiting an age to make Oliver Wood his husband once Voldemort was finally in the ground.

“Mm, you got a better idea, then?” he asked archly — and yelped when he was suddenly lifted off the sofa, Oliver’s hands under his arse as the keeper carried him towards the bed.

“Aye, I might.” He tossed Cassius on the mattress, following immediately after.

“Think I like this idea of yours,” Cassius said, gasping as hands yanked down his pyjama bottoms, a heavy form pressing on top of him.

It was the last coherent sentence Cassius formed all night.

.-. .

Valentine’s Day wasn’t really one you would usually associate with a joke shop, but Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes wasn’t an ordinary joke shop. With the breadth of their product range, business was booming — as much as it could in these difficult times, at least.

But it was all quiet now on Diagon Alley, the shops closed for the night, locked up tight until morning. And number ninety-three was no different.

Angelina liked to cook. She liked to cook family recipes; her mother’s recipes and her grandmother’s recipes — nothing remotely close to the food Fred had grown up with from Molly Weasley, or even at Hogwarts. But after several months of living with his girlfriend in this flat, both of the twins had been introduced to *proper food* as Angelina called it. Nigerian food.

Fred liked eating it very much, but cooking it still looked like some sort of sorcery he was not yet versed in.

“Go sit down,” Angelina said laughingly, batting away his hands as he tried to cop a feel while she checked the jollof rice. “I’ll be done in a minute.”

She’d been cooking since not long after George had left for Hogwarts, filling the flat with delicious aromas, and Fred’s stomach was rumbling. But she danced as she cooked, humming to herself with a smile on her face, and he could watch that quite happily for the rest of his life.

“Okay,” she declared, five minutes later. “Help me bring this to the table and it’s all yours,” she lifted one large pan, while Fred grabbed the pot — with his hands, not his magic. Angelina insisted that all parts of the cooking were better when done by hand, even the serving.

All her food was delicious, so Fred wasn’t going to argue.

They hadn't set the table in any fancy way, but there was a decent bottle of red set out to breathe, and Angie didn't know about the chocolate fudge cake he'd hidden in the back of the cold box.

"My lady," Fred said, pouring wine with an exaggerated flourish that made her giggle exasperatedly. He winked. "Happy birthday."

"Thank you." She tapped her glass to his. "Happy Valentine's."

When they were kids, Angelina used to get annoyed sharing her birthday with Valentine's Day. Claiming it was barely even a holiday, that it didn't exist to her.

When she'd learned the twins were born on April 1st, that eased the way a bit. The *special birthdays club*, they'd called themselves. Even when Angie got a bit older and hit the age where she might *want* all the fuss that went along with Valentine's, the twins always made sure her birthday didn't get lost in the noise. Especially once she finally agreed to be Fred's girlfriend.

"I'd say sorry for making you cook on your birthday, but this is delicious, so I'm not going to," he told her, and she beamed.

"I like cooking on my birthday," she insisted. "You did breakfast, so we're even."

Fred smirked — George had called in Alicia for the day to cover the shop with him all morning, so Fred and Angie could have breakfast in bed and a long birthday lie-in. Twin brothers were good for something, it turned out.

"Successful day, then?"

"Yeah, not bad." Her smile faltered, just for a moment, and Fred knew what she was thinking — she hadn't seen her parents since they'd taken an illegal portkey to Nigeria over a month ago, going to hide out with her grandmother's family.

"I wish you could chat to them, Angie," he sighed, knowing how much she missed them. "If I could find a way to make it safe, I'd do it for you in a heartbeat."

"I know. It's fine, really." Angelina reached over, taking his hand. "It won't be forever."

"Just a few months," he agreed, as they always said.

In a few months, the war would be over. One way or another.

Things were getting too tense to last much longer than that.

But those were far too dark thoughts to have on such a joyous day, so Fred gave his girlfriend a cheeky grin. "Want to go over and see the kids on Thursday?" he asked. "I thought I might take them some pygmy puffs."

Angelina raised an eyebrow. "Careful, there; Charlie will fight you for them."

Fred laughed. "He's fine, he knows I'm going for favourite uncle." All five of the kids had settled in now, and they were all great, but the Weasleys all had a soft spot for those twins and their big sister. Inheritance test be damned — if Sirius and Charlie didn't adopt the whole trio after the war was over, Fred would eat his broomstick. "So what do you think?"

"I did promise Nashira I'd come braid her hair soon," Angelina mused. "You sure we can take Thursday off?"

"Lissy's still around, she'll cover," Fred assured. Alicia had the whole week off work, she'd told him. And if not, Lee and George would handle it. There were so many of them willing to pitch in, so many friends working to help the twins' dream happen. They were the best.

"Then it's a date," she confirmed brightly.

"A date to go hang out with some kids — you sure you're not getting broody on me?" he asked, raising a teasing eyebrow.

"Merlin, no!" Angelina laughed. "That plan hasn't changed." No kids until they were thirty at least, was the plan. So they could enjoy life as adults for a while. Angie didn't want to go straight from being a student to being a mum, and Fred agreed wholeheartedly.

Thank Merlin for extra-strength contraception potion, to counteract that famed Weasley fertility.

"Also, you call them kids, Nash and Frankie are third years," she continued. "It's not that long since we were there ourselves!"

"Feels like it." Fred could barely remember third year at this point. "Blimey, those were the days. The year Harry showed up and everything got all *dramatic*." It felt so long ago, now. So much had happened — that scrawny little scrap of a first year was out and fighting the two most powerful wizards in the country.

"Honestly, still better than the year before, where we were all new on the team and had the shittiest seeker in the world and couldn't win a match to save our lives," Angelina said, shrugging. Fred laughed.

"Merlin, I'd forgotten about that."

With plates cleared and wine almost empty, Fred turned his eyes to his girlfriend. "Now, then, birthday girl," he drawled, "important question. Do you want bed," he wiggled his eyebrows salaciously, "or do you want cake?"

Her eyes sharpened. "There's cake?"

"Of course there's cake! What kind of man do you take me for!" He made an offended face, directing their dishes to the sink to wash themselves. "So what are you after?"

Angelina leaned back in her chair, giving him a once-over that had his jeans growing uncomfortably tight. "Cake," she declared, and he tried not to show his disappointment. "In

bed,” she continued, smiling wickedly. “Oh, I knew I loved you for a reason,” he declared vehemently. She stood, pressing against him in a steamy kiss, her braids tickling his neck.

“You get the cake,” she said, squeezing his backside. “I’ll meet you in the bedroom.”

His eyes trailed after her, too dazed to even think about following her instructions. In the doorway to their room, she paused, looked over her shoulder, then reached back and waved her hand to undo the buttons of her dress.

It fell to the floor with a soft thud. Angelina smirked. “Hurry up, then.”

In his haste to get to the bedroom, Fred almost impaled himself on a fork. Twice.

.-. .

One good thing about the Ministry being taken over by Voldemort was that Tonks and Kingsley no longer got stuck working alternate shifts. Or any shifts, really.

Sure, they kept busy — Kingsley was still working security for the muggle Prime Minister, as much as he could without drawing the Ministry’s attention for it. And then they had their work for the war effort; getting people safely into hiding, hunting down Death Eaters, doing what they could to stop the darkness from taking over before Harry even got the chance to face it. But they didn’t have to pretend they weren’t going home to the same place every night. Didn’t have to carefully check their schedules so no one realised they were spending their off days together.

Tonks could get used to life like that.

Valentine’s Day was something they’d never really done before. Something Tonks had never really done before, in all honesty. Not since Hogwarts, when it was just cards and chocolates and maybe flowers if someone was feeling really fancy. A trip down to the village, avoiding the god-awful display at Puddifoot’s, a bit of snogging and then life goes on.

He had thought, for a while, that perhaps they should go to some kind of effort for this one — get dressed up and go out, or do something. Since Sirius had introduced him to some of the muggle clubs he liked to go to, he’d gotten Kingsley into it, who turned out to enjoy it a hell of a lot more than Tonks thought he would. He’d considered making a night of it — dinner somewhere, clubbing, a whole muggle night out.

But honestly, they were both so fucking *tired* these days, it seemed like far too much effort.

Then Kingsley, the absolute god among men that he was, had picked up Chinese from the muggle takeaway down the road, brought it home and declared that they were going to eat it in bed like complete heathens, and then sleep for at least ten hours.

So they did. With bowls and take-away containers balanced precariously on their laps, they sat in bed in nothing but their pants and ate far too much Chinese food. It almost veered into dangerous territory when Kingsley spilled sweet and sour sauce on Tonks’ chest and decided to clean it up with his mouth, but there was still more food to be eaten — and then when all

of the food was gone, both of them were too full to even *think* about doing something so vigorous.

They cleaned up, sharing lazy kisses, abandoning their underwear now there was no risk of getting hot things on sensitive bits. Tonks amused himself by cycling his body hair through all the colours of the rainbow, taking requests from his snickering partner. They listened to the Wireless together — some audio drama about a quidditch player solving crimes, fun for them to pick apart for how utterly inaccurate it was. Kingsley pillowied his head on Tonks' flat chest, Tonks' hand absently rubbing his bald head like a strange, hairless cat. When the Wireless show ended, Kingsley announced that he was ready for dessert, and before Tonks even had the breath to point out that they didn't *have* dessert Kingsley's head was between his thighs, swallowing down his cock like it was the greatest thing he had ever tasted.

He brought Tonks off with his mouth, making his toes curl with pleasure, then crawled up his body and went back to his chest-pillow, throwing a leg over him and falling asleep before Tonks had even fully finished feeling the aftershocks, Kingsley's semi-erection jutting into his thigh.

Tonks stroked the smooth skin of his head again, heart full with how much he loved this man, how fucking lucky he was to get to see him in a way no one else in the world ever would.

And then he fell asleep, too. On top of the covers, Kingsley sprawled over him, before the sun had even finished setting.

It was the best Valentine's Day Tonks could have possibly imagined.

. . .

The waxing moon was high in the sky, its silvery light overshadowed by the yellow-tinted glow of the fairground-ride lights at the end of the pier. Most of the attractions were closed by now, the noise level barely a hum around them as the few late-night tourists went about their business.

Remus leaned his head against Severus' shoulder, cheeks aching from the force of his continuous smile. "No one would ever believe me," he murmured, playing with Severus' fingers in his lap. "I could show them a million pensieve memories and still no one would believe me if I told them about this."

Severus laughed, tilting his nose down to Remus' temple. "As it should be, wolf," he returned. "No one but you should ever know."

"What, that Severus Snape is an absolute demon at the penny arcade?" Remus teased, the sea breeze tickling his face. They were sat on a bench, facing the water, and not a single person who passed by gave a damn about them sitting cuddled up like that. It was Brighton, after all.

No one knew anything about them. They were just two ordinary men in their thirties, on a date at the pier. Remus had held Severus' hand in front of people, even kissed him on the cheek a few times, never having to worry about who might see them.

He could cry from the joy of it all.

Letting go of those long, slender fingers, Remus dropped his hand to the grey denim of Severus' jeans, immediately seeking the soft spot that had *almost* but not quite worn through to a hole in the knee. "Stop picking at it," Severus scolded half-heartedly, batting his hand away. Remus grinned into Severus' leather jacket.

"Never," he murmured, sliding his hand up to squeeze Severus' thigh. Then he exhaled a long, slow breath. "Fuck, I needed this, Sev."

Severus' arm curled around his shoulders, propped on the back of the bench. "So did I. More than I realised, I think."

"I feel like we're nineteen again." Waiting impatiently for Severus to finish work. Spending an afternoon at Palace Pier, playing the arcade and eating ice cream even though it was February, pestering Severus to go on the rides with him. Drinking cider and eating fish and chips on the beach as the sun set. "We should go dancing."

"If you like," Severus agreed. "Though I will remind you we are *not* nineteen again, and may be a little past the mark for some of our old haunts."

Remus scoffed. "Please; our old haunts were full of ageing queers back when we were teenagers, I doubt they've changed much now." The clubs around here were more forgiving of that, more understanding that not everyone had been able to go out and be themselves when they were the age for it, and some had to grab their happiness a little later.

"We'll soon see," Severus said wryly. Leaning back, looking at him in the low light, Remus could almost see that rail-thin, angsty teenager with the chip on his shoulder the size of a small country; the boy Remus had been so desperately in love with, so determined to pull from the dark and fumble a life together with.

He wondered what their teenage selves would say if they could see them now. They would be proud, he hoped.

"I'm going to spend the rest of my life with you, Severus Snape," he declared, a vow as much as a statement. Severus glanced down at him, raising one of his dark eyebrows.

"I should hope so," he drawled. "I've grown rather accustomed to you by now."

Remus laughed, cupping that angular jaw and pulling him in for a kiss — this was something they'd done as teenagers, too. Necked on the pier until someone yelled or threw something at them, far less tolerant of such things than they were now. Hardly anyone was around, and those who were didn't seem to care, and Severus certainly didn't seem to mind reliving this particular part of their youth. Back then it had been a rebellion, a defiant attempt to prove that they could be together despite their differences, that they didn't care what anybody thought of them, not in the muggle world. An attempt to prove to each other that things could work, even when they thought they might crumble.

Now, it felt like a promise. Like hope.

Eventually, they parted for air, and a seagull screeched as it hopped right by Severus' leg to steal a chip off the floor. Severus kicked out at it, but as always the bird was far too fast for any of that, grabbing its prize and taking off. Remus snorted.

"Can't take points from Gryffindors, has to resort to kicking seagulls," he teased, earning a scowl.

"I take plenty of points from Gryffindors," Severus retorted mulishly.

"With our cub in your class, I don't doubt it." Remus was amazed Gryffindor had any points left, some of the things Severus had relayed back to him. The mouth on that boy when he was angling for detentions, honestly.

Remus blamed Sirius. And Lily. Even from beyond the grave, she'd somehow instilled her un-ending snark in her son.

Gods, he missed her.

"Come on, then," he said suddenly, hauling himself to his feet and dragging Severus up with him. "Let's go see what entertainment is to be had for a couple of old homos in Brighton on a Monday night." He shivered against the evening chill, no longer using Severus' body for warmth.

The next thing he knew, a leather jacket was draped around his shoulders. He glanced over, seeing Severus in just a dark green long-sleeved t-shirt. "Chivalry, from a Slytherin? Why, I never," he mock-gasped. He shoved his arms into the sleeves — it was a little tight across the shoulders, but other than that it fit just fine. "Sure you're not cold?"

"Warming charms exist for a reason, wolf," Severus pointed out. Remus nudged him gently.

"Why didn't you just cast one on me, then?" he retorted knowingly. Severus' cheek twitched, an attempt not to scowl.

Remus laughed, tucking himself under the taller man's arm, feeling like he was walking on air as they headed down the pier towards the city.

Now he just had to get a bit more alcohol in his partner, get him on a dance floor, and everything would be perfect. He grinned to himself — the night was still young, and Severus was feeling very obliging it seemed.

He may regret that in the morning, when he had to teach second years with a hangover. But Remus wasn't going to remind him of that. They had Hangover potion in the medicine cabinet, after all. And he hadn't seen vodka-drunk Severus in *years*. He missed that handsy bastard.

No *real* trip down memory lane would be complete without it.

.-. .-

Harry was getting very good at conjuring beds.

It was not, perhaps, a talent he could show with pride to his Transfiguration professor. But it was a talent all the same. His latest attempt — a wonderfully comfortable king-sized bed with a small mountain of pillows to match — had certainly held up well to everything he and Draco could think to test it with in one evening, and Harry was fairly certain it would hold up long enough for them to get a few hours sleep, too.

He hoped so. Draco was awfully cranky when he woke up due to the bed disappearing.

He cuddled his Slytherin love closer, both of them boneless and sated but no longer sticky thanks to the joys of magic. On the floor beside the bed was the book of sex positions Harry had bought from Infinite — they'd ticked a couple more off the list, with resounding success.

"Can you believe we've only four months left of term?" Harry sighed, fingers running down the ridges of Draco's spine.

Draco groaned. "Don't. Four more months in this bloody powder-keg of a castle and I may never want to come back."

Rolling his eyes, Harry poked the blond gently. "As if. You wouldn't miss your seventh year. You wouldn't miss *my* seventh year."

"I'm sure I could convince you never to return, as well," Draco replied, reasonably confident.

"Not likely. Seventh year is going to be the first school year of my life where I won't have to deal with Dumbledore's bullshit or some sort of fight against evil. It's going to be brilliant." Just a normal year at Hogwarts, his biggest concerns passing his NEWTs and winning the quidditch cup.

"That does sound nice," Draco agreed, and Harry loved him for not even suggesting that there might be either of those things.

Harry had his heart set on that perfect, normal year. He was going to do whatever he had to this summer to make it happen.

He wouldn't let Dumbledore ruin his *entire* Hogwarts career.

"There's another World Cup the year after next, too," Draco told him. "Think it's in... Greece, possibly? Maybe Turkey."

"That would be fun. Do you think we could get tickets?"

Draco propped himself up on Harry's chest, looking at him like he was a complete idiot. "I think you'll be on the damned team, you clot." Harry started to grin, and Draco huffed. "Honestly. The only question is how badly it'll clash with my healer training and whether I'll be able to go with you for the whole thing. I shan't have you seeing all the sights without me."

"I've never been to Greece. Or Turkey," Harry said, a little bemused.

“The list of places you’ve never been to could fill a book. Does, in fact, fill a book — it’s called an atlas.” Draco snickered at his own joke, dropping his head to kiss Harry’s chest, right above the thatch of dark hair growing on his sternum. Draco’s chest was still baby-smooth, and he insisted it likely always would be.

“Can we go to them?” Harry asked.

“To all of them?” Draco asked, raising an eyebrow. “Might take a while.” Harry shot him a flat look, and he smirked. “I’m sure we can go to plenty of them. You’ve certainly got connections — France, Italy, Bulgaria, Egypt, Romania. Fairly sure my family owns an island in the Caribbean.”

“Of course you do,” Harry agreed, rolling his eyes. “Can we— can we go to India?” His voice grew hesitant. “Parvati and Padma said I could stay with their family if I ever went. I... I think I’d like that. But I think I’d like you to come with me. If you want. Sirius, too, maybe. See... see where my family came from.”

“Harry,” Draco sighed, voice achingly fond, “darling. I would follow you to the ends of the Earth with a smile on my face and then to Hell and back for good measure. Yes, I’ll go to India with you.”

There was nothing Harry could do about that but kiss him, so he did. Draco moaned softly, rolling onto his side to tip his head back, deepening the kiss at a much better angle.

“I love you,” Harry whispered against his lips, feeling the blond’s answering smile.

“I love you, too, you daft Gryffindor.” He squeezed Harry’s hip. “Now, are you absolutely sure this bed will last the night? I don’t want a repeat of the last time — I swear I still have bruises, and not the good kind.”

Harry laughed, kissing Draco again, smothering him with hundreds of tiny kisses until he was laughing too, until he agreed the bed was magnificent and wonderful and absolutely capable of carrying them through a night of slumber without fading to nothingness. Then Harry curled up in Draco’s arms, and fell asleep, dreaming of seventh year and quidditch and travelling, all with the boy he loved at his side.

Chapter 98

Despite most of them having done something to mark the occasion on Valentine's Day itself, a Hogsmeade weekend was still nothing to turn their noses up at — the idea of getting out of the castle was an excellent one.

So, weaving in between the third and fourth years holding hands and stealing shy glances at each other, Harry and Draco strolled down to the village — once again, Harry was wearing Draco's Slytherin scarf. Draco had developed a bit of a *thing* for seeing Harry in his house colours, ever since the Slytherin/Ravenclaw match.

When they reached the village, Harry saw two familiar heads of fiery red hair, and grinned, heading right over. The twins were a surprise — the two girls with them even more so. "Angie! Lissy!" Harry laughed as he was barrelled in a hug by the two chasers. "I didn't know you were coming down! What about the shop?" He cast worried eyes to Fred and George, who just smiled.

"Lee's manning it by himself today, no big deal. Alley hardly gets visitors anyway, these days." Fred's expression faltered ever so slightly, but then he was beaming, looking over Harry's shoulder. Harry didn't have time to turn around — a blur of dark hair sped past him, and Katie Bell bodily threw herself at her two best friends, screaming in delight. The noise was drawing attention, but none of them cared.

"Oh my God, I've missed you two. Ginny and Demelza are great but they're not *you*!" Katie enthused, still hugging the two girls, somehow dragging the twins into the mix as well.

"Don't suppose Ollie's gonna pop up somewhere, make this a proper reunion?" Harry half-joked. Angelina shook her head apologetically.

"He's got training. Sends his love, though."

Suddenly, George rocked up on his toes, darting off up the street. None of them even bothered looking — they knew exactly what had happened.

"That'll be Blaise, then," Draco sighed.

"Yup," Alicia confirmed, rolling her eyes. Then she turned to Draco, eyeing him appraisingly. "You're on our side, then, Malfoy?"

Of course; Harry forgot she hadn't yet met Draco as his boyfriend.

"Stand down, Liss," Katie assured, smirking. "Blondie's absolutely gone on our Harry, he's fine. Only time we need to hate him is quidditch."

Alicia blinked, gaze darting down to Harry's gloved hand brushing Draco's own. "Fair enough, then." She grinned, clapping her hands together. "Should we go fetch the lovebirds and grab a booth at the Broomsticks, before it gets too busy?"

“We’d better, yeah.” With the four graduates in town, Harry anticipated quite a big cluster gathering throughout the day. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw George and Blaise approaching, bringing Daphne, Luna and Sullivan with them.

“Ginny and Neville are on their way down,” Sully reported cheerfully. “Nev had to check something in the greenhouses. We didn’t ask.”

Harry snorted — that meant they’d be anything from five minutes to over an hour behind. “To the Broomsticks, then,” he declared, hoping there would still be a table free big enough for all of them.

They had to get a bit creative with the seating, squeezing tight into booth seats and dragging another table over for extra space, but Rosmerta didn’t seem to mind, greeting them all with a big smile and a wink at the twins when they began to flirt outrageously. Soon, Harry had a mug of warm butterbeer between his cold hands, Draco pressed close on one side and George on the other.

“How you doing, kid?” the redhead asked quietly, kissing Harry’s temple as he leaned forward to grab his drink.

“Well enough, all things considered,” Harry assured. “How about you? How’s the shop doing?”

“Keeping Diagon’s post office in business single-handed, it feels like, sometimes.” George gave a lopsided smile. “Foot traffic could be better, of course, but we’re still doing just fine. All thanks to you, naturally.”

“Oh, shut it,” Harry said, shaking his head. “I just gave you a boost — the genius is all you two.” A thousand galleons had been a great start, but it wouldn’t have gotten anywhere without the twins’ great ideas and solid business sense. “How’s the family? How... how’s your dad?”

He’d only heard from Arthur Weasley once more since the initial letter after Christmas. The man was still incredibly apologetic for everything, even though absolutely none of it was his fault.

George’s smile faltered. “It’s... difficult. We haven’t been home much since Christmas, but Dad’s come over a couple times. It’s hard for him — he loves Mum still, but he hates what she’s done to you. To all of us.”

“He knows Dumbledore was the driving force behind it, right?” From everything Harry knew about the Weasley matriarch, he doubted she would have gone quite so far in her manipulations of Harry without Dumbledore assuring her it was *for his own good*. Of course, that didn’t mean he was even remotely ready to forgive her for it or trust her again, but he didn’t want to destroy her relationship with her husband and kids. In a way, she’d been a victim of Dumbledore, just like everyone else.

“We’ve told him, yeah. Honestly, I think that made it worse — just made him think he should’ve done more to see what was happening. He’s been feeling guilty ever since he found

out how the muggles treated you, everything's just sort of piled on top of that."

Harry frowned. "None of that matters anymore, though. I'm done with the Dursleys. It wasn't your dad's fault." Sure, maybe at the time Harry might have raged at the whole Order guard who said nothing about a teenage boy not leaving his house once in an entire month, but even by then he knew not to expect anything. Dumbledore had them all too tightly wound in his web.

He couldn't let grudges like that linger, or they'd eat him alive.

Speaking of grudges — the pub door opened, and Ron and Hermione walked in, holding hands. Harry saw the moment their eyes landed on the large gathering; Ron froze, turning as if to leave, but Hermione tugged on his arm and took him over to a small table on the other side of the room.

Harry felt the same way about them, to a certain degree — they had been kids, manipulated by Albus Dumbledore. But they also should have had enough sense to know that being asked to stay friends with someone, to report back on their movements and keep them in with the *right* crowd was not normal, not something they should have been completely okay with.

Things would have been different, if they'd apologised for it and tried to work past everything. But instead the pair had doubled down, insisting they were in the right and Harry *needed them*, that none of Harry's other friends were good enough.

He wouldn't ever be their friends, wouldn't ever like them. But he was far too tired to hate them as much as they were determined to continue hating him. He preferred to just forget they existed.

"I'll talk to your dad over the summer, if I can," he said, turning back to George, who had followed his gaze to his youngest brother with an almost disappointed look on his face.

"I think he'd like that. I know he's trying to get Mum to be a bit more rational; I think he's starting with the easy stuff, really. Talking to Bill and Fleur about wedding stuff. Having me and Fred and Angie over for dinner. She even asked me about Blaise, once." He smirked. "Don't think he's worked her up to talking to Charlie and Sirius, though."

"Charlie hasn't told her about the kids, then?" Harry presumed. He'd heard all about the kids at Grimmauld from Sirius, knew how taken with the three siblings his godfather and Charlie were. Harry remembered Nashira Forrester, if only vaguely — he didn't interact much with the younger years, but he remembered her being one of the few Gryffindor first years in his fourth that hadn't gaped in either awe or horror at the sight of him. That was always nice.

George snickered. "Merlin, no. You've heard the story, then?"

"From Padfoot." Harry raised an eyebrow. "You really think they might be related to you?"

"I'd put money on it, honestly," George said. "But even if they're not, those two are hooked. The kids love them just as much — those twins think Sirius is even cooler than me and Fred! It's insulting, quite frankly." He winked. "You ready to be a big brother, then?"

“Can’t be too hard, if you manage it,” Harry teased, yelping at George’s elbow dug into his ribs. “It all sounds a bit too easy, though. I mean... we don’t even know if their parents are dead, do we?”

George’s smile faded, eyes growing serious. “Tonks and Kingsley are looking into it, but... it’s not looking encouraging.”

A lump formed in Harry’s chest. “Fuck. That’s terrible.” No matter how great it would be for Sirius and Charlie to adopt some kids, they would all much rather their parents be alive.
“What about the other two? Frankie and Kevin?”

“Kevin ran in an attack — he’s known his parents were gone for a while now, but he just got back in touch with an aunt who’s going to come take custody of him.” George’s lips pursed. “We haven’t found Frankie’s older brother, but the kid told us to stop looking. Blaise said Frankie was on the house watch list even before things went to shit; when he didn’t show up to school, they assumed the worst.”

Harry grimaced — Slytherin house, by nature, tended to get more abused kids than any other house. They were keen-eyed for the signs, and Frankie being on the watch list didn’t bode well.

Everything he’d heard about the third year boy hit a little too close to home, for Harry’s liking.

The dour turn of the conversation was interrupted as Ginny and Neville finally arrived, and everyone had to squeeze in a bit tighter to make room. Draco took the opportunity to place a hand on Harry’s knee, quirking an eyebrow in his direction. “You okay?”

Of course he’d been keeping one ear on Harry’s conversation. He was a Slytherin, after all. “Fine,” Harry assured, covering the blond’s hand with his own.

Draco didn’t look convinced, but he let it drop, turning his hand over to hold Harry’s as he went back to his conversation with Daphne and Sullivan.

They stayed at the Three Broomsticks for lunch, their table easily the loudest in the room — other Gryffindors dropped by to say hello to the graduates, not to mention a few of the heirs and their assorted social groups. It was quite possibly the most jovial crowd Harry had been part of since his birthday party; even at New Year’s, there had been the strong undercurrent of melancholy, the awareness that the coming year would bring a lot of dark things.

This was just light, simple, easy fun with his friends. Catching up with his old teammates, getting the gossip from the outside world, trying not to laugh as the twins teased Neville and Ginny hexed them under the table in retaliation.

Because of that, Harry didn’t notice the screaming at first. None of them did.

Then there was a thunderous crack from outside, and conversation died in an instant. Harry looked around his friends, colour draining from his face. “The wards,” he realised in horror. “We’re under attack.”

Immediately, they all began to scramble into action. Harry almost fell flat on his face in his urgency to get out of the booth, wand shooting from his holster into his hand. “Katie, Sully, get the younger kids safe inside,” he instructed immediately. “We need to clear the streets.”

They flooded out of the pub, right into a battleground.

Black-robed Death Eaters were everywhere. Flashes of spellfire lit up the street, while students and Hogsmeade residents alike screamed and fled for safety. He could see Flitwick and Vector, the two staff chaperones, holding bright blue Shield charms over a cluster of students fleeing from Puddifoot’s.

Harry threw himself in front of a pair of terrified third years, raising a shield and sending a Severing hex straight back at the Death Eater who had attacked them. “Get inside the Three Broomsticks,” he told the kids. “Now!”

They finally snapped themselves out of their fearful stupor, sprinting across towards the pub.

“Potter!” someone roared, voice echoing over the shouts of spells and cries for help. “We were wondering if you’d come play the hero!”

“Well, you’ve got me,” Harry snarled, dropping into a defensive position, shooting off spells at whoever was within distance. Proper combat spells, not the stuff he taught the HA.

Harry wasn’t going to pull his punches with people who came to attack *children*.

Around him, he noticed familiar faces standing their ground with their wands raised — those who had been with him in the pub, sure, but other members of the HA who had been in the village at the time. Cho with one of her yearmates; Justin Finch-Fletchley and the fifth year Slytherin girl he was currently dating; the Creevey brothers and Vicky Frobisher. All of them taking to the fight without fear or hesitation.

The Death Eaters didn’t seem to know what to do. One of them yelped loudly as Vicky hit him with a Stinging hex, distracting him enough for Colin to Disarm him and snap his wand over his thigh. Another ended up with enormous bats flying from his own nose, attacking his face — that had to be Ginny.

Harry grinned, sending an Impediment jinx at a Death Eater before they could finish casting a fire spell at Dogweed and Death Cap. What the hell kind of idiot set fire to a herbology shop; did they not know what kind of reactions that could cause?

It was clear they had not expected this kind of resistance in Hogsmeade. “Has your *master* gotten so desperate he’d send his lackeys out to torture and kill a bunch of third years?” he taunted, firing a curse that would shatter the bones in one Death Eater’s hand, making them drop their wand with a scream.

“*You watch your mouth!*” The screech was familiar, sending ice through his heart.

Bellatrix Lestrange was in Hogsmeade.

It looked like she had just arrived — back-up, perhaps? Or had she come late simply to gloat at their success? She must be disappointed, if that were the case.

As she sauntered down the cobblestone streets, two masked Death Eaters stayed close behind her. Harry wondered if it was the other two Lestranges; the brothers, Rodolphus and Rabastan.

He stepped up to face them. There was no way he was going to let the three of them loose on Hogsmeade. The HA could handle the rest — these three were all his.

“I’m only saying the truth,” Harry drawled, keeping his wand raised as he stood merely feet away from Bellatrix. “Hardly seems like a fair fight. Does he even care that some of those third years might be his followers’ kids? Or is he finally admitting that the whole pureblood supremacy stuff is just bullshit, and all he really wants is destruction.” He ducked a jet of bright green magic, smirking. “Ooh, naughty Bella! Your boss won’t like that; he wants to kill me himself, you can’t take that from him.”

Bellatrix scowled, and the next spell headed his way was a Cruciatus. Harry dodged that, too. “You don’t understand the Dark Lord’s master plans, you stupid half-blood!”

“Neither do you, by the looks of it,” Harry retorted. “Killing magical kids just to make a point? So much for *preserving the bloodlines*.¹”

The woman screeched, firing another spell, which Harry deflected. It left a huge gouge in the cobblestones when it hit the ground. “We don’t *care* about the ickle babies,” Bellatrix spat. “We’re here to make sure you and your blood-traitor *boyfriend* get what you deserve.”

Harry’s instinct was to look for Draco, but he didn’t dare turn away from the Lestranges. Draco would be fine. He could handle himself.

“Leave the others alone, then,” he challenged. “I’m right here. Leave them, and come get me.”

Not all of the Death Eaters took up the challenge. Some were clearly having too much fun terrorising the village — those ones didn’t last long against the HA.

But within moments, Harry found himself utterly surrounded. Bellatrix’s smirk was sharp as a knife, her wand drawing close to her face.

And the fight began.

All of Harry’s training could not have prepared him for this — there were more people after him than he could count, spells coming from every direction. He shielded and dodged and deflected, trying to send their spells back at them where he could, sending his own spells out when he got the chance. He wasn’t creative; Cutting curses, Bone-Breakers, Disarming charms. Anything quick, easy, and not likely to have him called a Dark Lord when the dust settled.

The HA were trying to help, picking their own fights with Death Eaters, those brave idiots. Fred and George were stood protectively over a huddle of kids who looked too injured to make it to safety, working almost as one singular being they were so in tune.

Suddenly, Harry caught a spell to the side, and fell to his knees with a scream of pain as all his nerves caught fire at once. Bellatrix cackled delightedly — a sound that was cut off with a wet thud, ending Harry's pain just as abruptly.

When Harry looked up, he saw Neville stood over him, blood splattered across his face. In front of them, Bellatrix was hunched over, hand grasping at her chest and face going chalky as she gasped fruitlessly for air.

"You will not use that spell on *anyone* ever again," Neville growled, helping Harry roughly to his feet. Bellatrix dropped to the ground — the two Lestrange brothers didn't like that one bit, and Harry was given no time to recover as he jumped right back in to defending himself. But at least this time, he had Neville there, too.

The Death Eaters were outnumbered, their resolve weakened by the felling of their leader. Harry's limbs burned with exertion, but it was easier with Neville at his side. Easier still when a tall, pale blond form appeared on his other side, face set in fierce determination, wand slashing down in a movement Harry recognised but hadn't dared use himself, couldn't without giving away where he'd learned it.

Rabastan Lestrange's left arm dropped to the ground, his wand going with it. The man screamed, while his brother snarled.

"You!" he roared at Draco, firing a Killing curse — Harry immediately summoned a broken bench to take the curse, though Draco ducked all the same. "I'll kill you, you blood-traitor scum!"

"I'd like to see you try!" Draco retorted, eyes blazing as he aimed another Sectumsempra, at Rodolphus this time.

Rodolphus screamed, arching his wand high above him, even as his chest split open from shoulder to stomach. There was a sound like a tree snapping, then the two Lestrange brothers huddled together over Bellatrix's slumped form, and with a crack of apparition they were gone.

Within a heartbeat, several more cracks of apparition sounded — Harry whipped around, wand raised and ready for the next round of the fight, but it wasn't more Death Eaters. It was the Order of the Phoenix, headed by Alastor Moody.

They looked around, blinking at the destruction surrounding them — and at the assortment of Death Eaters on the ground, some dead, some merely bound with magic, all with hard-eyed Hogwarts students standing over them.

"Potter!" Moody barked, limping forward. "What the bloody hell do you think you're playing at?"

“Playing at?” Harry repeated incredulously. “I’m not *playing* at anything — I’m saving lives, because your lot were too fucking slow to get here!”

“This isn’t a fun little training exercise for your bloody duelling club, boy!” Moody argued. Harry blamed his exhaustion for the way that he flinched at the word.

“Does it look like we were training?” he retorted, spreading his arms wide. “We’re the only damn reason Hogsmeade is still standing. You should be thanking us.”

Moody scoffed. “For putting yourselves in danger because you think you can stand up to a real fight, just because you’ve done it in your classroom? You’re going to get them all killed!” He looked around, glaring at the HA members. “All of you! Idiot children, involving yourselves where you’re not wanted. And you!” He rounded on Fred and George. “Where the hell were you two? You were supposed to be guarding the place, not reliving your glory days with your little friends!”

“Mad-Eye, I think you need to calm down,” Kingsley started, placing a hand on the man’s shoulder only to be roughly shrugged off. “Potter and his friends did good work here.”

“Potter and his friends need to keep their heads down and their noses out of other peoples’ business!” Moody snapped.

“They came here for me,” Harry said hotly. “They made it my business. Regardless, I wasn’t going to stand by and let them torture a bunch of third years!”

“You had no right to ask students to fight your battles for you! It’s one thing to take on Death Eaters yourselves; it’s another to throw kids in their way. Or do you want another Diggory on your hands?”

“Harry didn’t ask us to do anything!” came Ginny’s furious response. “We fought on our own decisions. And we *won*.” For good measure, she kicked the bound and unconscious Death Eater at her feet.

“And don’t you *dare* talk about Cedric like that!” Cho added, voice shaking only slightly.

Moody growled, turning back to Harry. “I knew something like this would happen. Before he left, Albus said—“

“Albus?” Harry repeated, wide-eyed. “You’re still listening to what Dumbledore told you, after he tried to *kill* me?”

Moody’s gaze narrowed, his electric blue eye darting up to Harry’s scar. “Don’t think because you’ve got the rest of the world convinced every word out of your mouth is bloody gospel, that you can hide the truth from those of us who know it.”

“Mad-Eye, that’s *enough*,” Kingsley cut in sharply. Another Order member scoffed.

“You *would* say that, wouldn’t you?” she muttered, glaring at Kingsley. “Still bitter you’re not leading the Order yourself, Shacklebolt?”

As the tension rose, the Order began to shuffle unconsciously into two sides — those with Moody, and those with Kingsley.

Harry wondered if he was being premature in thinking the fighting was over.

“You can’t say you condone this!” one of the wizards on Moody’s side exclaimed. “Just because we all know Potter needs to fight You-Know-Who doesn’t mean he should let kids in the fight as well!”

“I don’t think those kids had a choice when the Death Eaters started attacking them!”

They argued all at once, only snippets even audible over the combined din. Meanwhile the crowd gathered, staring incredulously at these grown adults bickering like children over a fight they’d been too late to help with.

It was too much for Harry. With an impatient growl, he raised his wand, creating a loud cracking noise that had everyone going silent at once. “Look. I don’t care what you think. The fact is, you were too slow. We had to fight, or we would have died. *Children* would have died. What’s done is done. Now, you can either fuck off back where you came from and sulk about a bunch of students stealing your thunder, or you can help us get our injured back to Hogwarts where they can be seen to. And you can deal with these scum,” he added, glancing at the downed Death Eaters in disgust. “I don’t know what you want to do with the alive ones. Can’t exactly take them to Azkaban these days.” Later, he might worry about how many of them weren’t truly loyal, were working for Voldemort just to save their own skin or their family’s. But right now he was in pain and tired and pissed off, and it was tempting to just kill every one of them and be done with it.

“We’ll handle it, Harry,” Kingsley assured. Then he turned to Moody, scowling. “And if this is the direction you’re taking the Order, you can count me out. I refuse to let children die just because the adults want to shelter them from reality.”

With that, Kingsley strode off towards the nearest group of students, healing charms already on the tip of his wand. A beat, and Sirius stepped forward. “What he said,” he agreed, glaring at Moody. “You can take whatever Albus bloody Dumbledore has told you and you can shove it up your arse. Stay the hell away from my godson.”

One by one, the Order fractured — Remus, Tonks, the Weasley siblings; all of them gave the rest of the Order disgusted looks and went to work on clearing up the aftermath.

“Throw your lot in with him, then!” Moody snarled. “You’re only signing your own death warrants!”

Then he glared at Harry one last time, bent down to grab a dead Death Eater, and apparated away.

The remaining Order members looked uneasy — some of them did the same, picking up a corpse and leaving to dispose of it. A few went to go aid in the repairs, but they were eyed with distrust.

Harry was glad to see Tonks carefully rounding up the still-living Death Eaters. He trusted her with them a hell of a lot more than he trusted Moody's people.

"Are you hurt, pup?" Sirius asked, rushing towards Harry and grabbing him gently by the shoulders. "Draco, Neville, are you boys okay?"

"Nothing major," Harry assured, giving himself a once-over now the adrenaline was beginning to fade. There was nothing he couldn't heal himself, he didn't think.

"I'm fine," Draco confirmed.

"I—I think I killed her." Harry turned to Neville, who looked like he was going to faint. His hazel eyes were glassy with tears as he looked back at Harry. "Did I kill her, Harry? Did—did I kill Bellatrix Lestrange?"

Sirius sucked in a sharp breath. Harry bit his lip. "I don't know, Nev." He would hazard a guess and say yes, but he wasn't completely sure what spell Neville had used. She certainly hadn't looked alive when her husband had apparated her out. "But if you did, good fucking riddance is all I can say." He placed a hand on his best friend's shoulder, meeting his gaze intently. "You saved my life, Neville. Saved dozens of lives, if you got rid of her. Don't you dare feel guilty for putting that bitch down. Not after what she did to your parents."

Neville nodded jerkily. Still, his whole body began to tremble.

"Come on, kid," Sirius soothed, putting an arm around Neville's shoulders. "Let's get you sat down, yeah? Give you a minute to breathe. Look, there's Ginny." He glanced back at his godson. "Get yourself up to the Hospital Wing, I'll meet you there."

Harry nodded, but when he turned, it wasn't to head up to the school. It was in the direction of the Three Broomsticks. The pub was a little charred and damaged out front, the sign nothing but splinters, but the line of students defending the doors had stood strong. Rosmerta stood with them, and now the fight was done she approached Harry. "I don't care what that idiot thinks — you're a damned hero, Harry Potter, and this whole village owes you our lives. You and all your friends." Around her, other shopkeepers who had dared venture out of their premises nodded.

"We just did what we had to do," Harry said, shrugging somewhat awkwardly. He wasn't used to being *thanked* for throwing himself into danger.

"Darn sight more than most would dare," Rosmerta returned. Then she straightened up, squaring her shoulders. "Let's get this mess cleaned up, then, shall we?" She looked at the crowd. "Anyone who doesn't have the strength to get back up to the school yet, come on in. I'll get butterbeer and sandwiches going, on the house." She smiled slightly. "And anyone who can fix my window gets a bottle of Ogden's Finest for their troubles. I was never any good with glass."

Several people perked up at that, including some of the students.

A hand on Harry's arm made him turn, meeting Draco's concerned gaze. "Sirius was right; you should get back up to the castle."

"Only once I know everyone's okay," he insisted. He might have told Moody that he hadn't asked his friends to fight, which was true, but that didn't mean he didn't feel some measure of responsibility for them. They were his students, of a sort.

For a moment, he thought Draco might argue. Then the blond merely sighed, pulling Harry in to a tight hug. "Fucking *Gryffindors*," he muttered. Harry laughed against the collar of his jumper.

Someone must have sent word up to the castle — McGonagall, Hagrid, Snape and Pomfrey arrived, Pomfrey immediately setting up a triage station just outside Honeyduke's as Draco hurried to assist her, the unconscious Professor Vector their first patient. The sweet shop was the least damaged of all, and Mrs Honeyduke was handing out bars of chocolate for the shock. When he drifted by to get a headcount of HA members, Harry found himself getting a huge bar of his favourite milk chocolate pressed into his hands. "Thank you, Mr Potter," Mrs Honeyduke murmured. "We wouldn't have stood a chance without you and yours." Then she was off, herding up a group of fourth years, sending them to catch up with the group Flitwick was leading back to the school.

Harry pocketed the chocolate, shaking his head bemusedly as he turned.

And immediately found himself at the end of the Hogwarts Matron's wand. "Sit down before you fall down, Potter." She gestured towards a conjured cot in front of her.

"Madam Pomfrey, I'm fine."

"I'll be the judge of that. You're limping." Over her shoulder, Draco scowled as Harry backed away from the mediwitch.

"There's students in far worse shape than me. Pass me a Healing potion, I'll be fine."

Pomfrey didn't look happy, but she couldn't deny the crowd of students needing her services was growing, so she let Harry be with the potion and a Nerve Tonic, as well as a mild threat to see her before he snuck away to the castle.

He stayed as long as he could, helping gather frightened students from their hiding places and offering what limited healing magic he knew. He levitated the corpses that hadn't been taken by the Order off to the side, where no one had to look at them. When some of the masks fell off, he recognised students who had graduated within his time at the school, and had to swallow back the bile that rose in his throat.

He conjured sheets to cover the two dead students, still held in the lifeless arms of a stout woman he vaguely recognised as a clerk at Gladrags, her protection clearly not enough.

The hand on his shoulder was McGonagall's this time, her weathered face drawn. "I can take it from here, Potter. You four are the only students left in the village; we've accounted for everyone else."

He blinked — waiting by Pomfrey's triage tent were Draco, Katie and Blaise. “I...” He trailed off, looking back down at the cloth-covered bodies. “I’m sorry I didn’t save them, Professor.”

McGonagall’s lips pursed, her fingers tightening on his shoulder. “Far more of them would have died had you not been here, Potter. Unfortunately, even the best of us cannot save everyone.”

He gave a stiff nod, barely a jerk of his chin. He understood that, but it didn’t stop the guilt. The Death Eaters had come for him, after all.

McGonagall released him, and he headed for his friends, stumbling a little as his quivering muscles began to protest a little too much, the ache in his hip turning sharp with every step. Now the adrenaline was starting to wear off, he was starting to realise he was not quite as unscathed as he’d thought.

“Don’t make me send you back to the castle on a stretcher, Potter,” Pomfrey called, not looking up from the patient she was dealing with.

“Oh, for Godric’s sake,” Katie huffed, stepping in front of Harry and turning her back to him. “Go on, on you get.”

He stared. “Sorry, what?”

“You’re no heavier than my little brother, and I give him piggybacks all the time. It’s me or a stretcher; you’re in no shape to make that walk under your own power.”

Blaise had his arm in a sling, and Harry could admit there was no way Draco was strong enough for that. He groaned.

“This is ridiculous,” he muttered. “I can walk!”

“Me or the stretcher,” Katie reminded. “So button it, Potter.”

Harry could count on one hand the number of times he’d been given a piggyback. But that was how he left Hogsmeade after his heroic battle against the Death Eaters — clinging to the back of Katie Bell, body slowly making its protests known, too tired to even argue at this point.

He would get Draco back for laughing at him, though. After he’d had some sleep.

.-. .

Dinner that evening was a subdued affair. To no one’s surprise, McGonagall announced that all future Hogsmeade weekends were cancelled for safety reasons. There was a small group of quietly crying students at the end of the Ravenclaw table, mourning the two kids that had died.

Harry couldn’t look at them without his chest hurting.

He ate mechanically, half propped up by Draco, wondering how the hell a day that had started out so wonderful could end so tragically.

“I was going to go up to the Hospital Wing, to visit Daphne,” Draco told him quietly. “Did you want to come with me? Pomfrey can get you checked out properly.”

Harry groaned, but nodded — the mediwitch was bound to get him eventually. Might as well get it over with. And he *was* pretty sore.

Then the rest of the sentence filtered through his foggy brain, and he stiffened. “Daphne’s up there? Is she okay?”

“She will be in a few days. She got caught by an Entrail-Expelling curse, but whoever cast it botched it, so it was reversible.”

Harry’s stomach knotted tight in horrified sympathy. “Fuck.” That was incredibly lucky. Draco nodded, eyes hollow.

“Yeah. You coming?”

As always, eyes followed Harry on his way out of the hall. But this time, instead of being suspicious or accusing, they were all filled with respect.

The Hospital Wing was far more full than Harry would have liked to see, most of the beds curtained off as their occupants rested. Daphne was at the far end, in the same bed Harry usually ended up in. Luna was sat in a chair beside the bed, braiding glittering purple wool into Daphne’s hair. At the foot of the bed, Astoria Greengrass sat with her knees tucked up beneath her, worried gaze stuck on her sister.

“Oh, good. I was hoping Mr Malfoy might be able to bring you up here tonight,” Pomfrey said to Harry, patting the bed beside Daphne expectantly. “Come on, let’s get this over with.”

Daphne gave a weak smile at Harry’s grumbling. “It’ll go quicker if you quit bitching, you know,” she teased. Her face was pale, the sheets pulled up to her chin, but she looked in fairly good spirits for a girl who had almost died.

“Can I help with anything, Madam Pomfrey?” Draco asked politely, and Pomfrey shook her head.

“Be glad you’re not sat right here next to Mr Potter — don’t think I didn’t notice you healing your own curse wounds down in the village.”

Harry turned accusing eyes on his boyfriend. “What curse wounds?” He hadn’t seen more than a few bruises on the blond when they’d snuck off to the prefect’s bathroom to clean themselves up, once they got back to the castle.

“Minor things,” Draco assured evasively. “As Madam Pomfrey said, I healed them all.”

That wasn’t nearly as reassuring as he probably thought it was. “You should have said something.”

“Pot, meet Kettle,” Draco said succinctly, making Astoria giggle. He turned to Daphne, gaze softening. “How are you feeling?”

“I think I’m going to go vegetarian,” Daphne answered, making all of them but Luna stare at her in confusion. “After seeing my insides on the outside, the idea of eating meat has become quite unappealing.”

A beat, then Draco snorted. “I told you not to look at it.”

“Yeah, but I wasn’t going to just close my eyes and let you rummage around my intestines.”

“Quite frankly, Miss Greengrass; Mr Malfoy’s *rummaging* is the only reason you’re still able to eat at all,” Madam Pomfrey remarked. There was pride in her eyes as she looked at Draco.

“Wait, Draco reversed the curse?” Harry asked, wide-eyed. “You didn’t mention that part!”

Draco blushed under his scrutiny. “It was before help arrived. There was no one else there to do it.”

“You saved your friend’s life, Mr Malfoy,” Pomfrey told him. “Did a very fine job of it, too. You’ve the instincts of a battlefield healer to you.” Then she glanced askance at Harry. “I suppose you’d have to, willingly tying yourself to this fool.”

“Hey!” Harry protested. Pomfrey clucked her tongue.

“You’ve been walking around all day on a fractured hip, Mr Potter,” she told him bluntly.

“...Oh. Thought it was a bit sore.”

The matron rolled her eyes heavenward for a brief moment. “Hold still.” She tapped his hip with her wand, murmuring a spell — there was a strange cold sensation, then the pain began to fade. “You’ll take it easy for a week, Potter,” she instructed. “No quidditch. No duelling practice. No *other* strenuous activity.” Her pointed gaze moved to Draco, and Astoria giggled again. “A week, and then you’ll come see me again. Clear?”

Harry swallowed. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Good. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got other patients to see to. Miss Greengrass, your guests can only stay another twenty minutes; you need your potions and then rest.” Pomfrey hustled off down the other end of the ward, leaving the teens alone.

“A whole week? Not sure you’ll cope,” Daphne teased feebly.

“It’s going to be even longer for *you*, so don’t be smug,” Draco scolded. He perched on the bed with Harry, leaning to take Daphne’s hand. “Are you sure you’re alright? I didn’t — I didn’t mess anything up in there?” Nerves strained his voice, and Harry squeezed his knee.

“You heard Pomfrey,” Daphne insisted, “you did a very fine job.” Her smile was tired, but genuine. “Thank you, Draco. I owe you my life.”

Draco swallowed tightly, squeezing her hand. “I’m just glad you’re alright.”

“It was a close one,” Daphne agreed. Her sister whimpered softly. “Tori, I’m okay. Draco patched me up, yeah? Good as new. Don’t even need to tell Uncle about it.”

Astoria’s eyes narrowed. “Oh, I’m telling him,” the fourth year insisted. “Daph, you almost *died*. In Hogsmeade! What if next time—“ She cut herself off, shaking her head defiantly.

“The war will be done by the new school year,” Luna said suddenly, confidently, *knowingly*. Harry’s spine straightened.

“You See it?” he asked, and she nodded.

“By summer’s end, the fighting will be done,” she said in that same Other sort of voice.

“Don’t suppose you See us winning, do you, hun?” Daphne asked. Luna shook her head apologetically.

“There are too many paths, too many wrackspurts. The outcome is unclear.”

Ignoring the ache in his hip, Harry slithered an arm around Draco’s waist, hugging the blond to his side. That was good news, of a sort.

But it still made his stomach churn with unease, imagining the battle to come.

Chapter 99

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“The house is full, but we’ve got some tents set up in the garden.” Sirius flashed a grin through the mirror’s surface. “Even had a couple more elves come along, which I think Tinker appreciates.”

“Not Essie?” Harry asked, grinning. Sirius snorted.

“Not hardly. Thinks we’re implying she isn’t up to scratch.”

It was late, and Harry was in bed chatting to Sirius, getting an update on life outside Hogwarts. He was glad the Pottery was helping so many people, even if it was a bit horrifying to imagine just how many families had been displaced by the Death Eaters.

How many hadn’t made it as far as safety.

“And how are the kids at Grimmauld doing? Did you end up moving them over?” Harry knew his godfather was torn on whether to take the five children to the Pottery, too — Grimmauld was more of an emergency hospital than a true safehouse, and the healers there couldn’t be expected to keep looking after the kids as well as their patients. Even though the kids insisted they could look after themselves just fine.

They would be better off at the Pottery, where there were others their own age there.

But Sirius was attached to them, now. He liked having them at Grimmauld.

Harry watched the dog animagus bite his lip. “Yeah, we took them over at the weekend, when Kevin’s aunt showed up,” Sirius sighed. “One of the other boys at the house is one of Frankie’s dorm mates from Hogwarts, so they were pleased to see each other. I don’t—I don’t think Nashira was as happy about being there. I don’t think any of them know how to cope with so many people around, after how long they spent by themselves.” He ran a hand through his long hair. “Poor kids. It’ll be good for them to have proper company, though.”

“But you miss them,” Harry finished knowingly.

“But we miss them,” Sirius agreed. “Merlin, pup. I hope you get to meet these kids soon. You’ll love them. Nash is a little sass-monster, just like you.”

Harry laughed. “I hope so, too.” He cocked his head, curious. “Have we figured out yet what the plan is for any other war orphans?” The ones at the Pottery weren’t the only ones by far. Most were safe at Hogwarts, but that wouldn’t help when summer came around. “It’s not like there’s an orphanage or anything for them.”

“We’ll keep them safe wherever we can, for now. If they can go to friends’ houses, or stay at a safehouse. When the war is over... inheritance tests for the muggleborns, to see if they’ve

any family connections that may take them in. And looking in the muggle world, of course — aunts, uncles, grandparents. We'd have to make sure it's safe to let them in on the secret, but that usually turns out alright. Same for the other kids; we'll look for family to take them in, or godparents."

"And if they have none?" Harry asked, well aware that a lot of children of Death Eaters had entire extended families in Voldemort's service.

"Then we find people willing to take care of them. The older kids will be easy enough to foster; they're at Hogwarts most of the year. But we're hoping to find enough people willing to adopt. Depends how many we end up with, when the dust settles. Amelia's suggested we contact squibs, or families of other muggleborns who know about magic. With stringent checks, of course," Sirius added, seeing the panic flicker across Harry's face. "We won't leave any of them alone, pup. We won't let what happened to you happen to another kid." His grey eyes turned soft. "Trust me, yeah? They'll be alright. Hell, I'd adopt every one of them myself before I let another Dursley situation happen."

Harry managed a smile. "From the sounds of things, you're already well on your way to doing that." He laughed when that drew a blush up Sirius' olive cheeks.

"Don't be a brat."

He laughed harder, the tension draining from him.

Privately, Harry cursed the timing of it all — he and Draco wanted a whole quidditch team full of kids, and couldn't count on finding women willing to surrogate for that many. But they weren't even seventeen yet; all these war orphans needed homes now, and there was no way two boys who hadn't even graduated school could provide that for them.

It was a shame. But he believed Sirius when he said they'd find places for all the kids.

Maybe having a whole bunch of new siblings would be a nice warm-up for when he and Draco decided to get started on that quidditch team.

"I've got to go, pup. Charlie's just got home," Sirius said, gaze looking at something beyond the mirror, out of Harry's view. "Looks like the baby dragons got the better of him a bit."

"Rude!" Harry heard faintly through the glass, and chuckled.

"I'll leave you to it, then. G'night, Pads."

"Night, kiddo."

The mirror turned to plain glass once more, and Harry tucked it in his nightstand with the Marauder's Map. It still made his chest ache, seeing those items without his invisibility cloak tucked in with them.

What was Dumbledore up to, with all three Hallows? Had he discovered whatever power they held once combined?

Harry sighed — everyone else in the dorm was asleep, but he still felt restless. Silently, he crept out of bed, sitting on the ledge of the curved window, staring out at the night sky. Somewhere out there was Dumbledore, plotting Merlin only knew what. Possibly with the power of Death itself at his disposal.

If only Harry had left his cloak behind that night. He hadn't even been *wearing* it!

Scowling to himself, he focused back on the stars — beating himself up wasn't going to help him sleep any.

He saw a pale blur in the sky, and smiled as he squinted at it — it was Hedwig, out for a late night hunt.

Then a second pale blur joined the owl. Another snowy owl. Harry raised an eyebrow.

Well, it seemed he wasn't the only one who couldn't sleep, tonight.

Slowly, silently, Harry undid the latch on the window, hissing when the cool night air touched his skin. Then he whistled — not too loud, but enough to carry through the quiet.

An owl hooted in response.

The two pale forms changed direction, heading towards him. The one that wasn't Hedwig was showing off a little, flying graceful arcs and dives, making Harry grin. Hedwig landed on the window sill first, cooing softly at Harry. He scratched the back of her head where she liked it best. "Hello, sweetheart. You showing him how it's done?"

The second owl's landing was a little more unsteady, and he butted imperiously at Harry's hand. Harry chuckled, giving him a scratch, too.

Hedwig hooted softly at the pair of them, hopped up to gently nip Harry's ear, then took off in the direction of the Owlery. The second owl watched her go, then turned back to Harry, bright amber eyes studying him.

Harry shuffled backwards, opening the window a little further. "You coming in then, or what?"

The owl didn't need asking twice, hopping through the window and giving a graceful little glide over to Harry's bed. Harry shut the window, heartbeat picking up.

By the time he turned around again, Draco was fully human, draped attractively over Harry's crimson duvet, wearing grey silk pyjamas and a lazy smirk. "So this is the Gryffindor dorms, is it? Charming."

Harry hurried to join him, pulling the drapes and raising a Silencing charm, arousal already coursing through him. This was exactly what he needed to deal with his restless energy. He straddled Draco's hips, mischievously kissing his nose. "Do you have any idea how many times I've fantasised about having you up here?" he murmured, playing with the button at Draco's throat. Grey eyes turned the colour of a summer storm, hot with lust. "Splayed out on my Gryffindor sheets, no one else knowing you're in here." He kissed Draco's jaw, suckling

at the tender spot just below his ear. “Do you know how many times I’ve jerked off in this bed thinking of you? How many dreams of you I’ve had in here? How many times I put my own fingers inside me imagining it was you, before I was brave enough to ask you for it?”

“*Harry*,” Draco moaned, rocking up into him.

“I don’t know what I want more,” Harry confessed, biting at Draco’s throat, kissing his way down his chest as he opened the shirt one button at a time. “To pound you into my mattress, or to have you do it to me. Something very sexy about the idea of my Slytherin boyfriend fucking me in the Gryffindor dorm.”

“Do you have lube up here?” Draco rasped, and Harry smirked. He sat up, pulling off his t-shirt in one fluid motion, then reached over Draco’s head to the hidden shelf behind the headboard, grabbing the vial he knew was in there. He watched Draco’s eyes follow the flex of his shoulders at the movement.

“Do I have lube, he asks,” Harry said, rolling his eyes, holding up the item in question. “As if I’d survive without it, all those lonely nights up here thinking of you.”

“Tell me about it,” Draco urged huskily. “These fantasies of yours.”

Harry’s eyes lit up. He finished undoing Draco’s shirt the rest of the way, letting it fall open to reveal the blond’s pale chest. Merlin, he looked good against the bold red duvet. “Well,” he began, keeping his voice low. “There’s quite a few of them. Sometimes I imagine we’re the only ones in the dorm, and I bend you over the end of the bed and fuck you til all of Gryffindor can hear you begging for it.” He let his fingertips trail down the soft trail of silver hair on Draco’s stomach, tugging gently at the waistband of his trousers. They were tented obscenely, a wet spot soaking through already.

“Sometimes I imagine I’m up here getting myself off and you sneak in to surprise me and catch me right in the middle of it. Sit right at the end of my bed and watch me til I finish.” He peeled the pyjamas down, baring Draco entirely, and sat back on his haunches to survey his boyfriend in satisfaction. Draco looked just as perfect in his bed as he’d always imagined.

“I’ve thought of all sorts of dirty, dirty things up here involving me and you. Didn’t even consider your new animagus form might make it easy to get you up here and actually do them.” He winked — if only the same could be said for his form making it as easy to sneak into the Slytherin dorms. That was something for another night.

“But the very first fantasy I ever had, once I knew enough to start *properly* fantasising,” he whispered, startling Draco when he reversed their positions, bringing the blond on top of him and then lifting his hips to take off his own trousers. “I imagined we were just like this, middle of the night, sneaking around behind my dorm mates’ backs. And *you* were just like this, over me, all gorgeous and Slytherin silver against my red and gold drapes, and *you* fucked me like I was the most precious thing in the entire goddamn world.” It was such a *sweet* fantasy, such a juxtaposition to the many other dirty thoughts he’d had of Draco in this bed. A fourteen year-old’s ideal of the perfect first time, not hot and heavy and wild but slow, sensual, *loving*.

Draco's breath hitched, his hands on Harry's thighs. He looked exactly as Harry envisioned he might, beautiful and flawless and *utterly in love*, haloed in the gold brocade along the top of the drapes. He leaned down, lips pressing to Harry's, nose brushing Harry's cheek as he opened his mouth and kissed him like he was trying to devour Harry's entire being. "You are," he breathed once they parted, smoothing reverent hands over Harry's bare chest. "You are the most precious thing in the entire world to me, Harry James Potter. Don't ever think otherwise."

Harry couldn't breathe, his chest was so tight with love for this boy above him, his beautiful Slytherin, his shining light in the darkness. Draco knelt between his open thighs, and his kiss-swollen lips curled at the corners. "Look at you," he murmured. "Letting me think you're about to ask for something *scandalous*, and all you want me to do is love you."

"Please," Harry gasped, hands fisting in his sheets. He felt so *exposed*, lying there naked in the bed he'd spent most of the last six years in, with Draco just *looking* at him with his eyes so warm. "We can get to the scandalous stuff later, if you like. Just— please." He hadn't realised how much he wanted this, *needed* this. Needed Draco to fulfil this teenage wish of his, to prove that loving Harry like that wasn't just something that happened inside Harry's own head.

Draco adjusted himself, hooking Harry's legs up over his shoulders, gently kissing the inside of his knee. Then he reached for the lube, abandoned on the bed beside Harry. "This good?" he checked, uncorking the vial. Harry keened quietly, heart beating so hard he was amazed Draco couldn't hear it, couldn't tell how it begged to leap right out of Harry's chest and into the blond's waiting hands, where it belonged.

"Perfect."

.-. .

Harry wouldn't say that Draco sneaking up to Gryffindor Tower in owl form became a *routine* after that... but he learned to expect that quiet tap on his window on Wednesday nights. Always Wednesdays — they had a free period first thing Thursday morning, so it wouldn't matter as much if Draco stayed the night.

He was pretty sure Neville suspected something, even if the other Gryffindor wasn't sure what. He didn't know about Draco's animagus form, after all. But Harry's sudden shift to always staying in the Tower on Wednesday nights did not go uncommented on. Nor did the Slytherin tie that Draco accidentally left up there one week, having come up still in his uniform so Harry could get the proper effect of having his snake in the lion's den.

It made the week more bearable, that was for sure.

It wasn't exactly the most comfortable thing in the world, squeezing two teenage boys into a single bed, but it just gave Harry an excuse to hold Draco even closer while they slept, after they'd properly exhausted themselves. But Harry could definitely get used to having one guaranteed night with his boyfriend — even if they didn't get up to anything sexual, it was nice having him there, without having to worry about being intruded on in the Room of Requirement or sneaking back up to their dorms from the Chamber. Sure, Draco always had

to leave before sunrise, but that was easy enough. With a bit of begging on Harry's part, Hogwarts was kind enough to squeeze a little owl-sized passage into the existing dungeon vent system, so Draco could come and go as he pleased.

Harry could hardly believe it had taken them so many weeks to figure out.

Plenty of people noticed the spring in Harry's step in the following weeks, but most of them seemed to attribute it to Gryffindor's success against Hufflepuff, leaving them in perfect position to take the quidditch cup unless Slytherin absolutely trounced the badgers in April.

That was nice, too. As was the blowjob Draco gave him for an impressive snitch catch.

With the rest of the world falling to shit around them, Harry needed bright spots like that to keep him going. To keep all of them going — because if he looked like he was starting to falter, the entire castle's morale would plummet.

They were counting on him to lead them to victory against the Dark, and he needed to look like he had that well in hand. There was no room for him to be scared, or sad, or exhausted. Not in public, at any rate.

He was Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, and he had a duty to uphold.

.-. .

The Dark Lord was angry.

Severus was just glad it was aimed at someone other than him, for once. His last few summons, his master had not been impressed with the lack of information Severus had to offer — about the school, or Dumbledore's whereabouts, or Potter's progress in classes.

He didn't believe that no one had heard from Albus since the man's disappearance, even though that was perhaps the only genuine truth Severus gave him.

Last time, when he had been summoned after the attack on Hogsmeade to discover Bellatrix dead and Rodolphus mere moments from the same, Rabastan missing his casting arm from the mid-bicep down — the punishment Severus had received for not warning his lord how capable the students of Hogwarts were had been intense.

But tonight, the Dark Lord's ire was directed at Fenrir Greyback. Just looking at the man made Severus' blood boil — this was the *monster* that had turned Remus when he was just a child, revenge for a father's slight against wolves. Greyback was exactly the reason werewolves had such a bad reputation as bloodthirsty, savage beasts. The reason Remus struggled to get a job, to be served in shops, to be given a modicum of respect by the wizarding world at large.

This man was the reason that Remus had learned to hate himself, and Severus despised him for it.

"You have always prided yourself, Greyback, on being the *alpha*," Voldemort sneered at the hulking form kneeling at his feet. Even as a man, Greyback had more of the wolf to him than

Severus had ever seen. There were rumours of experiments, done years ago — done to make him closer to his wolf form, able to transform at will, able to infect even in his human form. Severus had no idea how much of it was true, but if even *half* was... Fenrir Greyback could barely be called a man at all.

“Yes, My Lord,” Greyback agreed, bowing his head.

“And yet,” Voldemort continued coldly, “you have *failed* to get the werewolf packs to follow you. To follow *me*. You told me you were an alpha, that none would dare go against your will, that any who would try would die at your claws. But you are *weak!*”

“I’m sorry, My Lord,” Greyback said, daring to look up. Severus wondered how he could call himself an alpha of anything when he took to subservience so quickly at the Dark Lord’s hand. “They have banded together — I am strong, but I cannot fight them all at once. The packs have formed an alliance with the Potter boy. He has promised them rights, and the choice to stay removed from the fighting. He has promised them freedom.”

Oh, the Dark Lord did not like that, not one bit. Greyback screamed under the Cruciatus, but not a single Death Eater so much as twitched. No one wanted that fury directed their way. “*Potter*,” Voldemort spat. “How can he promise them this? How can he offer them freedom and have them *believe* it? How can he offer them *peace*? I, Lord Voldemort, am the one who decides where blood is shed!”

“I believe it is Lupin’s doing, My Lord,” Greyback snarled. Severus’ shoulders tightened. “That impudent little runt is close with the Potter boy, and I know he’s visited the packs in the past. No doubt he has persuaded them that his relationship with Potter means the boy *cares* about what happens to them.”

Another Cruciatus, this one shorter but no less agonising. “Of course. Lupin,” he sneered, and Severus *hated* hearing his love’s name in that filthy mouth. “He will die, in good time. And so will the wolves who believe *Saint Potter* can convince the world to care for beasts and creatures.”

“Of course, My Lord,” Greyback agreed, voice little more than a growl after his prolonged screams of pain. It amazed Severus, how a man so proud of his creature status could bow to a master they all knew would wipe werewolves off the face of the earth in a heartbeat if he had the power. “How may I assist you in your bloodshed?”

Thin, colourless lips twisted in a snarl. “You are mistaken if you believe you are worth anything to me, Greyback, now that you come with no pack at your call. If they will not support you, I have no need for a weak, useless *pup*. Avada Kedavra!”

Greyback hit the wooden floor with a soft thud. No one dared move. Severus wasn’t sure his heart was even beating anymore.

“Mulciber!” Voldemort snapped, and immediately the dark-robed figure was at his side. “Clean this up.”

“Yes, My Lord.” Mulciber pulled his wand, levitating the body away.

The Dark Lord paced in front of his loyal followers — a diminished group, now, thanks to Potter and his ilk. Severus felt a swell of pride in his chest whenever he thought about it. But this was not the place for such things.

“Severus,” the steel-silk voice called, and Severus locked up that pride along with all his other positive emotions in a tight box in the deepest part of his mind, where the Dark Lord would never find it.

“How may I serve you, My Lord?” he asked, moving straight to kneel where Greyback once had. His heart pounded in his throat as he hoped he would not suffer the same fate.

“Tell me of the school,” Voldemort urged. “What more is being done to put that Potter brat in his place?”

“I humiliate him in classes as much as I am able with the headmistress breathing down my neck,” Severus reported. “There are whispers that Dumbledore tried to kill him because he is a threat to the Light. I believe your loyal few within the school are perpetuating their own work in the student rumour mill. He is getting cocky, My Lord — he is well guarded, but he believes himself to be above the need for it, now he has drawn blood in battle. He will slip, My Lord, and you will get him.”

“You had best hope so, Severus,” Voldemort warned. “And still no word of Dumbledore?”

“None, My Lord. It seems whatever his plan is, it does not involve others.” And that was a whole other worry in itself.

The Dark Lord frowned, and Severus wondered if he was about to be screaming on the floor. Or worse. He braced himself, keeping his head bowed.

“Stay vigilant, Severus. You may not know who my loyal followers are within the student body, but they may call for your assistance soon. I shall task them with capturing the Potter boy; if he is as cocky as you say, they should not fail. You are dismissed, for now.”

Severus got straight to his feet, offering one last bow. “You are gracious, My Lord. I will await their word.” *Why wouldn’t his master tell him which students to look out for? Was it a matter of trust? Surely he would have killed Severus by now, as unhinged as he had become, if he believed him to be suspect.*

Or did he value a Potions Master more than he valued loyalty, these days?

It was difficult for Severus to tell, and he could not test his boundaries. Luckily, his allies in the Light had little need of information from him these days — they weren’t like Albus, expecting him to recount every second of his summons in case something useful popped up. But they understood how precarious Severus’ position was, and didn’t ask him to reveal information that might cost him his life.

He would have to tell them about this, though. He would have to tell Harry to stay vigilant.

Instead of apparating back to the castle, Severus made for home, shrinking his mask as he strode across the lawn. Unsurprisingly, Remus was waiting in the kitchen. “How was it?” his partner asked, jumping to greet Severus. He hesitated, scant inches away. “May I...?”

Severus closed the distance between them, ducking his head down to press his nose to Remus’ temple. “Fenrir Greyback is dead,” he declared, quiet but strong. Remus tensed in his arms.

“What?”

“The Dark Lord decided he had no use for a werewolf who could not bring him an army,” Severus relayed, meeting Remus’ honey gaze. “The packs have sided with Potter. Greyback’s punishment for failure was death.”

A hitch of breath, a flash of eyes. “Oh.”

“He blamed you for his failure,” Severus warned, hating the panic that welled in him when he thought of the idea of the Dark Lord having a *personal grudge* against his wolf, against another person Severus loved. “Greyback told him you were the one who swayed the packs to Harry’s side.”

Remus nodded slowly. “He’ll be after me, then.” No fear. Gods, this man was a marvel.

“In due time, so he said. I believe he has other priorities, first.” Like Dumbledore, and Potter. The loss of the werewolves was a blow, especially with how thin on the ground the Dark Lord’s ranks were looking these days, but it was not the biggest blow his master had suffered lately. Not since losing two Lestrange and watching the third have to retrain himself to duel with his off hand.

Remus nuzzled his jaw. “Let’s get you out of those robes. In the bath. Get the scent of that monster off you.” Severus wasn’t sure if he referred to Voldemort or Greyback, but he had no protests either way.

There were no more words between them until they were both naked, Severus in the bath and Remus kneeling at its side, washing his hair. Severus cracked an eye open, looking up at his partner. “You are taking the news that the Dark Lord wants your blood remarkably better than anticipated.”

Remus laughed, leaning down to kiss Severus, the angle awkward. “He wants the blood of anyone who stands against him. Anyone who stands with Harry. I am hardly in more danger than I was before.” He smiled, sitting back on his heels. “I spent half my childhood imagining Greyback’s death. Of course, most of those imaginings were at my hand, but the end result is the same.” His hand went to the back of Severus’ neck, squeezing gently, his smile turning soft. “It may be too late for me, but I have made a wonderful life for myself regardless of circumstances. But now, no more children will be turned on purpose for that beast’s amusement, or his vengeance. There will always be werewolves — but he was the worst of them, and now he’s gone, and the world is a better place for it.” Remus paused, cocking his head. “Does that make me a bad person, to relish in his death?”

Severus reached out of the water, sliding a hand into greying hair and twisting, yanking Remus down into the most ravaging kiss he could manage without accidentally pulling him into the tub. He pressed up into the kiss, and Remus gave as good as he got, meeting him beat for beat as he always did.

"If it does, that makes two of us," he said eventually, breathless and dark-eyed. "Join me in the bath, wolf."

Remus smirked, clambering into the tub, settling against Severus' chest with a hand over the Slytherin's racing heart. "Turns you on when I get all bloodthirsty, doesn't it?" he drawled, knowing and fond and not at all judgemental, because somehow the universe had discovered all the weaknesses of Severus Snape and rolled them into one being, one cardigan-wearing chocoholic werewolf of a man.

Later they would talk about Potter, and how to keep him safe. But there was celebrating to do, first.

.-. .

Training down in the Chamber was the only challenge that actually seemed worth Harry's time, these days. It was April now, three months until summer — four months until his birthday. Spending time doing Charms and Ancient Runes seemed... wasteful.

But everyone around him insisted he needed to keep as much normality to his life as possible, so Harry continued going to classes, playing quidditch and studying with his friends as if he was going to give even a single fuck about his end of year grades. And he mouthed off *constantly* in DADA, getting himself put in at least one detention a week, sometimes two.

His classmates clearly thought he had some kind of death wish, to act so brazenly against Snape. Some thought it was his own arrogance, his belief that he had nothing to learn from the man, that he could teach the class better. That always made Harry snort — if only they knew.

He'd heard a couple of Ravenclaw boys once discussing if Harry had some sort of masochism kink, if that was why he was dating someone like Draco Malfoy, if baiting Snape was some kind of a turn-on for him. There had even been a half-joking whisper of a threesome happening in Harry's detentions.

Harry had laughed himself hoarse at that one, then called Remus over the mirror just to tell his godfather the *juicy gossip*. Which had backfired slightly, as Remus had suggested that while Harry might not have a masochism kink, Severus was no stranger to such things, which was *more information than necessary jesus fucking christ Remus*.

Forget Snape playing double agent. The biggest deception in the wizarding world was Remus Lupin convincing everyone that he was *mild* and *innocent* and *responsible*.

So he got himself in detention as often as he could, as often as Snape would let him; the Potions Master had his own things to do, after all. Potions to brew for Voldemort, things to do for whatever they were calling the Order now that it had broken away from the actual Order.

And when Harry got down to the Chamber and was able to really put his back into duelling, he came alive.

Ever since the attack on Hogsmeade, he had pushed himself harder and harder. He had held his own, defended the village, and that was great — though he still saw the faces of those two students in his nightmares, sometimes — but he had also given away his skills. He had shown the Death Eaters that he wasn't just a silly little boy with an OWL-level defence education.

They knew he was good; that meant he had to be *better*.

Snape didn't seem thrilled with Harry's logic, but he also didn't argue with it. Especially not after the night he had shown up to their training session and told Harry that the loyal students within the school had been given the task of kidnapping him and bringing him to the Dark Lord.

Harry had already known that thanks to Anthony, but it was nice to have confirmation. He would be vigilant. He wasn't going to let anyone else get the better of him, especially not in this castle. Salazar's castle. *His* castle.

"I'm worried, Severus," Harry said one night as they healed their wounds and cleaned up their debris. Snape cocked an eyebrow. "I don't know if I can hold the war off until I turn seventeen. If there's another attack — if Voldemort decides to stick with the tradition of messing with me before the school year ends... I can't exactly tell him to bugger off and come back when I'm of age, can I?"

Snape's lips pursed. "Right now, the Dark Lord seems to be focused on finding Albus. He will not admit it, but he is intrigued by the idea that Albus believed so wholeheartedly in this *influence* he supposedly has over you. Especially now the connection he used to manipulate for his own gain is now no longer there."

"Do you think he suspects?" Harry asked, heart in his throat. But Snape nodded.

"I doubt it. He is not as erratic as I would suspect him to become should he start to fear for his horcruxes. He thinks the connection died when he began to purposefully block it. That is what I told him, after all." The tall man smirked. "He wants to see for himself if Albus has gone senile — to gloat, most likely. With that occupying his time, that should give you a grace period. Just don't get yourself kidnapped — *again*."

Harry gave a flicker as a smile, even as his worry remained. He didn't like the idea of Voldemort finding Dumbledore any more than he liked the idea of Voldemort coming for him.

Senile or no, if Dumbledore was now the Master of Death... either he would kill Voldemort before the final horcrux could be destroyed, or Voldemort would overpower him and kill him and perhaps gain the Hallows for himself.

Then they would truly be fucked.

Snape's long-fingered hand clasped his shoulder. "If the time comes early, Harry, you will be ready for it. *We* will be ready for it. Having you at full maturity would help, but I have faith that should the situation call for it, you will rise to the challenge regardless."

Harry leaned back into the firm touch, just for a moment. "I hope you're right."

He wished he could have that kind of faith in himself.

.-. .

The seventh of April brought the Hufflepuff versus Slytherin quidditch match — and also a notice in every common room, asking for all students fifth year and up to meet in the Great Hall for an assembly half an hour before dinner. Provided the quidditch match didn't run all day, at least.

Harry was curious, but too excited about quidditch to worry overmuch. If it was something dire, he would have heard about it by now.

Once again, he wore Draco's team hoodie, though it wasn't cold enough to need the scarf to match.

"I want you to win," he told Draco over breakfast, "but not by *too* much. Just a little bit. Then we don't have to get a massive lead over Ravenclaw."

Draco smirked amusedly. "I'm sorry, darling, but if you think I'm not going to do my damnedest to make your entire team work your arses off for that cup win, you've got another thing coming. If I can't get that cup myself, I'm sure as hell making sure you've really earned it."

Harry gave an overdramatic sigh. "Why do I love you more when you're an asshole," he despaired. Behind him, Ginny snorted so hard she choked on her pumpkin juice. "Go on, then. Go destroy some badgers." He leaned in for a kiss that was probably toeing the line for appropriate-at-the-breakfast-table, pushing Draco to his feet and smacking him lightly on the arse to shoo him off to join his teammates.

"If we lose the cup because you got lovesick, Harry, I swear to Merlin," Katie warned, and he laughed.

"We won't lose," he said confidently. "Even if Slytherin get a massive point lead. Our team is too good for that."

Katie couldn't argue with that.

With Gryffindor mostly decked out for Hufflepuff solidarity, Harry spent this match with friends from all houses in a corner of the Ravenclaw stands. Slytherin wasn't the fondest of him, since Gryffindor was still their main competition for the cup.

The match didn't last all day, but it stretched a decent way towards lunchtime. Hufflepuff were fierce competition, their keeper working his arse off to block the Slytherin chasers, their beaters surprisingly fearless against Crabbe and Goyle.

But it wasn't enough. Slytherin were as ruthless as always, skirting the edges of acceptable conduct and gaining a steady lead — a lead that only grew larger when Draco's hand clamped around the snitch, to thunderous applause from roughly half of the stadium. Harry cheered and whooped right with them, blowing a cheeky kiss to his boyfriend when he caught the Slytherin's eye on his way to landing. Draco held his gaze, tilting his head ever so slightly in the direction of the changing rooms, question in his eyes. Harry smirked, nodding just barely enough for the Slytherin to catch it. A quick smirk was his only answer, and then Draco was headed off the pitch with his team.

Harry wasn't going to dress up and pretend it was another Gryffindor match, but he would quite happily sneak into the changing rooms and drop to his knees for his boyfriend. There were only a few more chances for that, after all.

He did some mental math on the way down — as it stood, Gryffindor would have to beat Ravenclaw by at least 180 points in order to take the cup. That was going to be a tall order — but he could manage it. His team could manage it.

If only to wipe that smug look off Draco's pretty face.

. . .

Putting a somewhat premature end to Slytherin's quidditch celebrations — though Draco assured him that most of their post-match celebrations were much more *refined* than Gryffindor's, unless it was for an actual cup victory — all of the older students found their way to the Great Hall a half hour before dinner, eyeing their headmistress warily.

After the year they'd had, it could be anything.

They didn't sit like they were going to have a meal; with so few, it felt ridiculous to spread out over the tables. Instead they huddled in close to McGonagall, some perching on the edge of the platform the staff table sat on, others sat straddling the ends of benches or even on the floor. Harry sat on the end of the Gryffindor table, Draco sat on the bench leaning back against his legs, Susan at his side with an anxious hold on Theo's hand. "Any idea what this is about?" she asked under her breath, and Harry shook his head.

"Not a clue."

Once everyone had arrived, McGonagall cleared her throat. "Thank you all for coming. This won't take long, but it seemed like more information than would be fair to give you in a common room notice."

Harry leaned forward a little, concerned. Was it bad? Had someone else died?

Was the school closing?

"As I'm sure you are all aware, exam season is approaching. Ordinarily, I would be encouraging you all to put your best foot forward and begin your studying efforts — however, that is not the case this year, I'm afraid." Her lips pursed, her eyes trailing over her gathered students. "Considering the current political climate, we have come to the difficult

decision that it is not safe to allow the examination board access to the school at this time. The usual examiners have been... *replaced*, and I refuse to lose any more of the students under my care. As such, I am sorry to say that OWL and NEWT examinations will not be possible this year."

"What?!" Sully yelped, alarm in their eyes.

"But what about graduation?" Katie exclaimed worriedly. "If the fifth years miss OWLs they can just take them next year. Will we have to come back to school?" None of the seventh years looked happy about that idea, grumbling quietly to each other.

"I will be completely honest with you, Miss Bell, I cannot say," McGonagall said frankly.

It was jarring, for Harry, to have the Transfiguration professor be so upfront with them. Dumbledore as headmaster had always been so mysterious and omnipotent — he had all the answers, and was just waiting for the world to slot neatly into place at his command. He was also condescending as anything, treating even the older students like small children.

McGonagall, on the other hand, spoke to them like the capable almost-adults she knew them to be after having watched them grow in her classes for several years. She didn't sugar-coat things, didn't bullshit them. Even when it meant admitting she couldn't fix everything.

"While I would like to say that it will be possible for the current seventh year students to take their exams over the summer, I cannot guarantee that will be the case."

Harry tried not to squirm as almost every head swivelled in his direction. McGonagall folded her arms over her chest. "*However*," she continued pointedly, "We will make sure that as soon as it is safe, we will arrange for examinations to be held, and for accommodations to be made for returning seventh years. Myself and the rest of the staff will do whatever we can to help you prepare for those exams, no matter how long it has been since you were last our student." She smiled tightly. "Hogwarts will not abandon you. Any of you. It just might take a while for things to catch up."

"What about the sixth years," Ernie asked, frowning. "This doesn't really affect us, does it? I mean," he chuckled nervously, "by the time our exams roll around, everything will be back to normal."

Again, everyone stared at Harry. He clenched his jaw.

"I am informing the sixth years because there may come a point next year where you are joined in your classes by the current seventh years, for a revision session, so to speak. I would hope that you would help your fellow students cover any content they may have gotten rusty on in the interim."

"Can we take our exams independently?" A seventh year Slytherin girl asked, sat with several of her housemates. She looked entirely bored by the whole thing. "Not all of us have to hide from our own Ministry, you know."

Harry wasn't the only one who glared at her. It was bold to be so open with her allegiances, but then everyone knew her family were Death Eaters. She wasn't subtle about it, regularly muttering death threats towards Harry in the halls.

McGonagall remained stone-faced. "Should you feel comfortable in applying to take your exams at the Ministry of Magic this summer, you are of course welcome to do so," she assented curtly. "Similarly, if you choose to go elsewhere — that is to say, to a foreign Ministry you may have access to — I wish you the very best of luck in your examinations. But for those of you who do not have those options, do not fear. We will figure something out. And, of course, if you have any concerns you wish to bring to me privately, you are more than welcome to do so. You all know when my office hours are."

That seemed to be the end of it all, especially when a few nervous fourth years peered through the doors of the hall to see if dinner was ready yet. The students hopped off the tables, leaving room for the elves to send dinner up, and already McGonagall was surrounded by seventh years asking her questions.

"Well, no pressure or anything, then," Harry muttered dryly, sharing a glance with Susan. "Just got to off a Dark Lord and reform the Ministry proper so that our friends can graduate."

She bumped her shoulder with his. "Piece of cake," she replied, grinning. Harry snorted.

"I hope the seventh years don't get too complacent," Theo drawled quietly. "You did say summer after all, Potter."

"I did, didn't I?" Harry agreed.

It was a huge blow to those who had exams to take, of course — they wouldn't be able to relax for the summer knowing they had done the hard work.

Then again, Harry doubted *anyone* would be relaxing this summer, what with the whole Dark Lord situation.

Chapter End Notes

Legally Blonde the Musical voice ~It's time to get serious~

Last ten chapter, folks. Buckle up ;)

Chapter 100

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It was the second week of May when it finally happened.

They were stupid, really. Impatient. If these students were the best Lord Voldemort could gather, Harry wasn't worried at all about his chances of success.

That afternoon, Harry had decided it was long past time he go visit Hagrid. He hadn't been... avoiding his friend, exactly. He was really busy. And Hagrid hadn't exactly made any overtures to seek Harry out, either.

But it had been months since they'd had more than a brief hello at mealtimes, so after dinner Harry balled up his Gryffindor courage, kissed his boyfriend for luck, and headed down to the hut at the edge of the forest. He knocked on the door, and waited. As always, Fang barked excitedly at the prospect of visitors, and Harry smiled to himself as he heard Hagrid lightly chiding the dog, getting him away from the door. He pulled it open, and faltered. "Harry."

"Hi, Hagrid. Can I come in?" Harry's hands were in his robe pockets so that Hagrid wouldn't see them shaking. The half-giant blinked at him.

"Yeah. Yeah, o' course. I'll put the kettle on."

That was a good sign, and Harry's hummingbird heart slowed down a little. Fang nosed at his legs, slobbering all over his robes, demanding ear-scratches which Harry was more than willing to provide. He couldn't *not* smile when faced with the cheerful dog, who flopped his head in Harry's lap with a blissful look as soon as the Gryffindor sat down.

Hagrid fussed with the kettle and two mugs, one significantly larger than the other. With the large man's back to him, it was easier for Harry to make the first move. "I'm sorry, Hagrid."

Hagrid whirled around, beetle-like eyes incredulous. "What. *You're* sorry? Harry, you ain't got a jot to be sorry for!"

Wait, what?

Hagrid ran a hand through his tangled mane of hair, giving a gusty sigh. "Every time you came 'ere, you let me natter on about Dumbledore and how great a man he was, and that whole time you knew it was nothin'. I was so ruddy *proud* of having been the one to drop you off with Dumbledore after— after your parents died. If I'd've known..." He shook his head, scowling. "I'm the one who's sorry, Harry. You shoulda been able ter trust me, an' I gave you no reason to, blathering away with my blind faith like I was. I kept pushin' you towards the headmaster, and I never questioned why you might not want that — not even after you said you an' him was havin' some disagreements. You tried to warn me an' all! Idiot I was, I didn't listen."

The kettle whistled, cutting off Hagrid's self-flagellation.

"It's not your fault, Hagrid!" Harry insisted while the huge man poured. "There was so much I couldn't tell you. And you've known Dumbledore for a long time, after all. He did a lot of good things for you. I... I didn't want to ruin your view of him, not if I didn't have to." He had known it would come eventually, but he wanted to soften the blow as much as he could.

"Aye, he did, but that don't mean much when he's out there trying to kill you!" Hagrid protested. "All that about you havin' evil in you is absolute codswallop, anyone who knows you can see that!" Hagrid passed Harry his teacup, and sat down opposite him, shoulders slumping. "I shoulda come talk to yer as soon as you got back to school, but — well, everythin' with Grawp, and then Aragog..."

"Is he still not well?" Harry asked, and Hagrid gave a great big sniff.

"He died, actually. Jus' last week. Buried him out by the forest," he said shakily, wiping at his watery eyes.

Though Harry felt nothing but mild satisfaction at the knowledge that the huge man-eating spider was dead, his heart clenched for his friend's grief. "Oh, Hagrid, I'm so sorry. You should've sent a note, I would've come. You shouldn't have been alone."

Hagrid smiled weakly. "Means a lot, Harry, but it's alright. Was only a small thing, really. Just for me own peace o' mind. Acromantula eat their dead, and... well." He made a face. "I — I thought about it. Writin' you. Didn't know if you'd wanna talk to me, is all. Worried you might think I was still Dumbledore's man."

"I never thought that," Harry insisted — which was a tiny lie, but Hagrid didn't need to know about the doubt in Harry's chest. "I figured you were mad at me for not telling you the truth."

The half-giant chuckled, shaking his head. "Right pair, aren't we?" he mused, reaching out to pat Harry's back with one of his massive hands. "I told you, Harry — I'm on your side. That's what friends are for."

Harry grinned up at him. "I'm glad, Hagrid. Really."

The first adult to ever give a damn about him still cared. That was more than he'd hoped for.

He stayed long enough to finish his tea at a leisurely pace, catching Hagrid up on the things he might have missed in the time they weren't really talking. As the hour grew later, the sky turning burnt orange, Harry decided to head back up to the castle.

And that was when things went a bit pear-shaped.

He didn't quite wander about with his head in the clouds anymore, not after the first time — so he was vigilant when he heard muffled footsteps tracking him. He veered off course, heading closer towards the greenhouses. He knew where Neville planned to spend his evening, could feel the other heir's solid presence through the wards. Hogwarts was so much stronger now, with a headmistress who cared about it thriving.

Then a twig snapped and Harry moved, whirling around and cancelling any secrecy or camouflage charms in the area with a handy little spell Sirius had taught him a while ago. It revealed six students — the Slytherin seventh year girl who had spoken out about taking exams at the Ministry, a seventh year Slytherin boy Harry vaguely recognised; Crabbe and Goyle; and to his complete astonishment, Lisa Turpin and Fay Dunbar. His housemate had a shaking hand as she pointed her wand in Harry's direction.

"Come quietly, Potter," the older Slytherin boy snarled. "Or it's going to hurt."

Harry snorted despite himself. "That's really the best threat you have?" he taunted. "I faced *Bellatrix Lestrange*, you think you idiots scare me?"

The Slytherin girl smirked, like that was exactly what she wanted him to say. "Wiping that cocky look off your face is going to be *very* satisfying. *Crucio!*" She pointed her wand, but to Harry it was barely more than being hit with the old handshake buzzer Dudley used to have. He grinned — that would be a huge red alert to Neville, Hannah and Luna.

He hadn't seen the new wards in action, really; which is why he was pleasantly surprised when the girl suddenly froze in place, wand outstretched. She stared at Harry. "What did you do?" Her companions were eyeing Harry warily, and he laughed.

"I didn't do anything. The Hogwarts wards, on the other hand, *really* don't like nasty spells being cast at students." Thank Merlin the wards were at full strength, now.

Crabbe and Goyle didn't get the memo; they both tried to hit Harry with simultaneous Stunners, which he deflected into the grass, and they too were frozen in place.

"What the fuck! We cast Stunners in class all the time," Dunbar exclaimed.

"Wards are about intent," Harry replied mockingly. "You're not trying to actually harm anyone in class. Also, I'm an heir."

The seventh year boy let out a snarl. "There are ways around it," he muttered, and then he threw himself bodily at Harry.

Harry might not have had to run from Dudley for a long while now, but he still had the reflexes of a boy who had spent a lot of time dodging someone much larger than himself. He ducked under his outstretched arms, and the boy took a lumbering step to the side to try and grab Harry. "Turpin, Dunbar, get him while he's distracted!" he growled. "I don't care about the ruddy wards — it only takes one of us to drag him to the ward line!" He tried to throw a punch, but he was far too slow.

Neither of the girls seemed entirely keen to risk firing at Harry and missing, losing their only shot. It was only when there was a shout from near the greenhouses that Harry jerked his head up, and Dunbar took her chance. But Harry wasn't that much of an idiot; he deflected the tangle of ropes that flew from her wand, sending them right back at her. Not that he needed it, really, as the wards did their work.

Someone was running towards him, and the older boy got desperate; he charged right at Harry, fury on his face. A classic move of Dudley's, too. Harry used his own classic response — ducking aside at the last minute, and sticking his foot out to trip the large boy and send him sprawling. It was easy to catch him with a Stunner then, turning to face Turpin, the last Death Eater standing. She goggled at him.

“Why didn’t the wards get you?” she screeched, making him grin.

“Self defence,” he replied simply — then with one last Stunner, she was downed too, right as Neville and Professor Sprout came skidding to a halt at his side. Neville took in the scene quickly, then shot a grin Harry’s way.

“New wards?” he presumed, and Harry nodded. “Nice. Bloody hell, is that Dunbar?”

“Yup.” Harry turned to Professor Sprout. “Would you mind alerting the headmistress, please?”

The Herbology professor stared at him for a long moment, then turned, sending a Patronus off towards the castle.

“She’s probably already on her way,” Neville pointed out. “See, look; there she is.” Indeed, she was marching across the lawn towards them. Harry had forgotten she held the wards now, too.

It was quick work between Sprout and McGonagall to properly secure the six students, levitating them back to the castle. Neville fell into step beside Harry on the way up. “You alright, mate?”

“Fine.” Harry grinned. “That was laughably easy, to be honest. Hadn’t realised the wards would be so sensitive; they couldn’t even cast Stunners with intent.”

“Blimey,” Neville said, awed. “I got worried when I registered the Cruciatus, thought they might all be using the same sort of stuff.”

“They didn’t want me dead. They wanted to take me to their *master*,” he said, giving a disparaging look at the immobile group.

They were met by Luna and Hannah at the doors, as well as Daphne and Draco. “Oh, good, I thought you might have it handled when I felt the wards stop yelling at me,” Hannah remarked. “What happened?”

“Kidnapping attempt,” Harry replied cheerfully. Draco put his head in his hands.

“I swear to fucking Salazar, Potter, I’m never letting you out of my sight again.”

“Not a scratch on me, promise,” Harry assured, giving him a leering look. “I’ll let you check, if you like.”

“Mr Potter,” McGonagall snapped, more exasperated than anything else. “I need you to come with me, to provide insight into what happened. Mr Malfoy is going to have to wait.”

Harry mock-pouted, looking back at his boyfriend. “You heard the headmistress. Rain check on that, I’ll catch you later.” Then he stepped up to McGonagall’s side, not a hint of his previous teasing on his face. “Let’s go, Professor.”

McGonagall was still using her original office for the time being, not wanting to intrude on what everyone still saw as Dumbledore’s — and not having the time to go through the numerous things he left behind there in case any were sinister.

So Harry, the headmistress, and the six bound attackers all squeezed into the room, and McGonagall turned to Harry. “Explain.”

Harry did so, beginning with the moment he noticed he was being followed, reporting everything right up until Sprout and Neville arrived. McGonagall’s face got more severe with every word.

When he was done, she turned to her captives, adjusting her spells enough for them to talk but not move. “And what do you have to say for yourselves?”

“He’s lying, Professor!” Dunbar exclaimed. “Potter attacked us out of nowhere! He used his weird Slytherin magic to stop us from fighting back! He’s dangerous, and he needs to be expelled!”

McGonagall looked distinctly unimpressed, even as the other five backed up Dunbar’s words.

“I can provide pensieve memories, if you like,” Harry offered, but the headmistress shook her head.

“I am attuned to the wards as well, Potter — I can tell when students are in danger, and I can *certainly* tell when the Cruciatus curse is being cast on school grounds! Miss Wilkins, your wand, if you please?”

The Slytherin girl went milk-white. McGonagall snatched the girl’s wand, holding it up in front of her. “Priori Incantatem.” Smoke blossomed from the end of the wand, forming a tableau of Harry on his knees and screaming — her intention for the spell, if not the result.

“Potter stole my wand and cast it,” Wilkins tried immediately, cowering against McGonagall’s raised eyebrow.

“I highly doubt that.” She set the girl’s wand on her desk, surveying them sternly. “You six leave me no choice. For the attempted kidnapping of a fellow student, I hereby expel all of you from Hogwarts School, effective immediately.”

Harry felt it, the moment the magic kicked in, the moment they became *other* to the wards. Not students, not staff. Intruders. They all flinched in unison.

“As such, I have the right to destroy your wands. The house elves will pack your bags, and you will return to your homes as soon as possible.”

“You can’t do that!” Turpin argued.

“Believe me, Miss Turpin, I can and I will. Be thankful there is no competent Ministry to speak of — Miss Dunbar is the only one of you under the age of seventeen. In an ordinary world, you’d be facing Azkaban for this.”

Turpin turned a little green.

“Professor, please! I—I didn’t mean to! They talked me into it, threatened my family!”
Dunbar tried her best, but McGonagall was stone-faced.

“Then you should have come to me, Miss Dunbar, instead of deciding to be party to the kidnapping of your housemate,” she snapped. “I do not have the luxury of giving you the benefit of the doubt — not with the safety of our other students at stake.”

Harry was amazed by the woman’s composure as she ignored all of their protests, snapping each wand one by one without a hint of hesitation. He could do nothing but watch, waiting for the house elves to bring their trunks — and then waiting for Professor Flitwick to come and escort them to the gates. Lisa Turpin took one look at her housemaster’s disappointed face and flinched as if hit.

One by one they shuffled out of the office, until finally Harry was left alone with the headmistress. She shut the door with a wave of her hand, and stood with a steel-straight spine, staring at the worn wood. Harry didn’t dare move, watching her carefully. Did she even remember he was there?

“Did I just make a mistake, Potter?” she asked suddenly. When she looked at him, she looked older than he had ever seen her look, even when she had returned from St Mungo’s after taking four Stunners to the chest. The haunted gaze of the headmistress made Harry shudder.

“I—I don’t think it’s my place to say, Professor.”

McGonagall’s lips pursed, and then her whole body slumped, the fight leaving her in one sharp motion. She rounded her desk, sinking wearily into her chair, and the tartan biscuit tin floated over off the shelf. “Much as I hate to stereotype, the Slytherins... they were not a surprise. Miss Turpin and Miss Dunbar, however...”

“He gets in everywhere,” Harry pointed out sadly, sitting in the chair opposite when the biscuit tin was offered, grabbing a chocolate-coated shortbread. “For what it’s worth, I don’t think he really threatened Dunbar’s family. Her dad has been in hiding since November, and I know she knew he was safe.”

McGonagall quirked an eyebrow. “I’m not even going to ask how you know that.” Harry’s lips twitched. “I did assume as much; Miss Roper has come to me a few times this year out of concern for her friend, but there was little I could do — I’ll admit, I thought it was just stress.” She sighed, and Harry tried not to outwardly react when she summoned a bottle of whisky from a hidden corner of her shelf, pouring a generous finger. “It feels like sending them away from the school is doing them a disservice,” she said, shaking her head. “I know exactly where they’re going to go. Snapping their wands won’t keep them out of things for long.”

He pursed his lips — indeed, Voldemort would be furious with them for failing to kidnap him, but he would also appreciate six new recruits into his ranks outside the castle. “They couldn’t stay here,” he reasoned. “This is a school, not a stronghold. We don’t have prison cells in the dungeons.” His joke fell flat. “You had the rest of the students to think about.”

McGonagall sipped at her whisky. “I have still condemned those students — those *children* to death, or a fate worse than it. I was supposed to protect them.”

“You can’t save everyone,” Harry said grimly — that was something he knew all too well. “Everyone in this castle has been given a chance to do the right thing. Not all of them are going to take it.”

The Scottish woman was silent for a long time, even after her glass was empty. “You should go and find Mr Malfoy, Potter,” she said eventually. “He will be keen to make sure you are unharmed.”

Harry coloured, amazed she could say that with a straight face after his exchange with Draco on the way up. “I... will you be alright, Professor?” He stood, but hovered in front of the desk. The smile McGonagall gave him was tight, strained, barely lasting a moment.

“I must go and explain to Professor Snape that Slytherin house is now four students smaller,” she declared, standing as well.

That wasn’t an answer, but then Harry shouldn’t have expected much more. She was a professor, after all, and he just a student.

He just hoped she had someone to go to, to lean on after having made the difficult call.

.-.

The word had spread by dinner. Harry forced himself to sit through the meal, even as Sophie Roper cried into her lasagne ten feet down the table, even as half of Slytherin house glared daggers in his direction.

“What’s it turned into, then?” he asked Lavender quietly, knowing there was no way the story had been reported accurately.

“Depends who you hear it from,” she replied, frowning. “Anything from you exposing all six of them with Dark Marks, to you lying to McGonagall just to get them expelled after she caught you duelling them.” Harry snorted. “I... was Fay really working with them?”

There were tears in her eyes. She had been Fay’s dorm mate for nearly six years, after all.

“She was, yeah.” Harry wished he could say for certain whether she’d been threatened into it. He wished it mattered — as he had told McGonagall, they had all had chances, and made choices.

He just hoped desperately that those six teenagers lived long enough to learn from their mistakes.

....

As it always does in Hogwarts, life moved on. Now, the only people willing to so much as talk to Harry were the original HA and his professors. Even those who showed up to the expanded HA sessions on Saturdays barely spoke to him, just staring wide-eyed and mutely obeying instructions.

He didn't mind, really. His existing friend group was more than enough social interaction for him — with the end of the year drawing closer, there were plans to be made for after school let out.

The last quidditch match of the season was a nice break from it all, though. A return to normalcy. Privately, Harry hoped it might be enough to put a smile back on McGonagall's face, if Gryffindor won. She hadn't been the same since having to expel those students.

Harry surveyed his team over breakfast, quietly confident. "One hundred and eighty points, guys. Just keep the goals in our favour, and I'll do the rest." As long as they stayed at least three goals ahead of Ravenclaw, Harry catching the snitch would win it for them.

"We've got this, captain," Katie declared determinedly.

The shoe was on the other foot this time, with Draco looking mildly disgruntled to be wearing Harry's crimson quidditch hoodie. "Red is *not* my colour," he said in disdain, and Harry leered.

"I dunno," he murmured into the blond's ear, "seems to suit you well enough when you're in my bed."

The blond swallowed tightly, ears flushing.

"Come on, Harry. Quit flirting, time to go," Ginny urged, smirking at the pair of them. He gave a sigh, looked to Draco.

"You heard the lady. Time to go."

Draco gripped him by the front of his jumper, kissing him hard, ignoring the wolf-whistles. "Impress me, Potter," he challenged, cocking one pale brow, expression very similar to the one he had when he was in bed and daring Harry to fuck him harder. Heat pooled in Harry's gut, and he had to will away the stirrings of an erection that would be all too obvious in the tight uniform trousers.

"Yes, sir," Harry purred, giving him one last kiss before standing.

"Good luck, Harry," Neville said, offering a thumbs up. He still had a bit of Ginny's Gryffindor-red lipstick on his mouth, but Harry wasn't going to be the one to tell him that.

The lead up to the match was a rush of nerves, even as he gave a pep talk to his team that would rival even Oliver. The crowd roared when they strode onto the pitch, standing opposite the blue-clad team.

“Captains, shake hands!”

Harry stepped forward, grinning at Cho as she offered her hand to him. She had gone all out on the house pride; blue streaks in her hair, bronze war-paint on her cheeks. Even vivid blue nail polish with tiny black eagles painted on. “Don’t start celebrating too soon, Harry,” she told him, “Ravenclaw isn’t going down without a fight.”

“I’d expect nothing less,” he replied.

And then they were off.

Harry swooped around the pitch, keeping an eye on the main play even as he began his hunt for the snitch. It was a bright, sunny day — great for the rest of the team, terrible for the seekers. At least his goggles stopped the glare getting too bad.

All he could do now was wait, and hope to hell Cho didn’t spot the snitch early.

His girls were in fine form, scoring two goals right off the bat. Ravenclaw came back hard, though, and the quaffle careened past Vicky’s outstretched arms straight through the right-most goal hoop.

“And Ravenclaw are on the scoreboard!” Zacharias Smith declared. “Gryffindor had better pick up the pace if they want to secure the cup!”

Ravenclaw only needed a win of 150 or more to beat Slytherin to the cup, so Cho would be playing the waiting game almost as much as he was. They circled each other, flying laps in opposite directions.

Another goal for Gryffindor, and Harry beamed at Demelza for it. The chasers were blue and red blurs across the pitch, ducking bludgers and passing frantically.

The goals kept stacking up, Ravenclaw determined not to let Gryffindor keep a three-goal lead for very long. But slowly, goal by goal, Gryffindor hit their breakaway.

100-60. Harry was free to look for the snitch, now.

Cho seemed to realise that, hovering close by Harry. He surveyed the sky, looking for that little flash of gold. Then he smirked to himself, and dove.

Cho followed immediately, hot on his tail — her speed wasn’t a match for his Firebolt but she pushed on regardless, the pair of them heading closer and closer to the ground. He wondered how far he could get her to go, fearlessly plunging straight towards the grass.

She pulled up sharply five feet before the ground, and Harry sighed to himself, doing the same. “False alarm, folks! Potter was just feinting,” Smith announced, to groans from the crowd.

“Almost had me worried, there!” Cho called lightly. He laughed.

“All’s fair in love and quidditch!” And then he was off, zooming across the pitch, making a nuisance of himself for the Ravenclaw chasers on the way.

The beaters didn’t seem to know what to focus on most, and their split attention between Harry and the chasers gave Gryffindor a chance to score another goal. Unfortunately, Ravenclaw picked one up right after.

The snitch was being a tricky little thing, today. Dragging the game out far longer than Harry would have liked.

140-120. Harry caught a flash of gold out of the corner of his eye, and cursed. He couldn’t catch it yet. His only saving grace was, neither could Cho. A Slytherin win would almost be worse than a Gryffindor one in her eyes.

Still, just to be safe, Harry led her on a merry chase of death-defying loops and dodges, getting dangerously close to the stands in the Hufflepuff section. It was a good distraction for Ravenclaw’s keeper, too, allowing Katie to put a goal through the centre hoop.

150-120. Showtime.

All through his madcap adventures around the pitch, Harry had kept an eye on that little glint of gold, and now he was off. He wasn’t sure when Cho noticed the difference between him playing distraction and him going for the win, but she soon appeared at his side, leaning low on her broom, trying to catch up.

It was no use. Harry plucked the little golden ball out of the air, and the whole stadium *exploded*.

Apparently, while he’d been after the snitch, Katie had found the time to score one last goal in the chaos, making their lead an even more comfortable 310-120.

“And Potter does it again, folks! Gryffindor takes the game, and takes the cup! Honestly, one more of year of him and then maybe someone else can get a look in,” Smith groused into his megaphone. Harry threw his head back and laughed, surprised when Cho barrelled into him for a mid-air hug.

“Damn good game, Harry. Thanks for sending me out with a fun one, even if I couldn’t win,” she said, beaming with tears streaking her eyes. He hugged her tight, then held out the snitch.

“A keepsake,” he offered. “Your last match as a Hogwarts student.”

“A snitch caught by Harry Potter. Wow.” Then she grinned impishly. “Maybe it’ll be worth something some day, I can sell it.” She swiped it before he could rescind his offer, pressed a smacking kiss to his cheek, and flew off to join her team in commiserating, laughing as she went.

That was all the signal the Gryffindor team needed to pile on their captain, lowering to the ground in one huge red huddle. “I knew we could do it!” Katie sobbed. “One last cup! Fuck, I’m gonna miss this.”

“Any time you want to get the team back together, I’m there,” Harry vowed, pressing his forehead to hers in the middle of their team huddle. “Couldn’t have done this without you, Kit-Kat.” He used the nickname Oliver had given her, the one only the team ever used, and she sobbed even harder.

As was tradition, she and Cho flew their victory lap together to riotous applause, the two soon-to-be graduates saying one last goodbye to their school pitch.

While they were up there, Harry slung one arm around Ginny and the other around Vicky, beaming at Demelza, Ritchie and Jimmy. “So,” he said, “same time next year, then?”

The two boys shared a look, then gave identical salutes. “Aye, Captain!”

Harry laughed, releasing the girls to go ruffle their hair. They were no Fred and George, but he was damn proud of them all the same, and they had a promising career with the team now they’d played a year together.

On his way off the pitch, the crowd still screaming, Harry looked up at the staff box, right at Professor McGonagall. There it was — that curl at the corner of lips, the glimmer of pride in her eyes. The thing that made all their hard hours of training worth it.

They didn’t linger in the changing rooms, taking lightning-fast showers and having one last group hug while Katie cried her way through packing up her locker, all of them headed out with red and gold duffle bags full of quidditch gear over their shoulders.

There was an honour guard there to escort them up to their victory party, and in the sea of Gryffindor colours Harry didn’t notice Draco until the blond sidled up beside him. “Pretty good catch,” he said, knocking Harry’s shoulder with his own. “Didn’t think I could delay you in the changing rooms this time.”

Harry wound his arm around Draco’s waist, kissing the side of his head. “Not for this one,” he agreed. “But you can come up to the victory party if you like.” He had done as Rosmerta suggested and ordered drinks in advance, so he didn’t even have to make a detour.

Draco looked at him, startled. “It won’t cause problems?”

“Sweetheart, my house put up with me snogging you all over the place, pretty sure they’ll be fine with you coming up to the common room,” Harry teased. “Besides — I just won us the quidditch cup, they won’t argue with me!”

Draco hummed, fingers playing over the bright gold C stitched on the shoulder of the hoodie he wore. Harry’s hoodie. “Well, I suppose I’ve got nothing better to do,” he drawled, as if it were such a hardship. Harry beamed, squeezing him.

“Such enthusiasm, I can hardly stand it,” he said dryly. Draco shot him a look beneath hooded lashes.

“I’ll show *enthusiasm* once the party dies down,” he promised huskily.

Harry swallowed tightly. “Impressed you enough, then, did I?” he asked, lips brushing Draco’s temple as they squeezed through the castle doors, surrounded by exuberant Gryffindors.

“You weren’t bad, I suppose.”

Gryffindor House certainly knew how to throw a party, that was for sure. Dobby had outdone himself setting up the snacks and drinks tables, and there was a huge banner of a roaring lion taking up the entirety of one wall. Music was playing from somewhere, and the team were greeted with a wave of sound as they walked through the portrait hole.

Harry lost hold of Draco as he was bundled on by his housemates, and a spark of panic shot through him — but then he made it clear of the sea of people, and saw Draco happily ensconced in a corner with Parvati and Lavender, butterbeer in hand as he surveyed the common room with interest.

“Bit different to yours, isn’t it?” Harry said, striding over. A few feet away, Ginny pounced on Neville — and a few feet away from that, someone turned into a giant canary with red and gold feathers.

Harry wasn’t sure who had put Wheezes in the food, but he appreciated them staying on theme. Maybe the twins had sent them over special.

“I’m amazed all this red doesn’t give you headaches,” Draco commented. The girls giggled.

“It’s not as bad when we aren’t all dressed to match,” Lavender pointed out, gesturing to her red and gold t-shirt with a grin.

“I’ll take your word for it.”

Harry eased the bottle of butterbeer out of Draco’s hand, taking a swig from it, and the blond scowled. “Get your own.” He snatched it back, and Harry pouted.

“Do you have any idea how long it’ll take me to get through that crowd and back?”

All that did was make Draco roll his eyes. “Are you a wizard or not?” A wave of his wand, and a bottle came sailing over the heads of the crowd, neatly into Harry’s hand.

“Oh. Cheers, love!” Harry beamed, popped the cork, and tapped it against Draco’s before taking a large gulp.

It was still strange, having a quidditch victory party without the twins and Angelina and Alicia. But his new team were equally deserving of praise, and he made sure to spend time with them — and to be the loudest cat-caller in the room when Colin Creevey dipped Vicky in a Hollywood-worthy kiss right in the middle of the room, Dennis lifting his brother’s camera to capture the moment with a grin.

“God, they’re adorable,” Harry said happily, leaning back against the edge of the sofa behind him, pulling Draco to stand between his legs. The blond relaxed against him, at ease even in the lion’s den with their friends gathered around them.

“What’s *he* doing at a Gryffindor party?” The sneering voice cut through Harry’s effervescent joy, bringing a sour curl to his stomach. Ron was nearby, having clearly just been to the snack table, and he glared at Draco.

“Celebrating, Weasley,” Draco replied evenly. “My boyfriend caught the snitch, in case you missed it.”

Those bubbles of joy returned to Harry’s belly at the pride and possessiveness in Draco’s voice.

“This is the Gryffindor common room. You shouldn’t be in here,” Ron argued.

“I can always take him up to the dorm, if you’d prefer?” Harry suggested, tone full of innuendo. A chorus of ‘*oooohhh*’s and whistling met his statement, while Ron blushed as red as the flag draped around his shoulders.

“Walk away, Ron,” Dean suggested, appearing at his back. With a mildly apologetic look in Harry’s direction, the dark-skinned Gryffindor tugged Ron back into the crowd, over to the other side of the room.

“I hope one of those biscuits he had stacked up has a prank in it,” Ginny muttered, glaring after her brother. “Would serve him right.”

“Ahh, don’t worry about him,” Harry dismissed, not wanting Ron to ruin his happy buzz. “Although...” he drawled, hand on Draco’s stomach, pressing his hips forward just enough for the blond to feel it, “going up to the dorm isn’t a bad shout, now that I think about it.”

“You’ve had enough of being worshipped then, have you?” Draco asked. Harry bit his earlobe playfully.

“Not hardly,” he murmured. “But I’ve a different kind of worship in mind.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake — you’re still in public, boys,” Ginny reminded pointedly.

“No, don’t stop them,” Parvati protested, flapping a hand in Ginny’s direction. Harry laughed, cocking his head towards Neville.

“You mind, Nev?” The only one of his dorm mates whose opinion Harry actually cared about. Neville rolled his eyes.

“Go on, then. I doubt the others’ll be up any time soon, but just in case, please lock the door.”

It would almost be worth the interruption to see the horror in Ron’s eyes if he did catch them fucking in the dorm, but Harry decided that would be too much of a mood killer.

He slipped his hand into Draco’s, wandlessly transfiguring his empty butterbeer bottle into a bright red rose. “Shall we?” he offered, holding the rose in Draco’s direction. Draco snorted, reluctantly impressed.

“Fucking show off.” But he took the rose and went willingly, following Harry through the crowd towards the staircase.

People noticed them leave. The cat-calls that followed them proved that, but Harry didn’t care. Let the whole damn Tower know that he was going up to his room to celebrate with his boyfriend.

“It’s strange, coming in through the door,” Draco remarked, making Harry laugh. He had said door locked in an instant, though he didn’t bother with the silencing charms. Everyone knew what they were doing; the perverts could listen if they really wanted. As loud as the common room was, the sound wouldn’t carry.

He kicked off his trainers, gently pushing Draco until his back was against the wooden post at the corner of Harry’s bed. Their lips met tenderly and the rose dropped to the floor, Harry’s hands mussing the blond’s hair, rucking up the hem of the Gryffindor hoodie, unsurprised to find a Slytherin-green t-shirt beneath. He pulled the hoodie over Draco’s head, the bold shock of emerald even brighter in this room full of red and gold.

“What’ve I earned, then?” he asked softly, thumb stroking Draco’s jaw. “What do I get for impressing you?”

“Mm, depends what you want,” Draco returned, eyes bright and thumbs hooked into the back belt loops of Harry’s jeans.

The Gryffindor frowned thoughtfully — for the first time, they weren’t confined by the drapes of Harry’s bed, and he wanted to make the most of it. He liked the way Draco looked leaned up against the post like this, remembered a hot flash of a dream in which he had the Slytherin bent over the end of the bed.

But then he turned, looking around the rest of the room, which was surprisingly tidy for once.

Looked at the centre of the round dormitory, the clear space in the middle of the room, with the enormous rug in the middle of it proudly bearing his house crest. Measured up the space in his head.

A wicked smirk crossed his face as lust coiled low in his belly. “So, I’ve got an idea...”

He stepped back, into the middle of the room, watching confusion turn to understanding and arousal in wide grey eyes as he went to his knees in the centre of the rug, beckoning Draco down with one hand and summoning the vial of lubricant with the other. Draco huffed a laugh, but didn’t protest.

“I’m going to get carpet burn on my arse, aren’t I?” he asked knowingly, even as he unbuttoned his trousers.

“I’ll heal it,” Harry promised with a grin, manhandling Draco onto his back right in the centre of the rug, pinning him to the floor with a hot, sloppy kiss.

Merlin, Harry was going to enjoy this even more than quidditch.

Chapter End Notes

Merry Christmas, friends! :)

Chapter 101

While it was often tempting to avoid the Great Hall and all the attention that came with it, Harry tried to make a point of putting in at least a short appearance at every meal — both for the people who might worry for his safety, and the people who were waiting for a sign of his weakness to begin picking apart.

So Harry hadn't been down to the kitchens in a fair while. The route was familiar enough, though, and he couldn't help but grin as the giggling pear in the fruit bowl painting allowed him entry, revealing the hive of activity within. Several elves stopped to stare at him with their huge eyes. "Master Snakey is in need of food?" one elf asked, making Harry stifle a chuckle — Hannah had told him about the new form of address since their taking of the wards, getting a great amount of amusement over being called 'Missy Badger' by the tiny creatures.

"No, not food right now, thanks; lunch was brilliant, I'm still stuffed," he assured them, scanning the crowd for the bright explosion of colour that usually signified his elf friend. "I'm here for two reasons, actually. I—I was looking for Dobby. And also... whichever one of you is in charge? If you have a system like that?" He wasn't sure of the hierarchy of house elves, or if they even had one.

A quiet pop, and suddenly Dobby was at his side, wearing a pair of lurid green football shorts beneath a bright pink unicorn-printed tank top. "Harry Potter sir is needing Dobby?"

At the same time, an elderly elf shuffled through the crowd — this one wore the same white toga-like uniform as the rest of the elves, printed with the Hogwarts crest on the bottom. "I is being Lula, Master Snakey. I is the oldest elf at Hoggywarts."

"Oh, brilliant. It's nice to meet you, Lula." Harry smiled at the elf, who looked at him like he was just as strange as Dobby. "Can we— will you sit with me? I have some questions. If I'm not interrupting anything, of course."

Lula eyed him appraisingly, then nodded. Harry and the two elves went over to the small table nearby — they both looked deeply uncomfortable at sitting on stools at the same table as a wizard. All around the kitchen, elves were watching them.

"Well, the first thing I wanted to ask... I'm sure you're all aware of the war, right?" Several heads bobbed, not just Lula and Dobby. "Okay. Well, I'm fairly sure there's going to be fighting at Hogwarts, when it happens. Probably quite soon. And, well, I wanted to make sure you were all safe. And ask if there was anything you all would be willing to do to help."

Dobby almost fell off his stool with the force of his gasp. "Harry Potter sir is asking elves to fight with wizards?"

"Not if you don't want to," Harry hurried to assure. "It's our fight, not yours. I won't have you putting yourselves in danger for our sakes. But... there might be people in the castle who don't want to fight, either. Or people who are too young to fight." Harry couldn't guarantee

that the fighting would wait until the students left — or that the students would even be *able* to leave. “I was hoping the elves might be willing to help move them to somewhere safe. I know you can’t take students off the grounds, but if you could grab all the young students and take them to the same place — maybe down here, where the fighting isn’t likely to touch. And maybe be willing to help injured people up to the Hospital Wing? Your ability to travel within the wards is really amazing.” They could save lives, with that kind of speed.

Lula frowned at him, huge blue eyes a little rheumy. “Master Snakey is... asking? These is not orders?”

“Merlin, no! Like I said, it’s not your fight. If you all want to huddle up down here, that’s absolutely fine by me. Wizard magic is dangerous. But... this castle is your home, too. You deserve the chance to help defend it, if you want.” He looked over the crowd of elves, almost all of whom had stopped their work to listen in. “If any of you are willing to help, we would be in your debt for it. But regardless, we’ll do what we can to keep this castle safe. Keep your home safe.”

With elves like Dobby amongst them, Harry didn’t doubt that the Hogwarts elves knew exactly how many of the people on Voldemort’s side treated their elves. They wouldn’t want the castle to be taken any more than he did.

Lula hummed, tugging at their ears. “Elves will discuss. Think it over. We is... never has a wizard spoken so plainly to an elf. Like equals.” Many elves nodded, muttering quietly to each other. Harry flashed a grin.

“Well, that’s something we’ll have to work on once the war’s over, then,” he said cheerfully. “This castle would be nothing without you lot!” The food, the laundry, the cleaning — the hundreds of other things the elves kept in order that he probably didn’t even consider in his day to day life.

“Dobby will fight with Harry Potter sir,” Dobby declared boldly. “Dobby would be honoured to help!”

“Thanks, Dobby,” Harry said, patting the elf on his skinny back. “I appreciate it.”

Dobby looked like he might faint from joy.

“Master Snakey is saying he wants to talk about two things,” Lula piped up, somewhat hesitant, like Harry’s second request might be so much bigger than his first. Harry chuckled, running a hand through his hair.

“Oh, the other thing is simple, really,” he assured. “See, I’m planning a little birthday party...”

.-. .

Draco was used to his birthday being somewhat overshadowed, as a student. June 5th might not be an exam day itself, but it was close enough to it — usually by now everyone was far too busy studying to do anything in particular.

This year, there were no exams. In solidarity with the OWL and NEWT students, McGonagall had cancelled exams for all year groups, claiming they had enough on their plates as it was. This decision made her wildly popular, even amongst Slytherins. And that little spark of hope within Draco caught alight.

He was turning seventeen. Coming of age in the wizarding world. He had the day off classes, to welcome in his maturing magic — which would set in at 11:02 in the morning, a perfectly respectable time to be born — and he thought maybe, this year might be different. This year he could sit publicly with his boyfriend and his friends and not have to pretend to hate any of them. He didn't have to hide birthday presents in his trunk to avoid questions about who they had come from.

He woke up at his usual time in the morning, his fingers and toes tingling, a strange bubbling sensation in his chest. At first he thought it was just excitement — that foolish hope he was far too old for — but then he realised it was his magic, preparing for his maturity to arrive. The Malfoy magic, and the Black magic, and smaller echoes of other families that had married into both lines along the way. A deep, old magic.

“Happy birthday, Draco,” Blaise said with a grin, tossing a silver-wrapped present his way before Draco could even properly sit up.

Things were much lighter in their dorm, now that Crabbe and Goyle were gone.

“Thanks.” Draco shuffled into a sitting position, glancing at the other bed in the room, which was empty. “Theo in the shower?”

“Oh, no, he never came in last night,” Blaise drawled with a wriggle of his eyebrows.

“*Oh, I see.*” Fair enough. It wasn’t like he could judge. “And both of you are still happy with giving me my *other* birthday present?”

Blaise laughed, reaching into his trunk for a white uniform shirt. “Yeah, yeah, don’t worry. We’ve made other arrangements, the dorm is yours.” He winked. “I doubt it’ll be too much of a travesty for Theo to spend *another* night in whatever love nest he and Susan have holed up in.”

“True. I still appreciate it, though.” After all the times Draco had been up in the Gryffindor dorm by now, he rather thought it was about time Harry came down to his level for once. Harry didn’t know about his plan yet, but Draco couldn’t see him complaining.

With no classes to get to, he had a leisurely morning, taking his time in the shower and strolling up to breakfast far later than he normally would. It surprised him, how many people wished him a happy birthday on his way up to the Great Hall. How many of them weren’t even Slytherins.

Entering the hall, he couldn’t help the way his eyes immediately sought out a head of wild jet-black hair, nor the way his heart swelled in his chest at the beaming smile bestowed upon him, those vivid green eyes lighting up at the sight of him. Harry Potter would be the death of him, honestly.

There was an empty seat waiting for him at the Gryffindor table, and he stepped gracefully over the bench, bum barely touching wood before he was being kissed firmly. “Happy birthday, love,” Harry murmured. “I’ll give you your present after classes, yeah?”

A tiny, childish part of Draco wanted to pout and demand it *now*, but he pushed down the urge. He was an adult now, he could wait.

His present might not be something fit for public consumption, after all.

Several others sat at the Gryffindor table wished him birthday greetings, Ginny even conjuring a ridiculous spray of green and silver confetti that he would no doubt spend the next several days finding on his person.

It amazed him, sometimes, how comfortable he had come to be sat at the table of red and gold, a place he had long regarded as the seat of his enemies. How things had changed.

The morning post came, though there was nothing for Draco. He hadn’t expected it. His mother’s present — along with presents from anyone else in the family who thought to send something — was waiting in his godfather’s quarters, where he would go to safely await his maturation.

Again, once upon a time he might have kicked up a fuss about not getting such things in public where everyone around him could be jealous. But he wasn’t the spoiled brat he had once been, and over the years he’d learned the joys of keeping things private.

“Here, something you can have now, though,” Harry whispered conspiratorially, pressing something into Draco’s hand beneath the table. Draco glanced down — it was the two-way mirror. “Your mum’s expecting a call sometime this morning.”

Draco’s breath hitched — he would get to speak to his mother on his birthday, see her face. “And this isn’t my present?” he checked, amazed. Harry laughed softly.

“Course not, silly. This is just me wanting your mum to like me,” he joked.

“My mother adores you and we both know it.” Far more than they expected, far more than Draco had ever dared hope back when he’d first started feeling that fluttery sensation when he looked at Harry Potter.

“Yeah, but this certainly helps.” Then, Harry checked his watch, and groaned. “Ugh, gotta go to Charms.” He squeezed Draco’s thigh, pecking him on the cheek. “Good luck with your magic. I’ll see you at dinner.” A lopsided grin, a wink that still made Draco’s heart flutter even now. “Enjoy your day off.”

“I’m sure I will,” he replied, waving as his boyfriend left, as his friends left with him. The only people who remained were those who had a free period first thing, none of whom Draco was particularly close to. He glanced up at the head table, seeing his godfather striding away from it. He had to teach, too — he couldn’t sit with Draco while he waited for his magic to grow.

What to do with his morning, then?

. . .

Having a whole day off classes wasn't nearly as fun as he'd anticipated, Draco decided; largely because everyone else was still going through a normal school day.

He called his mother from Uncle Severus' private quarters, surrounded by wrapping paper and presents — presents from Sev, from his mother, but also from Sirius and Remus and more Weasleys than he'd ever anticipated, from Andromeda and Tonks and Kingsley.

His mother had laughed fondly, teasing him for making a mess, and cooed with appropriate enthusiasm over each and every present. The brand new watch on his wrist, a gorgeous black and silver creation with the Draco constellation studded in tiny diamonds on the face, felt strange and heavy with the weight of its symbolism, catching the light every time he moved his arm, reminding him that he was seventeen now. An adult in the eyes of the world. Old enough to be Lord Malfoy, as soon as the Wizengamot was safe to enter.

Old enough to start leaving his mark.

They talked for a while, and Sirius popped in to wish Draco well too, but then the morning drew on and the time drew nearer, so Draco ended the call and placed the mirror somewhere safe, somewhere away.

He wasn't sure how his magic might react to his maturation, how the magic around him might respond. Severus had accounted for this, setting up the spare bedroom of his quarters without anything magical inside it. Draco sprawled out on the bed, his wrist already feeling naked without his new watch. He stared at the muggle clock on the wall, and waited.

When it hit, it was less... dramatic than he anticipated.

Of course, he knew it wasn't going to be some flashy light show or miraculous influx of strength. While the maturation hit at the moment of birth, his body had been preparing for it for years now.

It was weirdly like an orgasm, without the pleasure. The white hot rush of *something* from the tips of his toes to the roots of his hair, pulsing through him as magic burned new pathways and filled his body. The bed beneath him rattled, but didn't break. The clock on the wall shattered. With nothing else in the room, he didn't get to see if his boost would be enough to cause damage worth bragging about.

It didn't feel as foreign as he thought it might. The magic within him, while stronger than he'd ever felt before, was like a long awaited growth spurt; now it had happened, he felt more like *himself* than ever.

He smiled, sparks tickling over the backs of his hands. This was the kind of power he needed to keep Harry safe.

Severus returned to eat lunch with him, wishing him a happy birthday and barely letting their food settle before he was putting Draco through his paces, seeing what he could achieve now. Letting out the build up of new magic and feeling how fast the well refilled.

The strength felt *so good*. He understood, now, why so many of his friends and housemates started holding themselves differently after their coming of age. He had thought it was just them trying to project their maturity, looking down on their younger peers. But it was a bone-deep thing, an awareness of the body that could hardly be described.

“Harry’s going to blow up half the school when he comes of age, isn’t he?” he remarked wryly, watching his godfather’s lips curl.

“We are hoping to avoid that scenario,” Severus told him. “Harry insists the wards will have it in hand.”

That wasn’t a no.

Draco didn’t feel jealousy over it, not like he might have done once. He felt only pride, and satisfaction — with that kind of power, Voldemort didn’t stand a chance.

Severus had to leave for his afternoon classes, and so Draco went for a walk, trying to get used to the way his body felt now. There was still a strange discomfort in his chest; nothing to do with his magic, but a kind of sadness, one he barely even wanted to admit to.

Turning seventeen was nice. Getting the day off classes was nice. But... where was the *celebration*?

It was fine, he told himself. He had the evening to spend with Harry, the dormitory for just them. They could celebrate wonderfully by themselves, all night long.

But... he had hoped for just a *little* more fuss, he thought quietly to himself at dinner, which felt like any other dinner at Hogwarts. Some presents from his friends in other houses, perhaps. Certainly not the ridiculous cake hat that Hufflepuff house delighted in forcing upon newly adult students, but something more than a quick ‘happy birthday, Draco — pass the potatoes, would you?’

As dinner came to an end, Harry’s arm curled around his waist. “You feeling up for a walk?” the Gryffindor asked.

“I’m of-age, Potter, not an invalid,” Draco pointed out dryly. Harry made a face, kissing Draco’s nose.

“That a yes, then?”

A walk sounded nice. A stroll by the lake, perhaps; a quiet celebration, watching the sun set on his youth or some poetic bullshit like that. So he agreed.

Only Harry didn’t lead him outside. He turned instead towards a suit of armour nearby — or rather, the passage behind the suit of armour, which certainly had not existed before in

Draco's living memory. Dating an heir to the castle was convenient and baffling in equal measure.

"Where are we going?" he asked warily, wondering if Harry was going to absolutely scupper his plan to have his way with his Gryffindor in the Slytherin dormitory by leading him to some romantic bedroom setup elsewhere in the castle. Perhaps he shouldn't have kept his birthday plans secret after all!

"Just for a bit of a wander. I want to show you something." Well, then. That sounded less like an intention to ravish him and more like Harry had found something weird and possibly extremely ridiculous, knowing that Potter luck. Like another secret chamber from the founders' era, or something left behind by Merlin himself.

Draco was braced for the extreme, and thus surprised when the passage ended in a familiar corridor. The seventh floor corridor, on the way to the Room of Requirement.

Had Harry been rooting around the room of Hidden Things again? Draco knew his boyfriend had looked into it once or twice, since finding the horcrux. Had he unearthed some other lost treasure?

Harry took him by the hand, opening the door and leading him inside.

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY DRACO!"

He stumbled against the wall of sound, wide-eyed at the sight of a room full of people; all his friends, even Pansy and Millie — even the Weasley twins, which explained both the fireworks exploding above his head and also Blaise's lack of complaints about vacating the dorm for the night. The room was decked out in silver and green, with a table groaning with snacks and drinks along one wall, a huge cake in the middle of the table decorated with snakes and snitches and the words 'Happy 17th Draco' in neat icing on top. Beside it was a smaller table, stacked with wrapped gifts.

Draco turned to Harry, who was beaming at his side, eyes sparkling. "You... you planned this?"

"Couldn't let you turn seventeen without a decent party, could I?" Harry said with a wink.
"Do you like it?"

A long stare, and then Draco pulled his boyfriend into a toe-curling kiss, their friends whooping and whistling when it dragged on far too long. Harry's mouth was swollen when Draco let him go, hair even more wild than usual, green eyes bright behind his glasses. He was gorgeous, and he was *Draco's*, and this was the best birthday ever.

"Let's get this party started, then!" Fred announced, letting off another firework and starting up the record player in the corner, filling the room with fast-paced muggle music Draco vaguely recognised. Draco couldn't stop looking at Harry, wondering what in the world he had done to deserve this life he now lead.

"Not too much? Harry fretted. Draco scoffed.

“When has anything been *too much*? I’m a Black,” he said proudly, making Harry laugh.

“Good. I know next year your birthday is gonna be a bit mad with NEWTs and everything, so I thought... well, this year is a special one. You deserve to make a big deal out of it.” He looked bashful, and Draco kissed him again, hand at the small of Harry’s back, loving the way the shorter boy just *melted* against him.

“Are you two gonna suck face this entire time, or would you like to join the rest of the party?” That was Susan, grinning far too devilishly for a Hufflepuff, a pair of drinks in her hands that were bright coloured and very likely alcoholic. She thrust them towards the two boys. “Come on. You’ve got plenty of time for that later,” she added with a suggestive wink.

Harry looked a little confused by that, glancing at Draco, who just smirked and sipped his new drink. *Definitely* alcoholic. “I’ve got the Slytherin dorm to myself tonight,” he whispered in Harry’s ear, leaning in close enough to brush his lips against the delicate skin. “Thought you might like to join me. Let me repay all your *hospitality* up in the Gryffindor dorms.”

He watched Harry’s eyes darken, and lust flared hot within him, tangling up in the rush of the new magic in his system. Everything felt that much more intense, and Draco couldn’t *wait* to see how that translated to getting Harry’s hands on his skin.

But he had a party to enjoy, first.

. . .

They were very lucky that Harry was the heir of Slytherin — they likely never would have made it down to the Slytherin common room without getting caught otherwise, as tipsy as they were. Neither of them had wanted to get too drunk, very aware of their evening plans. But Draco was buzzing, with alcohol and magic and sweet sharp arousal simmering below the surface, rearing up every time his gaze caught on the line of Harry’s neck or the sliver of skin below the hem of his t-shirt that flashed tauntingly when he danced.

The party ended just before midnight, the Room providing safe passage back to common rooms, though with the number of couples involved Draco doubted everyone would be returning to their own beds, or even beds at all. He didn’t care, as long as Blaise and Theo found other places to be.

Harry was handsy as they crept towards the entrance to the common room — he hadn’t been drunk often, and wasn’t truly drunk now, but he was an affectionate little sop at the best of times and with his inhibitions lowered that just made him all the more eager to press himself against Draco and whisper sweet nothings in his ear, all while grinding a huge erection against his hip.

It was a miracle they didn’t fuck right there in the corridor. But the desire to have Harry in his dormitory bed — and the fear of possibly getting caught by his godfather — had Draco pressing on, murmuring the password, feeling Harry’s magic trickle over both of them as the stone archway revealed itself. That shouldn’t have been such a turn on, knowing that even drunk and half-blind with lust Harry was still capable of a Dissillusionment charm to cover

them both, *wandlessly* at that. But Draco had long since stopped denying that he was attracted to power, especially the power that poured off Harry in waves.

There were only a couple of people in the common room, and neither of them noticed the two invisible sixth years creeping towards the boys' dorms. Harry's breath was hot on the back of Draco's neck as they hurried through, slipping into Draco's room and shutting the door behind them. Immediately, Harry burst into giddy giggles, leaning back against the door.

Draco felt the flare of magic, the privacy wards springing to life. He swallowed, surveying his boyfriend. Merlin, he was exquisite. "I want you naked," Draco growled, reaching for the hem of Harry's t-shirt — one of the slogan ones from Infinite, with rainbow lettering bold across the chest, declaring that '*the first Pride was a riot*'.

"Where and how?" Harry asked without hesitation, so trusting as he looked at Draco, the openness of his face and eagerness in his eyes making Draco's cock twitch in his jeans.

For a brief moment he hated Albus Dumbledore for tying Harry up when he kidnapped him — the Gryffindor would look *incredible* all trussed up in Draco's bed, restrained by the drapes or perhaps a Slytherin tie or two. But that kind of restraint was absolutely not fun for Harry anymore, so Draco didn't even suggest it, leaving that play firmly in his fantasies and reaching for the next thought. He had so many, battling for space in his brain, all the while Harry was revealing more of that glorious burnished bronze skin and making it impossible for Draco to think through the lust clouding his mind.

One thought stood out above the rest. "I— remember the last day of Yule break?" he gasped, gaze dropping lower as Harry shucked his trousers. He wasn't wearing any underwear, and *Salazar*, if Draco had known that sooner they never would have made it through the party.

"Yeah," Harry breathed, stalking closer to Draco now that he was naked, the blond still far too dressed. It felt so forbidden, having Harry here, in the heart of Slytherin. Bare and unashamed and staring at Draco with such fire in his eyes. They would be in so much trouble if they got caught, but that just made Draco's blood pump that much faster. "You want that?"

For a moment, Draco forgot what they were talking about. Then he remembered — Harry, in his bed, beneath him. "Your mouth, like that," he confirmed, shoving Harry down onto his bed, kicking off his trousers and boxers as quickly as he could, wanting to match his boyfriend's nakedness. "Then— then I want you in me, up against the wall. Right there." He pointed to the space between the two tall wardrobes, the patch of stone wall with a Slytherin banner hung on it, directly opposite the door. The place where they had no chance of hiding if anyone walked in. Not that anyone would, not with Harry's wards, but it made the fantasy so much hotter to think about it.

They hadn't fucked against a wall before. Draco was keen to find out what it was like.

A growl rumbled in Harry's chest, the sound hitting Draco hard. The Slytherin took a moment to admire his nude boyfriend lying against his green and silver sheets, then joined him on the bed, straddling his chest, feeling desperate hands grip his thighs.

Bracing himself with a hand on the headboard, Draco locked eyes with that vivid green stare, sinking into the hot wet welcome of Harry's eager mouth.

Best birthday *ever*.

.-. .

If the world was normal, Ginny would be taking her first OWL exam in the morning.

Instead, she would be going to class just like normal, teachers going over things they'd already learned — the staff were just as adrift as the students, with these extra two weeks to come up with lesson plans for. She couldn't even adjust her schedule to prepare for when she *would* take her exams; none of them had any idea how long it would be before that was even possible.

"I thought I'd be a lot happier about not having to do exams than I actually am," she sighed, curling a lock of hair around her finger.

Neville, knelt nearby over a raised bed filled with more plants than Ginny could remember the names of, looked back over his shoulder with concern in his hazel eyes. "It's weird, isn't it?" he agreed. "Last time they were cancelled was, well, y'know."

Ginny grimaced — exams had been cancelled after the whole Chamber of Secrets situation, but she had been in no fit state to notice or care by that point.

"Didn't really matter as much back then. Second year exams and all," Neville finished, shrugging. Ginny hummed in agreement.

"I just... I just want to get them over with. Do my OWLs, get my results, start working on the next things. I don't want to waste my first term of sixth year having to revise everything all over again." That would just leave her behind in her NEWT studies, which would make her last two years of Hogwarts that little bit more gruelling. Ginny wasn't a swot, but she still wanted decent grades, and having such disruption felt supremely unfair.

"It probably won't be the whole first term," Neville said. "Just the first month or so. I can't see it taking that long to get everything back up and running."

Ginny's gaze darkened sadly. "Depends how bad things are over the summer. There might not be a school to come back to for a while." She wasn't stupid, she could see Harry and her older friends and all the professors quietly preparing for war. She was part of the HA, she felt how their training became more and more serious as time went on. And there was no way Harry was with Draco *every* time he was out past curfew. Those boys were insatiable, to be sure, but they weren't that bad.

"Don't talk like that, Gin," Neville protested. "Everything's going to be fine."

There was such confidence to his voice, such utter faith in his best friend. Ginny had faith in Harry, too, but that didn't stop her worrying. Even a battle won could do irreparable damage.

She sighed, but didn't say anything else, watching Neville tend to his plants. She knew it calmed him to work in the greenhouses, and it was oddly soothing for her just to watch; his repetitive motions, his sure and steady hand, the quiet murmurs of encouragement to the plants that he probably didn't realise she could hear. He was adorable, honestly.

Professor Sprout didn't mind her sitting back here with Neville, not now she'd proven quiet and trustworthy and unlikely to damage any of the more delicate specimens. The first few times, she'd had the Herbology Mistress' keen-eyed stare on her the entire time, worried that she and Neville might be using the quiet space to get up to something scandalous.

Not that it wasn't tempting, in the back of Ginny's mind. Since falling for Neville Longbottom she'd developed a disturbingly high number of greenhouse-related fantasies. But most of those worked just fine in his greenhouses at Longbottom Manor, where they weren't likely to be interrupted by a teacher or another student.

Ginny just wanted to hang out with Neville, really. Watch him enjoy his happy place. Especially when her own emotions were restless, her quick temper battling with her disappointment in a confusing muddle of moroseness. She just wanted to be able to take her exams and have the owl come with her results in July like normal, a little piece of paper she could show to her parents and her big brothers and have them be so *proud*.

She wanted *life* to go back to normal.

She felt bad for thinking it, sometimes. She wasn't that badly affected by things — her family were in the thick of it, but they were all still around. She wasn't like Harry, with such a huge burden on his shoulders. She would fight when the time came, but through her own choice, not because anyone expected it of her. Most of her family would probably prefer she *didn't*, in all honesty. And she didn't even have it as bad as the seventh years, who couldn't graduate until the whole mess was over, had to put their futures on hold in this already uncertain time.

She didn't have that much to sulk about, but she still felt it all the same. She had been able to pretend, up to this point; pretend she was a normal fifth year with a great boyfriend and a spot on the quidditch team and a solid friend group, the teenage life she'd dreamed of as a child when all her older siblings went off to Hogwarts and left her with Mum, coming back at holidays with stories about all their cool friends and cool classes and cool student life.

But OWLs being cancelled due to the Ministry being run by Death Eaters was not something that happened to normal fifth years.

Ginny shook her head slightly, ridding herself of the depressing thoughts. Her brown eyes went back to Neville, a smile tugging at her lips as he leaned over to trim some dead leaves off a tall plant with bright blue flowers. He was humming to himself, speaking softly to the plant, promising it would all be over soon and it would feel so much better when he was done.

When the plant looked perfect, the boy ran a hand through his dark blond hair, sitting back on his haunches and downing tools, lifting the hem of his t-shirt up to wipe the sweat off his face. Ginny's smile widened — he never would have done that, a year ago. Not in front of her, and probably not by himself. He'd been so self-conscious of his soft belly, it had taken a

while for him to stop flinching whenever Ginny touched it, and even longer for him to be comfortable shirtless in front of her.

Even now, after they'd been naked in front of each other more times than she could count — after Ginny had given him a part of her that no one else would ever have — she still wasn't sure he believed her when she said he was handsome, gorgeous, sexy, any of the words he'd never use for himself.

But he was starting to. And him not even thinking twice before baring that swell of stomach in such an innocent gesture made her think that he was finally starting to be comfortable in himself.

"You're staring at me again."

She blinked, cheeks going red as she met Neville's amused gaze. He was done with his plants now it seemed, sat on the wooden edge of the raised bed and spelling his hands clean. "Sorry," she said, tucking her hair behind her ear.

He smiled. "It's okay. I don't mind." His face flushed a little, and not from the heat. "It's not the kind of staring that makes me worried we'll get in trouble with Sprout."

A laugh burst from Ginny's mouth. "It could be," she drawled salaciously, giving him an obvious once-over. He just rolled his eyes, and started packing away his gardening tools.

"Not in here," he scolded. "I'm not having you get me kicked out of the greenhouses right as I've just got my laceflowers finally blooming."

"Which one's that again?" Ginny asked, peering at the bed full of all of Neville's Herbology projects.

"The one with all the little purple buds. Which you should *know*, because they're definitely on the OWL curriculum," he teased, hoisting himself to his feet, offering her a hand up. Ginny just grinned.

"Well I've now got ages before my exams, so you'll just have to remind me in a couple of months time," she teased, brushing a smudge of dirt off his face. His jaw was getting stubbly again, which meant he'd probably shave that evening, which was a damned shame. Neville thought his scruff was still too patchy, but Ginny thought it looked extremely sexy.

"I will," he promised. "I'll help you study as much as you need. Probably won't be much help with subjects that aren't Herbology, mind, but I'm sure the others will chip in."

"I'll pester Harry about it." Then Ginny paused, frowning. "Or— maybe not him. He might be a bit busy. Killing a Dark Lord is probably more important than my OWL results."

"Only a little bit," Neville agreed. "When he's done with all that war nonsense, though, I'm sure he'll help."

All that war nonsense. Merlin, she loved this boy.

“You good to go?” she asked, wondering if he had any other projects to tend to. He nodded, squeezing her hand.

“All set, yeah. Thanks for coming with me — it’s nice to have company, even if you’re just sitting there.” Some of his plants he didn’t mind her helping with, but most were too fragile for her heavy-handed enthusiasm.

“It’s way too sunny to be up in the castle,” she returned, tilting her head up to feel the sunlight warm her face through the glass roof. She closed her eyes a moment, and when she opened them again the look in Neville’s eyes made her breath catch in her throat.

“You’re so pretty,” he murmured, reaching out to tangle a hand in her hair, watching the way the light shimmered off the copper-coloured strands.

“And you’re far too handsome for your own good,” she said, watching his nose screw up in denial. “Did I tell you I overheard Leanne Moon and Mandy Brocklehurst talking about you in the girls’ bathroom the other day? Mandy was considering starting some rumour about catching me with Michael in the Ravenclaw dorms so that you’d break up with me and go out with her instead.”

“That can’t be true,” Neville denied, shaking his head. Ginny nodded, grin widening. “Seriously? But— she thought I’d just *believe* that?”

“She was going to make it very convincing,” came Ginny’s airy response. “Get Michael in on it and everything. I think she’s got some kind of blackmail on him, she was pretty sure he’d be up for it.”

“Blimey.” Neville blinked, shaking his head once more. “That— Mandy Brocklehurst? Really?”

“You reconsidering your options?” Ginny teased; Mandy was cute, after all. Neville scoffed.

“Don’t be daft,” he said, not a second of hesitation. “I just... Mandy went out with *Roger Malone*, what’s she looking at me for?”

“Malone has weird hair,” Ginny said, grimacing; whoever had told the Ravenclaw boy that curtains suited him was committing a crime against humanity. “And she’s looking at you because you’re hot. Speaking of,” she added, feeling sweat trickle down her back beneath her top. “Fancy going for a dip in the lake before dinner?”

Neville arched his brows, hands settling on her hips. “Are you just trying to get me wet and half naked?” he asked with a sigh. Ginny beamed.

“Yup,” she chirped. “What do you think?” She tried not to look too eager, wondering if being shirtless where anyone could see them was too far out of his comfort zone.

“Go on, then,” he relented, kissing her forehead and directing her towards the greenhouse doors, hand moving to the small of her back. “I swear, I’ve got no willpower when it comes to you.” He didn’t sound mad about it, more resigned to his fate. Ginny wound an arm around

his thick waist, squeezing lightly, already imagining the bikini she could transfigure for herself. Something that would make Neville far too distracted to think about his own bare-chested state.

Mandy Brocklehurst could go suck a dick; she wasn't getting *anywhere* near Ginny's boyfriend.

.

With summer break so close, and no exams to direct their focus, the tension amongst the students was getting to unbearable levels. Two weeks before the end of term, McGonagall called a school-wide assembly after dinner one evening.

"It has been decided," she announced, "that Hogwarts will remain open for those in need for the duration of the summer holidays."

Immediately, the hall burst into noise. McGonagall cleared her throat pointedly, staring them all down until the students hushed again. "This does not mean you will be forced to stay. Nor does it mean that, should the battle come to our doors, you will be forced to fight. If you have alternate arrangements made for your own safety, I will do my best to help you keep to those arrangements. But, if you have nowhere else to go, we will not close our doors to you at the end of the year."

Her gaze turned intent, fierce. "However, I will warn you that this school intends to stand as a stronghold against the forces of Lord Voldemort, and as such it may well not be the safest or best place for you. Make your choices wisely; I know all of you are capable of having bright futures, and I would hate to see those futures crushed by the false promise of superiority."

Harry was reminded of the way McGonagall had looked when expelling the six students who had attacked him, stony and yet so hopeful for her students to make the right decisions. There was some dark muttering in amongst the worried voices as they all got up to leave — not just from the Slytherin corner of the room, either.

He wasn't so stupid as to think those six students were the only loyal Voldemort supporters in the school. The others were just biding their time, aware that Harry was practically untouchable here.

As the first students reached the doors, all of a sudden there was a boom so loud it rocked the very foundations of the school. At the same time, four students dropped to their knees with gasps of pain, and the headmistress swooned back into her chair.

Harry hardly registered the smack of his knees hitting the stone floor, his head ringing with the force of the pressure on the school wards. He thought he felt a hand on his back, heard a voice calling his name. "Attack," he croaked, squeezing his eyes shut as there was another assault to the web of magic surrounding the castle. Hogwarts cried out for help in his mind, and he did his best to provide strength.

Had he been more coherent, he would have noticed his friends banding tight around him, protecting him from view. What he *was* aware of was the connections around him, as his

friends moved Neville and Hannah and Luna close to him, the four of them immediately locking their arms around each other, leaning in together as they worked to offer what they could to the school. It was easier, with his fellow heirs beside him.

Harry's entire awareness narrowed down to the Slytherin magic within him, and the foul magic trying to tear a hole in the castle's protections. Nothing else mattered, nothing else even existed.

The headmistress was handling things better than the heirs, though it was clear the strain was on her, too. She hauled herself to a standing position, leaning heavily on Professor Sprout, and hobbled her way over to the four heirs huddled tight together in the middle of the hall. "We need to move them," she said, unsurprised at the solid ring of students shielding the heirs, their wands raised and ready for attack.

"It's You-Know-Who!" Someone came running in — Dennis Creevey, his eyes as wide as dinner plates. No one had even noticed him leave the hall. "There's Death Eaters at the gates!"

Harry had no concept of the panic, sucking the air from the room in an instant. He had no concept of the teachers and the prefects trying to organise their students. He was only vaguely aware of a tiny hand pressing to his back, and the feeling of house elf travel. He remained locked in the embrace with the other three, but the place they arrived was... easier. He strained his neck up, forcing his eyes open, and found himself looking at the Wardstone, its colours swirling angrily. At his side stood Dobby, big eyes round and scared.

"Heirs will hold the wards," the elf said solemnly, "elves will keep Hogwarts safe."

And then he disappeared.

The castle's magic was strongest in this room, the pressure easing slightly, enough for the heirs to disentangle themselves and look at each other.

"We need to outlast him," Luna said, eyes glowing with ethereal light. "If he breaks the wards, it's over."

That didn't sound like the good kind of over. Harry grit his teeth, stumbling to his feet, moving to the same compass point he'd stood at when he'd claimed the wards so many months ago.

"We have all of Hogwarts at our hands," Harry reminded, looking at his friends as they took their positions. "He's just one man. We hold, or we die."

Across the Wardstone, he met Neville's gaze, giving his best friend one last solemn nod. Then he pressed both hands to the wardstone, and sank.

.-. .

The siege on the wards lasted almost twenty-four full hours. A whole day of Voldemort standing at the gates of Hogwarts, drawing the magic from all of his Marked followers —

and several Dark ritual-based sources — trying to force the wards to crack, his followers waiting around him for their chance to claim Hogwarts School for good.

Had the wards been the same as they were when Dumbledore was in charge, they likely wouldn't have lasted more than an hour or two under the onslaught.

Inside the school, the teachers did their best to maintain some semblance of calm. The students were kept in their common rooms, prefects guarding the doors — for Slytherin and Hufflepuff it was torture, trapped in the bowels of the school with no idea what was going on. Up in the towers of Gryffindor and Ravenclaw house, students jostled at the windows, trying to see the crowd of black-clad figures at the very edge of the school grounds. There had to be at least a hundred, perhaps more. Voldemort's army, ready for battle.

No one knew where the four heirs had been taken, just that the school elves had moved them 'somewhere safe'. No one except Draco, who had called Dobby in the privacy of his bathroom and begged for information on his boyfriend. Dobby told him that the heirs were at the Wardstone, though he couldn't tell Draco where that was. That Draco wouldn't be able to go in even if he knew — only the heirs and the heads of school could enter.

So for almost twenty-four hours, they waited. Wondered if this would be it, the beginning of the end. For almost twenty-four hours, four teenagers stood in the heart of the castle, pouring every ounce of strength they had into the wards surrounding them. Channeling all the wild magic of the forest and the ley lines beneath it, the echoed magic from hundreds of years of students growing within these halls, coming of age right here in the castle, leaking magic to be absorbed by the stones and fed back to Hogwarts itself.

Finally, a figure dropped to the floor in a dead faint.

Outside the wards, a hundred or more black-cloaked figures watched in shock as their master crumpled to the ground. For a moment, none of them moved. Then one hurried forward, crouching beside the unconscious Lord Voldemort, gesturing with an arm that ticked like the winding of a clock. "Retreat!" Rabastan Lestrange shouted, trying not to show his panic. "All of you, out! I will take our Lord to safety!"

The students in the tower windows watched the black-cloaked figures disappear, one by one.

Back in the heart of the castle, four teenagers gasped in unison as the pressure in their heads finally abated. The wards settled down, weak but still in tact. The heirs lifted their hands from the Wardstone, groaning as their stiff limbs protested.

"How long...?" Hannah trailed off as Harry did a wandless Tempus charm, and all four of them swore loudly.

"A whole day!" Neville exclaimed. "No wonder I'm bloody starving!"

Harry laughed, the sound rusty. He wanted to walk away, but he wasn't sure his legs would support him if he moved even an inch. "I hope it fucking destroys him." He could hardly believe how much magical power was at Voldemort's disposal, with so little of his soul left.

Sure, he had his connections through the Dark Marks, drawing on his followers' power when his own faltered, but even so...

Harry hoped his maturation was as big as they expected. He'd need every last bit of it to win that fight.

Suddenly Hannah's knees buckled, the Hufflepuff girl caught at the last minute by a divan the Room provided. "Ohh, I'm dizzy," she groaned, clutching her head.

"Dobby," Harry called, and the elf was there in an instant. "The school, is it safe?"

Dobby's ears flapped as he nodded. "The students is safe in they's dorms. The wards is not being breached." He looked at Harry worriedly. "We is taking you to Hospital Wing now." It was a statement, not a request, but Harry didn't have it in him to argue. Three more elves appeared, one for each heir.

Madam Pomfrey shrieked in alarm when four patients appeared suddenly in beds in her ward, house elves at their sides. Her hand flew to her face when she realised who those patients were. "It's over, then?" she asked, rushing to aid them. Harry nodded, a grim look on his face.

"For now, at least."

Voldemort would try again, that was for sure — he would not take well to being denied entry, to being made to look weak in front of his followers.

But after that, it would take him quite a while to recover. They had bought some time, at least.

.

Lord Voldemort sat in a high-backed, throne-like chair. Severus, stood in the front row of the gathered Death Eaters, could see the faint tremors running through the man's form.

He had been unconscious for three days straight, after failing to breach the Hogwarts wards. For two days after that he had refused to be seen by anyone but Severus and Rabastan. Severus had been sent a request for restorative potions, and they seemed to have helped — he himself had needed a few, after the drain on his magic through his Mark. He had another one brewing back at the school, one that would take another two weeks to prepare.

But none of them had seen their Lord cast a single spell since.

"Severus," came the hissing voice, halfway to Parseltongue, barely louder than a whisper. "Come forward."

Severus did as bid, kneeling in front of the chair. Rabastan stood at their master's side like an honour guard, wand held in the clockwork hand of the arm Voldemort had so graciously provided him.

He expected the Cruciatus that ripped a scream from his throat. The only mercy was that it came from Rabastan, not the Dark Lord himself. There was a different feel to the magic — just as painful, but not quite as sharp in the aftershocks.

“When my loyal subjects were expelled for their attempt at kidnapping Potter, Severus, you told me the wards had grown stronger. You did not tell me they had grown strong enough to keep me out!”

“My Lord, I did not know,” Severus murmured with the appropriate amount of fear and remorse. “The full extent of the heirs’ capabilities has been a closely guarded secret. I had no idea they could combine together with such strength.” It still amazed him, even now, that the four students had held fast against such a power.

“What use is having a spy within the school if you do not provide me with this *vital* information!” Voldemort snapped, his voice quiet but his fury as strong as ever. “You made my followers look like fools when they were curtailed by the wards. Now you have made *me* look like a fool with the same! One might wonder if you *wanted* to keep me out of Hogwarts! I know how... fond you are of the castle, after all these years.”

“No, My Lord,” Severus said desperately. “I would like nothing more than to see you in charge of that school, turning it into the great academy of Dark Arts it deserves to be. I will do better, My Lord. Minerva is keeping the school open over the summer, a gathering point for the forces of the light. I will stay with them, My Lord, and learn their weaknesses. I will find a way in for you, and if I cannot do that then I will bring you Potter myself.”

When he dared look up, Voldemort was smirking. “You will indeed, Severus — this is your last chance to redeem yourself. With the old fool gone, there are few who trust you within the school; if you have not changed that by the end of the summer, have not given me something *useful*, then you will deliver the brat to my feet or I will kill you myself.” His thin lips sneered dangerously. “And if I hear even a *whisper* that you are no longer loyal to me, your life is forfeit. I do not like it when my plans do not work, Severus. Especially when it is due to information that my *spy* should have provided me!”

“I am sorry, My Lord. Please, forgive me.”

Knowing what was coming didn’t make it any less painful.

“Learn from your punishment, Severus. Lord Voldemort does not suffer incompetence.”

Severus couldn’t answer — he was too busy screaming as Rabastan’s magic tore into his skin, ripping at muscles and burning his very bones.

It might take more than just Remus to piece him back together, after this.

Chapter 102

No one was excited for the end of year feast. No seventh years eager to graduate and join the adult world, no homesick first years keen to see their parents again. Gryffindor won the house cup, but it was not a celebrating matter.

There would be no Hogwarts Express in the morning. It was too dangerous, too big a target for attack. Voldemort would happily endanger children if it meant drawing the Light out to defend them.

Not everyone was staying. A lot of students, Harry knew, had families in safehouses already, and were desperate to join them. The parents at the Pottery were looking forward to having their children back with them.

And of course, there were those students who had nothing to fear from the wider world. Those who would go home to their families quite happily, live a fairly ordinary summer while their parents or cousins or siblings went off to serve a madman. The lucky students were the ones too young to be expected to fight.

Many students would be going home only to offer their arms up for branding. Marking themselves for death.

So it was a solemn affair that closed out the school year, Harry sat at his table with Neville on one side and Katie on the other. He kept his head down, stayed silent, ignored the whispers. His thoughts were already on the days to come.

At least he had recovered from the attack on the wards. Two days in the Hospital Wing, some potions, and a full twelve hours sleep had done wonders for him, and the other heirs. They had not bled themselves dry, not even close — they were reinforcing the wards with their strength, not offering up all their magic — but it was still an exhausting process.

Harry lingered in the hall after the empty dessert plates vanished from the table. He waved off the gentle concern of his friends, promising to see them back at the common room soon. He made his way up towards the staff table; McGonagall was lingering, too.

“All set for tomorrow?” he asked. The headmistress nodded sharply.

“I now understand how you were so sure of Miss Dunbar’s father’s whereabouts.”

Harry’s lips flickered in a weak smile — McGonagall had finally been made aware of the Pottery, and Grimmauld. Not of the secrets themselves, but of their existence, their purpose. It was the only way she would accept allowing Sirius to send over the portkeys for the students. “This war began long before the Ministry was taken, Professor,” he said, thinking back on the days when Voldemort had been just a vague threat, and the need to hide from Dumbledore was almost as urgent.

“Indeed.” Together they watched the students file out of the hall, not a single one of them excitedly discussing their summer plans, as they would in a normal year. Even the ones who would be leaving looked like they were going to battle.

They looked as exhausted as Harry felt.

“What will the housing situation be, once the students are set?” Harry queried — he had left those sorts of decisions up to the staff, as they were none of his business.

“All remaining students will be moved down to the Hufflepuff dormitories. Slytherin house will remain open for any adults seeking refuge who are not here to fight. The rest we will split between Gryffindor and Ravenclaw.” McGonagall’s lips pursed. “I have offered your godfathers rooms within the empty staff quarters.”

“I’m staying in Gryffindor,” Harry told her. “I’m not going down with the students.” He needed to be a leader, not a child.

To his relief, McGonagall nodded. “I expected as much. Yourself and Mr Longbottom shall remain in your dormitory, along with anyone you wish to join you. I trust I can expect the pair of you to behave responsibly.”

A brief flicker of a smile. “No wild parties, promise.” Then a thought. “It’s not us you have to worry about. The twins are coming back.”

The headmistress gave a long-suffering sigh. “I have realised that, yes. My hope is that Miss Johnson and Mr Zabini will keep them from causing too much trouble. Failing that, their elder brothers.”

“Good luck with that,” Harry said with a snort.

A head of silver-blond hair approached him as the last of the students left the hall. Harry held out a hand, twining his fingers with Draco’s. “Pack your trunk tonight,” Harry requested, watching confusion cross the Slytherin’s face. “You’re moving up with me tomorrow.”

Grey eyes darted nervously towards the headmistress. “That— that’s allowed?”

McGonagall eyed them knowingly, the barest hint of a smile. “I daresay even if I said no, you’d find yourself up there anyway.” She looked a little sad, gaze dropping to their joined hands. “Times like these, we should hold on to the joys that we have even tighter. I shall not begrudge you that, Mr Potter, with the task you have to face.”

Harry nodded, squeezing Draco’s hand that little bit tighter.

At last, the hall was empty but for the three of them.

“It begins, then,” Harry murmured, looking up at the magical night sky of the ceiling. It was a clear night — a full moon night. Part of him wished Remus had come early, so that he could take his fox form and run with his godfathers, feel that freedom.

One last chance before his birthday to do so.

But there would be more chances, after. He was sure of it. He had to believe.

Suddenly, a slow smile crept across his face. “Would you like to see something cool, Professor?” he asked. McGonagall blinked at him, bewildered.

“I— pardon?” Harry just grinned wider, awaiting an answer. “I get the feeling you will show me regardless, Potter.” She looked to Draco, as if expecting an explanation, but the blond was equally baffled.

Harry stepped back, and where he once stood, there was suddenly a fox on the floor. He jumped up onto the end of the Gryffindor table, standing proud for his professor to see. She gasped sharply. “Oh, my.” Harry yipped happily, turning a circle to show off his beautiful tail. “Well, then,” McGonagall murmured, and if Harry wasn’t mistaken she was a little misty-eyed. “I suppose that’s Sirius Black’s doing, is it?” Harry yipped again, giving a fox grin. “Indeed. You do your parents proud, Potter. Even if you’re more trouble than all the Weasleys combined.” Harry barked in a laugh, then began running down the Gryffindor table, headed towards the doors. He stopped halfway, looking over his shoulder at Draco, barking pointedly.

Draco sighed. “So demanding,” he muttered, rolling his eyes. “Have a good night, Professor.”

And then he turned, transforming mid-stride, and a snowy owl soared across the room, gliding gracefully between the floating candles, hooting as the fox began running once more.

McGonagall could do nothing but stare at the animals, watching them disappear from the hall. Then, once she was alone, she laughed.

.-. .

None of Harry’s friends were leaving. When they packed up, it was only to relocate, and they didn’t have to bother with goodbyes in the morning. Most of them were prefects, so they took on the job of making sure the students got to their portkeys on time, and organising the ones remaining down in the Hufflepuff dorms.

Harry was not a prefect, and therefore had more pressing matters to attend to.

“Sirius!” He hugged his godfather crushingly tight before the man could even let go of Ceri’s hand.

“Hello, pup.” Sirius held him for a long moment, nose buried in the wild Potter hair. “Let me look at you.” He studied Harry at arms length, as if checking him over for injuries, then winked. “Handsome bugger, just like your dad.”

Harry laughed, wriggling out of Sirius’ gentle grip and hugging Charlie, who ruffled his hair. “Good to see you, Harry. Where’s Draco at?”

“We’re not attached at the hip y’know,” Harry muttered indignantly. Two sets of eyebrows rose, as if to say ‘*oh really?*’ “He’s prefect-ing. Moving kids into the Hufflepuff dorms.”

“Ahh, of course. Where have you ended up, then?”

Harry walked with the pair through the halls towards their new quarters, explaining the plans for the school now that summer had arrived. “You two have one of the empty staff suites,” he added. “You’re supposed to be sharing it with Moony, but...”

Sirius snorted — there was no way Remus was going to sleep away from Snape in the same damn castle. “Guess we’ve got a spare room, then. Lucky us. You want it, pup?” he offered. Harry made a face.

“And see you two wandering around naked in the mornings? I’ll pass, thanks. Besides, if I moved in there everyone would know about Moony in a heartbeat.”

“Ha! Fair point. Ah well, might be useful for something,” Sirius mused, hitching his bag further up his shoulder. “So, what sort of numbers are we looking at?”

It was a long morning, getting everyone settled in the appropriate places. Several of the older students kicked up a fuss about being moved to Hufflepuff when they fully intended to fight, so McGonagall relented and agreed anyone of-age could bunk up in the Ravenclaw dorms.

Of course, that led to Ron Weasley throwing a tantrum about having to go to Ravenclaw when Harry and Neville were staying in their Gryffindor dorm, but by that point the twins had arrived and were happy to loudly describe the type of things Ron might see should he stay in Gryffindor — namely Draco; Draco and Harry performing various sexual acts; and even the possibility of Ginny and Neville performing various sexual acts. It worked to deter Ron, but also the twins managed to gross themselves out at the thought of their baby sister in such situations. Harry just laughed.

“What do you think, Gin?” he asked, smirking. “Wanna move in with your boyfriend and a couple of queers?”

“Mum would kill me,” Ginny said with a snort. “I’ll pack my trunk after lunch.”

Across the table, Neville turned pink.

.-. .

The first few days were awkward, to say the least. The younger students weren’t sure what to do, with no lessons and a whole bunch of strange adults gradually filtering into the castle. There was very little supervision, other than the fifth year prefects still living down in the Hufflepuff dorms, and Professor Sprout herself.

Surprisingly, it was Neville who provided an answer. “We’ll work the HA with them,” he suggested. “Obviously, not at the level the rest of us are doing. But they’re here, and they need to be kept busy. And— they might need the practice, if worst comes to worst.”

“It’ll help, Nev, but I really don’t have time to teach a bunch of second years how to Stun each other,” Harry sighed, running a hand through his hair.

“We’ll do it,” Neville suggested, looking surprised by his own answer. “I mean— we know enough to teach the kids. And we can work on a rotation. You’ve got your own training and

all. I'll talk to Sully, they're still down in Hufflepuff and from what I've heard the kids love them. Between us we'll sort something out."

Harry wasn't going to argue with that; it was one less thing for him to think about.

Mrs Weasley did indeed go apoplectic over the idea of her not-quite-sixteen year-old daughter sharing a dormitory with three older boys, one of which was her boyfriend. Harry felt sorry for Professor McGonagall having to deal with that one; they all knew that even if Ginny was ordered down to the Hufflepuff dorms, she'd find a way to sneak back up to Gryffindor anyway.

"Mum's trying to make me share a dorm with her and Dad, like I'm *five*," Ginny grumbled as she stomped into the dorm that evening, not even bothering to knock.

"Technically you are underage," Draco pointed out diplomatically.

"So's Neville, for another month! And Harry!" Ginny argued hotly.

"Yeah, you cradle-robber," Harry teased, nudging Draco's hip with his foot. Draco grabbed it, tickling the bottom of his foot in revenge.

"What does your dad say?" Draco asked.

"I told him we were in separate beds, but I think even he knew I was lying through my teeth. We had a really awkward conversation about pregnancy and Weasley fertility, and then he said that he knew I was too stubborn to do as I was told regardless so he just hoped I'd be sensible about things."

With a bit of magic, the boys' dormitory had transformed from a room holding five single beds to a room holding two doubles, with a makeshift partition in the middle that could be warded for privacy. Ginny didn't seem to give a single shit about any of the boys seeing her in various states of undress — Harry supposed after living with six brothers she had relegated Harry and Draco into that zone — but it was still good to have that boundary, if only at night.

Some things Harry didn't ever want to hear.

"Honestly I think they're more worried about me deciding to fight than where I'm sleeping. As if I'm going to let everyone I love step on that battlefield and just twiddle my thumbs down in Hufflepuff with the firsties," Ginny said, face a picture of disgust.

"Wait until they see a proper HA session," Harry told her with a smirk. "They'll realise they've got nothing to worry about." He would guarantee that his HA were more prepared for battle than most of the people coming to the school preparing to fight.

Harry scheduled that first session a week into summer, just as people were beginning to get restless. He made sure to check with McGonagall that they could claim the Great Hall for it — the headmistress had the tiniest of smirks when she agreed, and Harry suspected she knew exactly what he was trying to do.

So he reached for his inkwell, and etched a message on the silver plate. *Training. Great Hall, Tuesday, 3PM.* He made sure to clarify, not wanting those outside the castle to think it was an emergency meeting. To his surprise, many of them turned up at the Hogwarts gates on Tuesday morning, bags slung over their shoulders. “Alright, Potter,” Cassius greeted, nodding in his direction. “Room for one more?”

“Always,” Harry said, grasping the Slytherin’s forearm in welcome. “Where’s...?” He trailed off, not sure if he could name Cassius’ partner where others could hear.

“Finishing out the season, best he can,” Cassius explained. “I left him my inkwell, he says he’ll come when it’s time.”

Harry grinned — of course, even a war wouldn’t tear Oliver Wood away from quidditch.

At 3PM on the dot, Harry stood on the raised platform at the head of the Great Hall, looking at the cluster of students in front of him. Around the edges of the hall lingered a number of the adults now living in the castle; either because they didn’t know where else to go, or they were curious about what Harry Potter was up to this time.

“Alright, everyone. Welcome back, to a few familiar faces,” he added, nodding to the returned graduates. “I thought we’d start off easy, get warmed up. Some of you might be a little rusty.” His voice was teasing, and Patrick flipped him off from the back of the group. “Pair up, get going. Aiming to disarm, for now — Madam Pomfrey has better things to do than reattach limbs. Although Draco’s gotten better at it, so y’know. If you fancy your chances.” He wiggled his eyebrows. “I’ll be roaming.”

They got to work straight away, and Harry stayed where he was, watching with no small amount of pride as his students began duelling. He could see the exact moment their onlookers realised they weren’t just sticking to student-level spells, watching their eyes widen and their jaws slacken. Molly Weasley looked like she might faint as she saw Ginny ducking a Reductor curse and sending back a sickly orange hex that would have dislocated both of Cho’s kneecaps if she’d let it hit.

Harry walked between the pairs, pointing out weak spots, offering advice. Occasionally a spell came his way, forcing him to dodge or deflect — perhaps their spectators thought it was sloppy casting, but Harry knew it was intentional. They were all checking Harry was still paying attention.

“When this is all over,” a deep baritone murmured, and Harry looked up as he reached the edge of the group to see Kingsley approaching him, “I’m going to need names. Any of these kids want to be an auror, they’re in.” He squeezed Harry’s shoulder. “I’d offer the same to you if I thought you’d take it. You’ve done a damn fine job with them. What year is that scrawny kid in?” He was pointing at Dennis Creevey, who was duelling against Justin Finch-Fletchley and holding his own remarkably well.

“Just finished his third,” Harry answered. Kingsley let out a low whistle.

“Fucking hell, Potter. Aren’t his parents stopping him from fighting?”

"Muggleborn. They're in hiding," Harry explained. "His big brother isn't thrilled — Colin, over there, year below me — but I don't think he'd trust anyone else guarding his back. You should see them duel together, you'd swear they were twins." Colin and Dennis working as a team was truly a force to be reckoned with.

Kingsley just shook his head in astonishment, folding his arms over his broad chest.

Harry walked back to his platform, stopping the duels with a firework from his wand. "Not as rusty as I thought," he joked. "Good to see it."

"Are you gonna give us a challenge, or what?" Lee Jordan taunted playfully.

"Well, if you insist," Harry mock-sighed. "Groups of four, rotate through some three-on-ones."

There was a reshuffle of positions, and the duelling began again. Harry didn't want to push them too hard too soon, but he needed them to be ready.

Harry let them go on with that for another twenty minutes or so, then called break time — immediately, house elves filled the staff table with drinks and snacks.

"Well, well, this does look like fun," drawled a voice from the doorway. Bill had arrived, with Fleur at his side, both of them looking impressed. Harry was right beside the cluster of redheads sprinting to greet the pair excitedly.

"What are you two doing here?" Harry asked, raising his eyebrows. "Last I heard, you were in France until at least next week."

"Cut it short," Bill said with a shrug, Fleur leaned into his side, beaming.

"We are getting married," she announced in delight.

"Yes, dear, that's usually what that big shiny rock on your finger means," Harry teased. She huffed, shooting him a glare.

"She means here," Bill supplied. "Now. This weekend." He looked at his gathered family. "If... if you're up for it."

"I— this weekend? As in four days away?" Mrs Weasley asked, flabbergasted. Bill's returning smile was sheepish.

"Yeah? McGonagall says it's fine, and... we never really wanted anything big or fussy. But, hell, if I'm gonna die, I want to do so as Fleur's husband."

Fleur smacked his arm, rolling her eyes. "No one is going to die," she insisted, "stop being dramatic." She looked back to Mrs Weasley. "We know it is short notice. But we do not want to wait any longer. I... I hope you are willing to join us."

"You're sure you want me there?" Mrs Weasley asked, voice sad. "After everything?"

Harry didn't miss how Bill's gaze flicked his way for just a moment.

"There's still a lot I'm mad at you for, Mum," Bill admitted. "But we're working through it. And I don't want to look back on my wedding day and regret that you weren't there."

Mrs Weasley clasped her son's hand between hers, nodding tearfully. "Then I'd love to."

"Brilliant. Dad? You in?"

"...Is Fleur pregnant?" Mr Weasley asked suspiciously. "Because if she is, that's still no reason to rush."

Fleur laughed. "Non, Arthur, I am not pregnant. Just ready to be married."

"Well, then. We've got a lot of work to do in a short space of time!" Mr Weasley clapped his hands together, beaming. "What's the plan, then?"

Harry grinned — some may think the timing wildly inappropriate, but he rather thought a wedding was exactly what they needed to boost morale.

. . .

Because of their wedding plans, Fleur had already brought her parents and sister with her on the trip back from France. Mr Delacour turned out to be an ex-duelling champion, and he was more than happy to stay and fight, while Mrs Delacour was a healer who gladly agreed to assist Madam Pomfrey. Gabrielle, now almost twelve, was delighted to see Harry — if a bit put out by meeting his boyfriend, proving her crush had not yet faded entirely.

The day after, another surprise arrival came in the form of Viktor Krum. Harry met the Bulgarian seeker in the Entrance Hall, having felt his arrival through the wards.

"Viktor," he greeted warmly, shaking his hand and pulling him in for a quick hug. "You heard about the wedding, then?"

"I did, but I am here for more than that," Viktor replied, his English coming easier than it had when Harry last spoke to him, though his accent was still present. "I told you I would fight with you."

Harry's face turned serious. "Then thank you; we're glad to have you with us." Viktor had been chosen as Triwizard champion for a reason, and his skill with a wand would be a boost for their side. "Come on in, we'll get you set up with a bed somewhere. I'm afraid it's likely to be dorms, but I can probably get you a single. Or at the very least, sharing with someone who isn't likely to fawn all over you."

Viktor's smile didn't falter. "Dorms are fine; I'm sure I haff done worse for quidditch!" He chuckled. "It is good to see you again, Harry. Good to see you are finally tall enough for that Firebolt of yours," he added teasingly.

"I am a respectable five foot eight, thank you very much," Harry told him archly. He was hardly two inches shorter than Viktor, now; seekers weren't usually very tall.

Harry led the way up the stairs, going over his mental checklist to be sure there was room in Gryffindor. “We’ll have to catch Fleur at dinner tonight, if she’s not too busy with wedding stuff,” he mused. “Cho’s around too, somewhere. We can have a proper little reunion.” His voice was sad; Cedric should have been there, preparing to fight with them. He would have loved to see everyone coming together again.

“We will raise a glass in Cedric’s honour,” Viktor suggested quietly, smile dimming at the corners.

“Yeah. I’d like that.”

Harry was glad, in a way, that Viktor had returned — this war had begun in the tournament, with the resurrection of Voldemort, the manipulation of the four champions. It was right that they be together again to end it.

“There are more waiting, at Durmstrang,” Viktor told him. “Word of your war has spread; many of your people have turned to Europe, as you know. We did not know if reinforcements were needed, but — you have allies, should you need them.”

“That’s... that’s good to know. Thanks.” Harry wasn’t sure if there would be time, when the battle came, but he wouldn’t turn his nose up at more help.

And it would be good to have people in other countries ready to receive people, if the worst came to pass.

“However, I do also come bearing better news,” Viktor said, brightening up a little. “Let us call it an incentive for you to win this battle quickly.” Harry raised a curious eyebrow. “I was talking to a friend, the other day. A player for the Vratsa Vultures, but English. He knows the manager for the English national team, and mentioned to me that they have begun preparing for the World Cup next summer.”

Harry’s heart stuttered, and he stopped in his tracks. Viktor grinned at him. “You have a tryout for seeker, on August 23rd. If such things are possible by then.” He gripped Harry by the shoulders, pressing their foreheads together for a brief moment. “So survive this war, Harry Potter, so I can face you on the pitch once more and reclaim my pride. Yes?”

“You’re serious?” Harry asked incredulously. Viktor nodded. “Hell. I — that doesn’t give me much time, if I get injured in the fight.”

“Then do not get injured,” Viktor challenged, smirking. A snort escaped Harry.

“I’ll try my best.”

Seeker tryouts, for the England team. Draco was going to *lose his mind*. “I — don’t tell anyone, yeah?” He didn’t want that kind of pressure on top of everything else.

He didn’t want people mourning one more thing if he wasn’t there to make it happen.

Viktor mimed zipping his lips shut. “Our secret,” he promised.

They stopped outside the entrance to Gryffindor Tower. “This is the quieter of the two dorms we’ve got set up for adults. Not as many people, more married couples and the like. The other one, Ravenclaw Tower, that’s holding all the of-age students, younger single people, that sort of crowd.” It was much more packed in there, but no one seemed to mind.

“But not you?” Viktor presumed, and Harry’s smile turned wry.

“Not me,” he confirmed. “I’m in here. Bit more peace and quiet. We haven’t been bothering with passwords,” he added, knocking on the edge of the frame and smiling at the Fat Lady as she waved at them both. “Just knock, the dorms will open.” Hufflepuff was the only place with a password, being home to many younger children.

Harry was not anticipating the Weasley family gathering in the Gryffindor common room; it seemed they were planning wedding things, if the parchment in Mrs Delacour’s lap was anything to go by. All of them froze, and then Fleur squealed.

“Viktor! You made it!” She jumped up, throwing herself at the Bulgarian man.

“I would not miss it for the world,” he promised, kissing her on both cheeks. “I am sorry to interrupt; Harry was just finding me a room.”

“If there’s nowhere free, you can stay with us,” Bill offered, getting up to shake Viktor’s hand.

“When you are getting married in three days?” Viktor asked skeptically. Bill laughed.

“Maybe not on that night,” he corrected with a wink. “But the rest of the time, sure. I mean, if we wanted a honeymoon, we’d have waited.”

Viktor glanced to Harry, who shrugged. “Works for me.” With how many new people had shown up lately, Harry wasn’t sure there was enough space for Viktor to have his own room. At least this way he’d be staying with family.

“That’s settled, then,” Viktor agreed. “Should we leave you to your planning?”

“Nonsense! We are practically done,” Fleur insisted, taking him by the hand. “Come, join us. You too, Harry! We were just deciding on music. Bill insists on throwing muggle bands into the list and I do not know enough to know if I should let him!” She giggled, shooting her soon-to-be husband a fond look.

“Don’t worry, I have a *lot* of opinions about muggle bands,” Harry assured her.

He almost walked straight into Viktor’s back as the broad-shouldered seeker stopped in his tracks. Peering over his shoulders, Harry tried not to grimace. He hadn’t noticed her before, but Hermione was sat with the group, squeezed into a large armchair with Ron. She was looking up at the Bulgarian in shock, while Ron was steadily turning redder, jaw clenching with poorly-hidden jealousy.

“Hi, Viktor,” Hermione greeted, her voice thin and a little too high. Viktor inclined his head.

"Hello, Hermione." He had finally got the hang of pronouncing her name. "You are looking well."

Ron looked like he might explode, grabbing Hermione's hand possessively. Harry winced, climbing over the back of the sofa to squeeze himself in between George and Ginny. "That's a disaster waiting to happen," he muttered under his breath, watching warily as Viktor was led to a seat beside Fleur. Ginny snorted.

"I hope there's popcorn," was all she said, eyes lighting up with glee.

.-. .

Between the combined power of Mrs Weasley and Mrs Delacour, everything was set for the wedding on the afternoon of Saturday the 9th of July. Harry, Draco and Neville got ready together in their dorm; Ginny, as a bridesmaid, was getting ready with Gabrielle and Fleur elsewhere.

Harry was wearing the purple dress robes he wore to Slughorn's Christmas party, and it didn't take much convincing for Draco to wear his grey ones. Neville, too, seemed to have decided to wear the same robes from the party, shrugging and pointing out that they were hardly two events within the same social calendar.

Despite the rising number of people now living within the castle, they had made it very clear that the wedding was a family affair. McGonagall had organised a private marquee out by the lake, and also agreed to officiate. Harry hadn't realised that was within her skill set — the headmistress was full of surprises.

Just as it had for Slughorn's party, walking through the castle in full formalwear felt incredibly strange to Harry. At least he was part of a group; Viktor left the common room with them, but they were joined by Blaise and Angelina at the top of the staircase, and by Sirius, Remus and Narcissa on the second floor.

"Oh, those robes suit you so nicely, Harry, darling," Narcissa cooed happily, and he grinned.

"They're really great, thank you. Way better than anything I probably would have picked out," he added with a rueful smile that made both Draco and Sirius snort.

"Don't you all clean up nicely," Sirius told them, eyes trailing over the group.

"Not so bad yourself there, old man," Harry teased; indeed, Sirius looked incredibly handsome in his cobalt blue dress robes, embroidered with very subtle constellations.

"Less of the old, thank you," Sirius growled playfully, "or I'll ruin that hair you worked so hard on."

"Touch it and I'll cut your hands off," Draco warned. "I spent half an hour making that mop look presentable." He offered his mother an arm when they reached the Entrance Hall, but she waved him off.

"Stay with your beau, sweetheart. I already have a charming gentleman to escort me." She looped her arm through Remus', and set off out the door.

Harry wondered how much of that friendship was based around embarrassing childhood stories of one Severus Snape — a man who had been invited to the wedding, but may not actually show his face. He was still dancing the thin line between both sides, and didn't want to cause a fuss with his presence.

Also Harry was pretty sure he just didn't like weddings.

The marquee awaited them, with a twin at each side of the entrance in identical dark gold dress robes. Angelina and Blaise had absolutely no trouble telling them apart, greeting their respective partners happily.

"Well, well, what a fine looking bunch we have here," Fred drawled, winking. "Go on in, sit wherever, just leave the front row clear. And save me a seat, gorgeous," he added to Angelina. As Harry made to enter the tent, George caught his elbow. "Hey, go sit with Cass, would you? Ollie's running late and I think he's feeling a bit awkward."

The Slytherin was sat by himself in the third row, looking handsome but mildly uncomfortable. Harry nodded, and he and Draco went to join the dark-haired boy, Viktor following along — with Fleur otherwise occupied and Cho not yet arrived, Harry was the only person he really knew all that well, unless he decided to send Ron's blood pressure through the roof by sitting with Hermione.

"No last regrets about not stealing her away at the Yule Ball?" Harry said by way of greeting, startling Cassius. He chuckled, tension in his shoulders easing as Draco sat beside him.

"No, none of that. Just wondering if they might have the right idea — small affair, family only. Well, family and me, apparently," he added.

"Oh, hush, Fleur loves you," Harry said with a roll of his eyes; the pair had kept in touch after the Yule Ball and now Cassius was easily one of Fleur's favourite people. "You deserve to be here just as much as we do."

"Alright, mates," Tonks cut in quietly, shuffling into the row behind them. "Don't you look nice."

Tonks' light green dress robes were fairly masculine in style, though the body beneath them was more feminine-shaped. Harry propped his arm on the back of his chair to turn around properly.

"Hi, Tonks. What we going with today?"

"Oh! She's fine, thanks," Tonks assured, grinning. Harry grinned back.

"Cool. I like your robes. And the hair." Tonks had decided to go back to her family roots with a jet black pixie cut, though her eyes were a similar shade of green to her robes.

"Thanks! You look great, too. All matchy-matchy, very cute," she teased, patting Draco's cheek.

Into the seat beside her dropped Kingsley, wearing moss-green robes with two wide bands of bold black and gold geometric pattern running vertically down the front, and a hat to match. His knee knocked against Tonks', making Harry grin.

"We not hiding this anymore, then?" he asked, looking pointedly at the pair of them.

"Don't know what you're talking about, Harry," Tonks said breezily. "Totally normal, two co-workers sitting next to each other at a friend's wedding. Nothing suspicious at all. Those co-workers might even dance together at said wedding."

"And when those co-workers get caught snogging round the back of the marquee?" Harry teased.

"Then the four-eyed little twerp who catches them had better keep his mouth shut," Tonks continued in the same tone. Harry snickered.

"Noted."

There was a bit of noise, and a burgundy-clad figure hurried into the tent — Cassius' shoulders slumped in relief as Oliver hurried around the edge of the seats, sinking into the empty one at his partner's side. "Sorry, sorry, I know I'm late, things ran over," he whispered, kissing Cassius' cheek apologetically.

"You're lucky it's not started yet," Cassius said, though he wasn't truly mad. Oliver squeezed his thigh and winked, then looked down the rest of the row.

"Alright, lads," he greeted. "Aye up, Viktor, when did you get in?"

"Wednesday," Viktor replied, thick brows furrowed. "I did not realise you knew Bill and Fleur."

Oliver's grin widened. "I know them well enough, but I'm mostly here for this one," he explained, jerking a thumb towards Cassius — his left thumb, so he could uncurl his hand and show off his engagement ring. Viktor made a quiet noise of realisation.

"Ahh, your mysterious partner is Cassius? I did not know. Congratulations."

"Hang on, how do you two know each other?" Harry cut in, confused — if Viktor hadn't known about Cassius, then how? Oliver had graduated by the time the Tournament happened.

Oliver and Viktor exchanged a look. "Quidditch," they said in unison.

"It's a small world, even internationally," Oliver elaborated. "And remind me, Potter, to catch you when the party starts. I need a word," he added with a pointed look.

Harry wondered if, in this small world of quidditch, Oliver might have heard about the tryout Viktor had arranged for him.

Suddenly, Professor McGonagall appeared at the head of the aisle, beneath the archway threaded with white and gold flowers, and the whole room went hushed. “Please be standing for the entrance of the bride and groom.”

Harry, who had only ever seen muggle weddings on telly but who was sure that wasn’t how it went, stood all the same, Draco’s fingers finding his. Soft music began to play, and the curtain of fabric covering the entrance was lifted.

Bill entered, walking between his mother and father. His dress robes were bright gold, embroidered with runes all around the cuffs and hem, and the Prewett family crest on his left breast. His parents wore darker gold, a similar shade to the twins. When they reached McGonagall, they hugged their son tightly, and moved to sit down. Mrs Weasley was already crying, pulling a handkerchief from her sleeve as she sat.

The music changed, and the curtain was lifted a second time. Harry’s breath caught in his throat.

Fleur did not need a single ounce of her veela charm to have everyone in the room utterly captivated.

Her wedding dress was a gorgeous, form-fitting piece with lace over the shoulders and low back, ending in a long lace train. A silver tiara held her veil in place, sparkling with diamonds, and her silver-blonde hair was loose down her back in a perfect curtain of silk.

Glancing back at Bill, Harry was unsurprised to see the redhead looking absolutely gobsmacked.

Like Bill, she had her mother on one side and her father on the other. Coming up behind her was Gabrielle in a pretty pale gold dress robe, just barely tall enough to be escorted by Charlie, who looked incredibly handsome in identical robes to Fred and George.

Bringing up the rear was Ginny, her robe the same as Gabrielle’s, and beside her—“Percy!”

The quiet gasp blurred from Mrs Weasley, who immediately covered her mouth with her hand. Percy Weasley resolutely did not look in his parents’ direction, stepping perfectly in time with Ginny, all the way up the aisle. When they reached the front, Percy continued to escort Ginny to her seat, making sure he was sat beside her — as far from his parents as possible.

Harry had to hand it to the man; he had balls of steel, making an entrance like that. He wondered how long ago Bill and Percy had planned that.

As Best Man, Charlie stood off to the side while Bill and Fleur faced each other in front of McGonagall.

“Welcome, friends, and thank you for gathering for this wonderful occasion,” McGonagall began, “where we will join these two here in matrimony, by magic and by life, with the full permission and blessing of their family lines. Please, be seated.”

They all sat, the music fading out. Her speech continued, talking a lot about magic and the soul and things that sounded like very traditional wording but went right over Harry's head — the muggle stuff he'd seen was all about God and heaven and stuff, and there was none of that in a magical wedding. He had no idea if what was happening was a standard wedding or not.

He should probably research that, when the war was over. All things considered.

He let the headmistress' words wash over him, reaching for Draco's hand once more and leaning slightly against him, smiling when Draco brought their joined hands up to his lips, pressing a soft kiss to the back of Harry's.

At last, it came to a part that was more familiar to Harry. Bill reverently moved Fleur's veil off her face, properly revealing her shining blue eyes, a few tears already escaping.

"William, please offer your vows," McGonagall prompted. Bill swallowed thickly.

"Fleur Apolline Delacour," he began, voice husky with emotion. "I vow to you my magic and my life, my heart and my home — whatever is mine we shall share, whatever I am is yours to keep. I will share in your joy, and also your sadness. I will walk at your side, in this life and that which comes after. I will hold my duty to our family above all other loyalties — any challenge to you is a challenge to me also, because we are one in spirit and mind."

He paused, swallowing again, wiping quickly at his face in a way that made several people chuckle quietly. "I vow to protect you, to cherish you, and to love you until the last of my magic fades. This I vow by the magic in my blood, so mote it be."

Fleur was definitely crying by now, but her voice didn't waver as she offered her own vows in return.

Then, instead of asking for rings, the couple joined both hands together between them, and McGonagall raised her wand. "These vows have been made by magic, and by magic will they be kept," she declared — gold light shot from her wand, wrapping around Bill and Fleur's joined hands like a thick rope. "We who gather here today do offer our blessings upon this union, and all that follows from it. We offer our witness of their vows, and our magic to aid in their keeping. So mote it be."

"So mote it be," came the murmur of the crowd. As he recited the words, Harry felt a small spark within him, and the gold light around Fleur and Bill flashed even brighter, changing shape; it shrank down, becoming the wedding rings on their fingers, bright gold and glimmering in the light.

"Lord William Arthur Weasley, and Fleur Apolline Delacour, by the will of Magic I pronounce you wed," McGonagall said, finally breaking into a smile as Bill cupped Fleur's face and kissed her. The whole tent broke out into applause, the twins wolf-whistling in loud unison when the kiss just kept on going.

Finally they parted, and Bill offered his new wife his arm. Draco nudged Harry into standing and once all the guests were out of their seats, the pair began their journey down the aisle.

Wands were raised, shooting gold and silver sparks over the pair as they walked. Harry couldn't stop the smile taking over his face — Bill and Fleur both looked so *happy*.

He glanced to Draco, catching a suspicious glimmer in the blond's eye. "Are you crying?" he murmured, leaning in close to be heard over all the cheering. Draco glared at him, wiping at his eyes.

"It's not a crime to cry at weddings," he muttered petulantly. Harry chuckled and kissed his cheek.

"No, but it is very cute," he informed him. Draco blushed. "So what happens now?"

"Now we go outside, probably pose for some pictures, while the house elves move things around for the party in here," Draco said, following Viktor out of the aisle. At the front of the tent, Mrs Weasley had finally made her way to Percy, and Harry could hear snippets of her talking — he couldn't tell if she was scolding her son or apologising to him, not through all the crying.

He wisely decided it was none of his business, and let his boyfriend lead him out onto the lawn.

Harry was surprised to see Colin Creevey out there with his camera, wearing a muggle tux that was very likely transfigured. He grinned at Harry, holding the camera up in a gesture, then turned back to Bill and Fleur — the pair were stood arm in arm, looking like a true fairytale couple, smiling like they had never been happier in their lives.

Harry found himself stood with Draco, Remus and Narcissa, while the group spread out a bit. Sirius had gone off to go and paw at Charlie in his dress robes.

"So that's a magical wedding then, is it?" Harry remarked, looking at the gathered crowd. Perhaps thirty of them in all; still a decent turnout for such a last minute decision.

"Pretty much," Remus said. "Obviously they vary from case to case. Bill and Fleur kept it fairly simple; often there's a bit more pomp and circumstance, and sometimes even a ritual in the really old-fashioned pureblood ones."

"Just some runes on the hands and drinking from the same cup," Narcissa added, seeing the slightly perturbed look on Harry's face. "Nothing unseemly."

"Wonder how different Cass and Ollie's will be," Harry mused, looking over at the couple who were chatting away with Viktor.

"Oi, Harry!" He turned around at the call, seeing Bill looking at him expectantly. He was already surrounded by his siblings and parents, a beacon of red hair and gold cloth, Fleur's white dress standing out in the very centre. "Family picture," Bill urged. Harry stared at him blankly — yes, that was indeed a picture of them all, what was his point?

George huffed, rolling his eyes. "Get over here, you clot!" he called, gesturing to a space in beside him and Ginny. "Every sibling counts, even the not-ginger ones!"

Several people snickered, and Draco pushed Harry forward until he was stumbling dazedly towards the group. “I— really?” he asked at Bill, still hesitant. Bill’s grin widened.

“Yes, now hurry up before the twins start hexing eyebrows.”

Ginny grabbed Harry, situating him properly in the midst of the family, and George elbowed him gently in the side. “Told you, little brother,” he said under his breath. “Stuck with us forever. Now smile and look pretty.”

Harry faced Colin’s camera, and beamed.

..

After the photos, they were allowed back into the tent, which had transformed into an elegant ballroom. A magical record player was set up in the corner with a stack of records waiting beside it, and tables laden with drinks and food lined the sides, leaving plenty of room for a dance floor in the middle. Smaller round tables were dotted about as well, with chairs tucked under them in case not everyone wanted to dance.

They had all eaten lunch at the castle, so there was no formal wedding meal; just finger-foods, and of course the cake, which was a masterpiece of a dessert — three-tiered and decorated with delicate white chocolate feathers, no doubt as a nod to Fleur’s veela heritage.

Bill and Fleur moved to the centre of the dance floor, and after a thumbs up from his big brother, Charlie set the first record on the player.

Harry didn’t recognise the song, but he wasn’t paying much attention to it anyway; the happy couple swayed in each others’ arms, whispering to themselves and smiling soppily. It made Harry’s chest ache in the best of ways, watching them like that.

Arms looped around his waist, pulling him back against a familiar chest, the spicy-sweet smell of Draco’s aftershave tickling his nose as the blond rested his head against Harry’s, body just barely swaying to the rhythm of the music. One by one, couples began to join Bill and Fleur on the dance floor; the Delacours, Mr and Mrs Weasley, Sirius and Charlie, Ginny and Neville. Draco kissed his cheek, then stepped away, offering his hand with a bow.
“Dance with me?” he asked, grey eyes shining.

Harry was more than happy to oblige, accompanying his love to the dance floor.

The music didn’t stay slow for long, moving effortlessly between wizarding and muggle music, throwing in a slower song every now and then to ease things off. Harry was more than happy to dance with Draco — and with plenty of others who offered.

When he danced with Fleur, she was practically glowing with joy. “Thank you,” she said earnestly. “Had I not met you, Harry, I would never have found my Bill. I owe all this happiness to you.”

“I’m just glad that you’re happy,” he told her, kissing her cheek. “And I know he’s my brother, but feel free to call me if he ever needs his arse kicked.”

She laughed, the sound ringing out over the music and the chatter like a chorus of bells. “I will keep that in mind.”

Later, when the sun was beginning to set and the twins were making noises about fireworks, Harry stood with Sirius, who had miraculously removed himself from Charlie for a while. They were watching Draco dance with his mother, two elegant blondes in a sea of fiery red hair.

“You made a plan on that, yet?” Sirius asked in a low voice, insinuation clear.

“Not yet.” Nothing concrete, anyway. He had the ring and a few vague ideas, but he also had other priorities. Then, louder, “I wonder who’s going to end up with the next one. Other than Cass and Ollie of course.” The pair were dancing, too, lost in their own little world. Oliver had already cornered Harry to talk about the England team, saying that he was almost definitely secured as the Scottish team keeper and Harry had better work his arse off in his tryouts so they could give Scotland a proper challenge.

“Certainly a lot of couples to choose from,” Fred remarked, appearing out of nowhere with Angelina on his arm. “Not us, though. Wild and free for a few more years, right, Angie?” he teased. She laughed.

“That’s right. Got to make absolutely sure I’m willing to throw my lot in with this lunatic for the rest of my life.” Fred feigned being wounded.

Harry lit up as Draco and Narcissa finished their dance and Draco glanced over to him, Narcissa claiming Remus for a turn about the floor.

“The rate things are going, you’d better be thinking about it, y’know,” Fred said, elbowing Sirius with a leer. “Make an honest man of our Charlie before you start adopting little’uns.”

Sirius blushed, though he was smiling. “Don’t go getting ahead of yourselves, now,” he insisted, as he always did when the subject of the Forrester kids was brought up.

Draco wound an arm around Harry’s hips, greeting him with a kiss to the cheek.

“I’d put a fair bet on these two,” Angelina piped up, staring pointedly at Harry and Draco. Harry felt his cheeks burn hot.

“Fair bet for what?” Draco asked, having missed the start of the conversation.

“Fair bet for the next wedding, not counting Ollie and Cass,” Fred elaborated. Harry tried not to tense in Draco’s arms as the Slytherin blinked in surprise.

“I’m certainly not getting married until after I’m graduated,” came Draco’s immediate response. Oblivious to the mild panic rising in Harry, he continued. “So I’d save your money, because that’s at least a year and knowing some of these lovestruck fools I highly doubt they’ll hold out any longer than that.”

The conversation paused when George came to fetch Fred for ‘twin reasons’, the two of them disappearing with identical mischievous grins.

Harry turned in Draco's arms, offering a somewhat stilted smile. "At least a year, hmm?" he asked in an undertone, raising an eyebrow.

"No marriage before we're eighteen," he said imperiously. Then he softened, gaze growing tentative. "Engagement, however, is a little more flexible."

For one heart-stopping moment, Harry wondered if his boyfriend was onto him.

"Mother might possibly kill me if I propose at school where she can't properly shriek about it, though, so there's that to keep in mind."

Trying not to relax visibly, Harry held Draco close. "Good to know," he murmured.

Draco thought he would be the one to propose, did he?

Harry would have to see about that.

Chapter 103

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

If Harry hadn't known better, he would not have realised Hogwarts was supposed to be a school, in the days that followed. The wedding seemed to be the last grasp of lightheartedness in the face of war — once that was out of the way, giving everyone the Sunday to bask in their happiness, it was all business.

Harry felt like a military general, organising training groups depending on ability — intermixing the HA with the adults, letting them learn from each other, making sure everyone was aware of the others' skill level. Now was not the time for a grown adult to get embarrassed by a fifteen year-old casting a better Shield charm than them, only the time to improve it before it really mattered.

He had Sirius and Remus around to help, making sure he took time to eat and sleep and get some time away from it all when he could. Draco helped, too, but he had his own matters to deal with, splitting his time between duelling with the rest and helping Madam Pomfrey prepare the Hospital Wing for all eventualities.

Every day, more and more people showed up — either for safe refuge from the war, or to lend their wands to the fight, People Harry had never met, people he wasn't sure he could even trust, but luckily the adults around him usually knew enough to get a good measure of them. The teachers especially; between McGonagall and Slughorn, they had memories of just about every British wixen of a certain magical ability for the last sixty years.

Of course, as had been proven many times over, looks could be deceiving. But they just didn't have the capacity to properly vet every single person who came to Hogwarts.

The guilt from expelling those six teenagers still hung heavy in McGonagall's shoulders. They didn't want to risk condemning people to Voldemort's clutches. And, quite frankly, they needed every capable wand they could get.

The only place Harry could truly be alone anymore was the Chamber of Secrets. He still had his training sessions with Snape down there — often with Draco joining them these days, both boys pushing themselves ever harder — but Salazar's office was a quiet, solitary retreat that he desperately needed by the latter half of July.

"What if he doesn't come?" he asked plaintively, stretched out on the sofa and staring up at the portrait of the founder. "Snape says he's recovered from the attack on the wards, but what if he decides it's not worth the risk and decides to lure me out instead?" It was all well and good preparing for a fight at Hogwarts, but Voldemort may not want to meet them on their terms.

"Then you beat him to it and lure him here," Salazar said immediately. "Honestly, lad; you're a Slytherin, now act like one. There's ways to get a man like that to dance to your tune —

especially as mad as he is now.”

“I suppose.” Most of the new arrivals to the castle were those here for safety, so their numbers for the fight hadn’t swelled that dramatically. Even with any spies in the castle reporting on their training progress — Harry wasn’t so naive to think Snape was the only Death Eater still around — Voldemort would likely be arrogant enough to think his sheer numbers could win it for him. Especially if the rumours were true, and he had the dementors on his side.

If Harry could give him enough of a reason to come here, enough of a reason to think he’d win...

“I’ll have to think on it, see how things go.” If Snape didn’t start hearing word of movement soon, Harry would have to take matters into his own hands.

His throat went dry at the thought of what came after. The battle itself. Him versus Voldemort — an entirely different animal to fighting Death Eaters. Most of Voldemort’s Old Guard, his original best duellers, had died either of age or battle; his current army were younger and inexperienced, and not all as dedicated to the cause as their predecessors were. He could handle Death Eaters.

Voldemort, however, had fifty years on Harry and knew more magic than Harry could even dream of knowing. Had done all sorts of rituals to strengthen himself, to expand his power, to draw magic from his Marked followers in times of need.

“I don’t know if I’m strong enough,” he admitted in a rasping whisper; words he had not said out loud to another living being, not even Draco. Words that lingered in the back of his mind at all times, reared up in his darkest moments of doubt.

“Look at me, lad,” Salazar said firmly. Harry did so. The founder was steel-eyed, his snake draped over his shoulders. “*You are a Slytherin,*” he hissed in Parseltongue, repeating his earlier words. “*You have the ancient blood of several strong families running through your veins, and when you are ready, the magic in that blood will rise to assist you. You are the most powerful young man I have seen in a very long time — you are dedicated, and talented, and you have far too much to live for. That filth is a stain on my lineage, with a shattered soul and magic so foul the family rejected him entirely. He is a shadow of a man, with false power and little sanity to speak of. You are already at an advantage.*” He didn’t blink, and Harry didn’t either, not daring to look away as the founder spoke so vehemently. “*Trust your magic, Harry Potter. It will not fail you. And you will not fail your family.*” He leaned back in his chair, smirking. “Do you understand?”

Harry nodded, drawing his shoulders up, feeling Salazar’s faith settle something in his soul. “You know the spell I taught you. And you know damn well that he’s going to be too busy gloating to see you as a legitimate threat. Don’t let that ridiculous Gryffindor nobility make you wait to take him in a fair fight — find your opportunity, and take it,” Salazar instructed, looking down his regal nose at the boy. “I finally have an heir I actually like, and you have promised me you will help restore my legacy. I expect you to keep that promise.”

Slowly, a smile crept across Harry’s features. “Yes, sir.”

Find his opportunity, and take it. He could do that.

He hoped.

.-. .

Technically, Luna wasn't supposed to be in the Ravenclaw dormitories. As an underage student, she was supposed to be down in Hufflepuff, safely tucked away in case of invasion.

But, much like Ginny, Luna wasn't going to listen to anyone telling her where she was *supposed* to be.

No one could keep Lady Ravenclaw out of her own damn tower.

She lay on her bed, in the dorm that she and Daphne shared with Susan, Hannah and the Patil twins, her eyes closed against the cloud of colours and shapes in her vision. Gentle hands massaged her temples, and while it felt very nice, it wasn't doing much to help the problem.

Nothing but time would help this particular headache. The future was so fraught, the paths ahead so numerous and so uncertain... Luna was usually pretty good at not getting overwhelmed by the wrackspurts, but right now she was drowning in them.

"Will a potion help?" Daphne fretted, kissing her brow. "Or, hell, a cup of tea? Burning some incense? What's all that stuff Trelawney uses to *clear her inner eye*?"

Luna giggled, letting her eyes flutter open to look at her girlfriend in the dim light of the room. Daphne had blacked out the windows for her, conjuring a ball of soft silver light overhead instead. Daphne was so sweet to her, so attentive. She didn't treat Luna's Seeing like it was some oddity or fun quirk.

"I don't need any of that," she assured softly. "Though I could go for some ice cream. Pistachio sounds nice."

Daphne's lips turned up at the corners. "Luna, honey, I don't think that's going to help your Sight."

"No, but it'll make me feel better," Luna said brightly. With the castle so in tune to her, the elves always listening, she barely had to think it before a bowl of pistachio ice cream was on the nightstand. "Thank you," she murmured, feeling the wards brighten in response. Hogwarts was such a friendly thing, so welcoming to its students, so eager to please. Now the wards had been cleared, the whole castle felt like one big hug.

She sat up carefully, reaching for her ice cream, shuffling over so Daphne could squeeze in beside her in the narrow bed. Daphne's chin tucked against her shoulder, her body a warm line against Luna's.

"I'm worried about you. About how clouded things are for you. I... what does that mean?" Daphne asked, voice barely louder than a whisper. "Does it mean we won't win?"

"Even in the shadows, I don't see darkness looming that large." Of course, that could mean any number of things. But Luna liked to think it meant that Voldemort would fall, somehow, when the battle came. "What worries me more is who we might lose along the way." Every dream was the same, yet every dream was different. A thousand permutations of possible events, endless tiny actions that could sway things one way or another, knock little choices into bigger ones into even bigger ones that had the whole thing falling apart. She had seen all her friends die in a hundred ways, by now. Seen herself die more than a few times. At this point, she wasn't sure what was Seeing and what was her own nightmares. Her dreams were never trustworthy — it was the Seeing she did while awake that mattered most, but that Sight was frustratingly murky these days.

"Are..." Daphne's heavy sigh brushed Luna's neck. "Are there any futures where we all make it out alive? Everyone we care about?"

"Yes," Luna replied, eating a spoonful of ice cream. The cold helped clear things, a little bit, but mostly she just liked the flavour. "Not many, but some." She hadn't Seen a future in which nobody on their side died, but she had Seen ones in which the only deaths were people who weren't attached to her.

"Focus on those ones, then," Daphne urged softly, squeezing Luna's hand. "Try and See those ones. Maybe then, they'll come true."

That wasn't how that worked and they both knew it, and even to try felt enormously selfish — those deaths might not be her loved ones, but they were someone's loved ones, someone's family — but Luna closed her eyes and leaned against her girlfriend and tried not to let the weight of the future carry her away, and she imagined those futures. Imagined the warmth and light and laughter that came with all her friends, all her family, making it through these next few weeks.

She ate another spoonful of ice cream, and offered the next to Daphne. Felt her girlfriend's warmth, her heartbeat, her magic twining lazily with Luna's own. Felt her love, so clear, so strong Luna could hardly stand it.

It was hard, for a Seer, to live in the now. But it was much, much easier with Daphne by her side.

.-. .

The HA was training, once again. Though Harry couldn't really call it a HA session anymore — it had expanded to include far more than just his group of rebellious Hogwarts students, now.

The whole Great Hall was full of people, spellfire flashing all over the room. Harry was glad he wasn't the only one roaming the groups to keep an eye on things; Kingsley and Tonks, as the only qualified aurors in their little group, were doing the same. It still baffled Harry that these people put him, a boy who wasn't even seventeen yet, on the same level of authority as someone like Kingsley Shacklebolt.

Harry was just considering calling an end to the mock-duels, when suddenly someone screamed. Immediately, everything stopped, and the problem became clear — Hannah Abbott was on the ground, screaming in pain, while her duelling partner stood chalk-faced and horrified. “What happened?” Harry asked, dropping to his knees at Hannah’s side. “Draco!” He called for the blond, the only person in the room he knew had *any* kind of healing experience. Draco was at his side in a flash, wand already scanning Hannah’s prone form.

“I don’t know!” her duelling partner, a middle-aged man who Harry was pretty sure was the father of some Ravenclaw third year, exclaimed in fear. “It wasn’t my spell — I used a Freezing hex on the floor, trying to slip her up. Something hit from the side and she just went down! I swear, I didn’t hurt her!” He looked so terrified at the prospect, Harry shook his head in assurance.

“I believe you.” He looked back to Draco, whose face was set in concentration.

“Bone-Melting curse,” the Slytherin gritted out. “Get Pomfrey.”

The blood drained from Harry’s face. That was *not* a spell he expected to be used in a group like this.

He turned, raising his wand, but Kingsley’s hand came down on his shoulder. “I already sent for her,” he assured. As if in answer, the mediwitch appeared suddenly, an elf at her side. She took in the scene quickly, dropping down beside Draco to get to work, both of them muttering spells over Hannah as the blonde girl clenched her jaw in an attempt not to scream.

Harry tore his eyes away from her, looking back up at the rest of the group with fury burning in his eyes. “Did anyone see who did this?” he roared, gesturing to his friend on the stone floor. “Who used that curse in here, in *training*?”

No one moved. No one answered.

“I... it had to be an accident, right?” Lavender piped up hesitantly. “Otherwise the new wards would have reacted. Like you said they did with Fay and the others. They read intention.”

“The wards are lax around here while we’re training.” It was Neville who answered, voice hollow. “There’s too many people, too many offensive spells going on — it’s almost impossible to tell what’s self-defence and what’s not. Making a mistake on that judgement and freezing someone mid-duel could lead to more harm than good.”

Everyone looked around uneasily. Still, no one owned up to casting the curse.

“I can only assume,” said Harry in a tight, harsh voice, “that this silence means this was an *attack*, not an accident.” He stared at the group at large, eyes burning Avada Kedavra green. Several people flinched. “Whichever one of you did this, don’t think you’re safe. There are ways of finding out what happened.” He took a steady breath before his temper could get the better of him. “Go. We’re done for today.”

They didn’t need telling twice. As the rush began to leave the hall, chatter rising, Harry turned back to the two healers. “How is she?” Fear churned in his stomach — the Bone-

Melting curse could be fatal, if not reversed immediately.

Draco sat back on his heels, looking exhausted. "She'll live," he said. Behind him, Harry heard someone let out a sharp, relieved breath. "I... I don't know what state she'll be in. How well she'll recover. But she'll live."

"We'll move her up to the Hospital Wing, get some Skele-Gro in her," Pomfrey declared, conjuring a stretcher and carefully levitating Hannah onto it. The Hufflepuff was unconscious now, her face frighteningly pale. "Time will tell how she responds to it."

A whimper, and Harry glanced over his shoulder; it was Ernie, looking at his girlfriend with watery blue eyes. "I— what can I do?" he asked, taking a hesitant step forward.

"You may come with me, Mr Macmillan," Pomfrey told him gently. "I do not know when Miss Abbott will awaken, but I'm sure she'd appreciate a familiar face when she does."

Ernie nodded, falling into step behind Pomfrey and Draco with the stretcher, heading out of the hall.

It was only Harry, Neville and the two aurors remaining, now. Neville looked especially grim. "I don't think it's a coincidence that it was Hannah who got hit," he declared, voicing the words that were rattling in Harry's mind. "Seems a bit suspicious that out of everyone in this hall, that curse hit one of the four people connected to the castle wards."

"They always think Hufflepuffs are the weakest," Tonks muttered, scowling.

"I was facing that area, but I didn't see who the curse came from," Kingsley admitted.

"Could you pull a memory?" Harry asked, brain whirring. "I have a pensieve."

The auror perked up. "It's worth a shot."

The Potter family pensieve was down in Snape's quarters, where they'd been using it to go through his memories of Death Eater meetings in the hopes of identifying any potential spies within the castle. It was a good thing Neville had been let in on the secret when Harry had been kidnapped, or he would have been incredibly surprised when Harry stepped up to the statue guarding Snape's rooms and gave her the password.

"I heard about what happened," Snape said in greeting; he was sat on the sofa, with the pensieve already on the coffee table. "I thought you might be on your way."

Ignoring Neville's trepidation at being in his feared professor's personal rooms, Harry walked over to the stone bowl, raising an eyebrow at Kingsley. It was the work of only a few moments for the broad-shouldered man to raise his wand to his temple, extracting a strand of silver memory and dropping it into the pensieve. All five of them gathered around it, and in unison they put their hands in the liquid.

Immediately, Harry was right back in the Great Hall, stood beside the memory version of Kingsley and watching the training duels at work. "Spread out," Kingsley instructed. "The spell came from somewhere behind her."

Harry hurried over to memory-Hannah to get a better look, trying not to instinctively duck at spells that could not hurt him. It was weird, walking right into the middle of a battle like that, and it set him on edge.

He looked around, noting the faces of all the people within range to potentially hit Hannah from behind, annoyed by how many he barely recognised. What if it was one of the newcomers? What if they had let a Death Eater into the castle in their attempts to offer a safe haven?

What if that Death Eater cost Hannah her life?

“I saw it!” The shout came from Neville, and Harry whirled around, seeing the horror on his friend’s face. “I saw the spell,” Neville stuttered, aghast. “It— it came from Terry Boot.”

“*What?*” Harry gasped, the word almost lost in the sound of Hannah’s screaming. He hurried over to Neville. “Are you sure?”

“Positive,” Neville insisted, stony-eyed. “Terry was duelling with Charlie, and he cast a flash-bang to distract him, then shot the Bone-Melting curse at Hannah. I saw it.”

“Which one’s Terry Boot?” Kingsley asked, “that’s not a name I’m familiar with.”

“This one,” Snape answered, stood by memory-Terry in the crowd around Hannah, glaring disparagingly at the boy. Terry was remarkably blank-faced — someone else might excuse it as shock at what happened to his yearmate, but they knew better, now. He was trying not to give himself away.

“A student?” Tonks exclaimed in shock. “Are you serious?”

“It was him,” Neville said again. “Watch the memory back again if you don’t believe me.”

They did, exiting the pensieve and re-entering at the beginning of the memory. All five of them went straight to Terry, studying him closely — sure enough, it happened exactly as Neville said. Terry half-blinded Charlie with a flash-bang, and while the redhead was blinking the spots from his vision he locked his eyes on Hannah, murmuring the curse under his breath. Harry couldn’t help the shudder that racked him as the vibrant yellow spell hit Hannah right in the small of her back, her scream ringing in his ears for a third time now.

He was going to hear that sound in his sleep, he was sure of it.

“Well, then,” Kingsley muttered, once they were back in Snape’s living room. “What do we do with the boy?”

“I have a small supply of Veritaserum,” Snape offered coolly. “You are welcome to it, should you need to confirm his guilt verbally. I recommend asking for the names of his accomplices — I was not aware of Boot’s... connection to the Dark Lord, nor do I know of anyone else in the castle who may be suspect.” His frown deepened. “At this point, I believe they’re here to spy on me just as much as they are Potter. Making sure I’m doing my duty,” he snarled. Harry scowled.

"Will it be a problem for you, if we kick them out?" he worried. The last thing he wanted was Boot and his allies going back to Voldemort and insisting that Snape was no longer loyal.

The Potions Master's face was drawn as he looked at Harry. "I cannot say for sure, but I doubt it. If they had the evidence to condemn me, they likely would have done it by now."

"We'll ask Horace for Veritaserum," Kingsley suggested. "If he doesn't have any, we'll tell him to pretend yours came from him. Save you having to explain why you didn't sabotage it so that Boot could cover his arse."

Snape gave a curt nod. "Thank you."

Kingsley turned to the two Gryffindor boys. "Can you find Amelia? She'll need to be involved in this."

Harry closed his eyes, reaching out to the wards in search of the familiar magical signature of Amelia Bones. It ached, connecting to Hogwarts' magic while it was aiding Hannah. A searing pain at the base of his spine — merely an echo of what his friend was feeling.

"She's in the Hospital Wing," Neville said, coming to the conclusion the same time as Harry. "I guess she heard what happened." Amelia hadn't been at the training session, as she was in a meeting with McGonagall elsewhere about things that weren't Harry's business to know.

"Right, then. Off we go," Tonks declared. "Then we can find this Boot kid."

Snape didn't come with them up to the Hospital Wing, but when they arrived they found a cluster of people around Hannah's bed. The girl was still unconscious, spelled rigid in the bed while Pomfrey's potions and spells did their best to repair the damage.

"What did you find?" Susan pressed, rushing over to Harry. "You know who did it, right? Who hurt Hannah?" She had puffy red eyes and tear-tracks down her cheeks, and Harry had to swallow the lump in his throat that formed.

"It was Terry, Sooz. Terry Boot."

There was a beat of silence. Then, Ernie swore. "That filthy little— we trusted him! He was Hannah's friend, he... we've known each other since we were eleven!" He looked absolutely wrecked, his hands clenched around the rail at the foot of Hannah's bed. Harry's heart twisted in sympathy.

"I know," he murmured. "But it was him." He looked back to Amelia. "We confirmed through pensieve memory. Kingsley's memory," he explained. "I... we don't know how to proceed."

There was the sound of a throat being cleared, and they all turned around to see Horace Slughorn tentatively approaching. There was a vial of clear fluid in his hand. "I— excuse me, but I was asked to bring this to you, Amelia, dear." He held the vial out to her. "I always keep some tucked away — for emergencies, you know. Especially in these difficult times." A

quick, humourless smile flitted beneath his bristly moustache. “I understand the culprit has been identified. I... let me know if you need more, won’t you?”

Slughorn folded the vial into her palm, patting her closed fingers gently. Then he cast sad eyes in Hannah’s direction. “If there’s anything I can do to help the poor girl — more Skele-Gro, or— I have contacts at St Mungo’s. If it’s safe to send her over. Just... whatever you need, don’t hesitate to ask.”

The ageing Potions Master gave a helpless little shrug, then quietly left the Hospital Wing.

Harry didn’t argue when Amelia took Kingsley and Tonks to go find Terry for questioning. He may be somewhat of a leader in this rag-tag rebellion they had pulled together, but in any other circumstances this would be a Ministry matter, and he was still just a student.

More than that, Harry didn’t *want* to watch Terry’s questioning. He didn’t want to sit there and listen to a boy he’d shared classes with for six years declare his allegiance to the man who was trying to destroy everything he held dear. He didn’t want to hear who else was involved, or what Terry had been asked to do by Voldemort. He would find out the details sooner or later.

He already had so many burdens on his shoulders by the very nature of this war. He didn’t want to add another.

A thin-fingered hand slipped into his, and he blinked away his dark thoughts, meeting concerned grey eyes. Draco led him over to a quiet corner, away from Susan and Ernie’s quiet vigil at Hannah’s side.

“How is she really?” Harry asked, keeping his voice low. Draco sighed.

“It’s bad,” he admitted. Harry’s stomach sank. “I’ve only read about this curse — I knew the counter, but I’d never done it. And the time it took me to identify it... it hit her right in the spine. The curse got halfway to her shoulders and down through most of her pelvis before Pomfrey and I could stop it.” He was stark white, hand clenching tight around Harry’s. Bile rose in Harry’s throat — that was a *lot* of bone to be damaged.

“But... it can be grown back, right? Once the dark magic is filtered out?” He only knew bits and pieces of healing theory from listening to Draco, but he knew that the thing that made dark curses so dangerous wasn’t the effect itself, but the dark magic that lingered in the affected area and prevented healing. That had to be dealt with before anything could truly be fixed.

“We got her stabilised,” Draco said. “Poppy’s said we’ll get Uncle Sev up here to help — he knows dark magic scrubbing far better than I do. The Skele-Gro won’t set while it’s still a cursed injury, but it’ll grow enough to keep everything in place. We hope.” He swallowed tightly. “She... Hannah probably won’t be able to walk again. It’s possible, of course, with time and therapy and the right course of potions. It would be *more* possible if we could get a specialist from St Mungo’s out to see her, but... this is what we’ve got.” The tense line of his shoulders crumpled, ever so slightly. “Harry, if I’d just been faster, if I’d—“

Harry cut him off, pulling the blond into a tight hug. “Don’t even,” he scolded. “You did everything you could, Draco. Fuck, you probably saved Hannah’s life. Pomfrey was quick but even that short space of time...” The curse could have made it to Hannah’s knees and shoulder blades by then. “You did amazingly, sweetheart. You’re not a healer yet, you’re not even in training for it! And yet you identified the curse and stopped it in under a minute!” He pulled back, cupping Draco’s face. “That’s incredible. *You’re* incredible. And I won’t have you blaming yourself for any of this. Pretty sure Hannah would kick your arse if she heard you trying.”

That earned a flicker of a smile. After a beat, Harry ran his own words back in his mind. “Hell, is that what it’s like for you when I get on my saving-people bullshit?” He made a face, and Draco chuckled.

“Pretty much, yeah,” he confirmed.

“Oh. Well. Sorry.” No wonder it annoyed everyone so much when Harry did it. He couldn’t stand Draco putting himself down when he’d already done so much good!

He wrapped his arms around his boyfriend again, looking over at Hannah’s bed, at Susan and Ernie clutching each other because Hannah’s state was too delicate for either of them to hold her hand.

Harry was *so* ready for this battle to be over.

..

There was a meeting, that evening. It couldn’t really be called an Order meeting, since those who had once been part of the Order had since eschewed Dumbledore and all that he stood for — the existing Order were out there, somewhere, perhaps with the ex-headmaster but perhaps not. Either way, they hadn’t shown up to fight, and that said it all.

But it was everyone who Harry associated with the Order, plus a few extras; himself and Neville and Luna, whom the adults had kicked up a fuss about but were promptly reminded of *why* the attack had targeted Hannah. Amelia and Narcissa, both women glaring fiercely at anyone who dared question their inclusion. Professors Flitwick and Sprout — and McGonagall of course — wan-faced at the two very different but awful fates of their charges.

“For anyone who is unaware, Terry Boot has been confirmed under Veritaserum as a supporter of Lord Voldemort, though he does not yet have the Dark Mark,” Kingsley declared in the tense silence of McGonagall’s office. “He admitted that he intentionally cast the Bone-Melting curse at Miss Abbott, with the intent to kill her. Apparently, he was under orders to weaken the new school wards however possible, and believed that killing one of the heirs — especially the only one who is currently of age — would sever the connection. The founders’ lines are linked, after all.”

“Cut down one of us, cut us all off,” Neville murmured, grimacing.

“Who else?” Harry asked flatly. “Who else in this castle is working for *him*.”

"Boot had only a few names to share," Amelia said. "Severus Snape was the first. But we knew that," she added, giving a pointed glare at several people who turned dark gazes on the Potions Master. Snape, to his credit, did not flinch under their accusations. "He named three more students — two seventh years and his dorm mate Kevin Entwhistle. Along with four of the adults supposedly seeking refuge here. They have all been apprehended, and are under guard in the Potions classroom."

Eight people. Out of the hundred and fifty odd staying in the castle — about half of whom were either underage students or non-combatant adults — it was more than Harry would have liked to hear, but honestly less than he had expected.

"What if there are more he doesn't know about?" Bill piped up, brow furrowed. "We know from Severus' reports that You-Know-Who isn't sharing all his plans with all his followers. There could be even more."

"How much Veritaserum have we got?" Fred added. "We'll just question everyone, weed them out!"

Several people nodded in agreement around the table, but Kingsley shook his head.

"Something like that would need to be public, and we all know who everyone would want to be the first under questioning." His eyes landed on Severus, who again remained straight-backed and unflinching. "We cannot risk it."

"Why not?" Emmeline Vance pressed. She was one of the few Order members who had broken away from Dumbledore without hearing the truth of things from Harry. "If we question Snape under Veritaserum, all he'll do is admit to being a spy for the Light. It breaks his cover, but we can keep him protected here." Her face twisted in an ugly sneer. "Unless you think he'll say what we all suspect and admit he's only ever been the Dark Lord's man. Then good fucking riddance to him."

Harry wished he could jump to the man's defence, but they still had to maintain cover, even in this group of *trusted* individuals. There were Order members Harry didn't trust as far as he could throw them.

Luckily, McGonagall wasn't having any of it. "Severus Snape is not the one under suspicion here," she snapped. "He is a valued member of this group, and I daresay he's done more for the Light than *you* have lately, Miss Vance." Turning back to the rest of the group, she clasped her hands together. "Kingsley is right — we cannot afford to have Severus questioned in front of witnesses. They may misconstrue things."

"Surely the point is moot?" George said, looking askance at Snape. "Unless we plan on keeping Boot and his buddies locked in the castle until things are over — which I am entirely in favour of, by the way — they'll run back to their Master and tell him that they were forced to reveal Snape's supposed loyalty. He'll have to go back regardless, won't he?"

Fear gripped Harry's chest at the idea of Snape having to return to Voldemort's side so close to the end.

“The Dark Lord believes that I am a double-agent for him; he believes that I have fooled you into thinking I have repented my Dark ways and have offered myself as a spy, feeding you only the information he gives me,” Snape declared curtly. Looking around the room, it was clear Voldemort wasn’t the *only* one who believed such a thing. “If Boot goes back and admits he named me, the Dark Lord will just believe that I have convinced you of my innocence despite the accusations. However, if you question me in front of the entire population of Hogwarts and I am forced to reveal my true loyalties, you will be signing my death warrant.”

“Yeah, because we’ll kill you ourselves when you confess you’re a loyal Death Eater,” someone muttered, though Harry wasn’t sure who. It might have been Sirius, keeping up appearances.

“No, because when word reaches the Dark Lord that I am not as loyal to him as he thought, he will drain the very magic and life from me through my Dark Mark,” Snape retorted icily. “There is nowhere I can hide from him, not with this connection. Breaking my cover and keeping me in the castle will not protect me.”

“*Moreover,*” Amelia interrupted loudly, before a proper argument could brew. “It is completely unethical — not to mention *illegal* — to question that many people under Veritaserum without due cause. There’s a reason it’s such a tightly controlled substance.”

“It’s not like they’re going to arrest you for it or anything, though, is it?” Fred reasoned with a shrug. Amelia looked distinctly unimpressed.

“Not at this moment, but if we have any hope of building a competent government once this is all over, the public need to know that we are not the kind of people who throw away our morals in times of conflict,” she pointed out, steely-eyed as she surveyed the group. “The Ministry may be in tatters, but I will still uphold its values the best I can while we work to save it. We aren’t questioning anyone else. The only decision that needs to be made tonight is what to do with those Boot named.”

The conversation turned to that, and Harry thought he saw Snape relax, ever so slightly. Beside Harry, Remus ran a hand through his hair, and pressed his shoulder a little heavier against his pseudo-godson’s.

Harry couldn’t imagine being Snape, having to weather such accusations regularly, having to actively cultivate suspicion around himself. He would be glad when it was all over, and the masks could be dropped. Even if that kind of distrust wouldn’t go away overnight.

Harry was fully prepared to defend Severus Snape to the death. The man was family, after all.

. . .

It was decided that keeping eight Death Eaters under guard in the castle was too risky; they didn’t have the manpower to keep them watched carefully, and with Hannah Abbott in such a precarious state none of the three remaining heirs wanted to divert the wards into keeping them captive. The girl had awoken three days after the accident, but she still could not move.

However, it was also decided that they couldn't kill them in cold blood. Nor did they have anywhere to imprison them. So the only other option was to snap their wands and send them away from the castle.

It was a risk, the potential of facing them on the battlefield shortly, but it was all they could do. Not everyone was happy with the decision, but they didn't have time to keep arguing it out.

Kingsley wasn't entirely thrilled with the decision either, but it was the best one they had. There was no sending people to Azkaban, not these days.

Ever since the attack, the atmosphere had changed within the castle. No longer was there a sense of tentative camaraderie, of banding together in the same rebellion. Mealtimes in the Great Hall were no longer cheerful, good-humoured gatherings with everyone trying to make the best of things and reach out to their fellows.

People kept to themselves, to their families and close friends. Meals were quiet, groups sat around in clusters with their heads bowed, occasionally sending suspicious glances across the hall at someone or another. Usually at Severus, if he was around, but plenty of others were seemingly suspect to their peers as well. Old school grudges, or workplace arguments, petty squabbles rising to the surface as accusations of treachery. From talking to Harry, Kingsley knew the castle wards were regularly freezing people to break up fights. Almost like Hogwarts was trying to make up for what happened to one of its heirs.

They didn't have group training sessions in the hall, anymore. Not like before — duels were conducted one at a time, under heavy shields and tight surveillance. It was slower, but it was safer.

The HA, Harry's little militia group, were hit hardest of all. Both as friends of Hannah Abbott, and as ex-friends of Terry Boot. He and the other one, the Entwhistle boy, had been members from the beginning, Kingsley knew. He had been one of them, trusted and cared for. And he had still turned away.

That was the true power of the Dark Lord — not his magical strength, but his ability to twist peoples' minds and desires until they turned on their own friends under the firm belief that it was the best way forward.

Kingsley did his best to keep things under control. Between strategy meetings and training supervision and all the minutiae that came with organising a rebellion, he tried to maintain structure and authority. Most of the adults listened to him, familiar with his long auror career.

Most of the students did not, but he left those brats to Harry. He was the only one they ever seemed to obey.

They were a week shy of Harry's seventeenth birthday, and something would need to change soon. Waiting would not serve them well for much longer.

When the commotion started, Kingsley was one of the first on his feet — it was lunch time, and he'd been sat with Sirius and Narcissa, reading over a letter from Andi sent by way of

Ceri; the eldest Black sister was their only trustworthy connection to the outside world, these days.

Shouting echoed in from the Entrance Hall, and Kingsley mentally prepared himself to break up another fight. But there were no frozen forms when he arrived; instead just Emmeline Vance, her hair mussed and her eyes frantic. “The Dark Mark is over Hogsmeade,” she told him urgently, just loud enough for eavesdroppers to hear and start spreading word around the hall. Great.

“Just now?” Kingsley asked, wondering if this was the beginning of the end. Emmeline shook her head.

“Don’t think so. It’s fuzzy round the edges, like it’s been up a while,” she reported. “I was just taking the little kids out for some fresh air when I saw it. We got them all back inside, but I think they saw it too.”

Kingsley grimaced faintly, and he wasn’t surprised to turn around and see Harry at his back. That boy seemed to be in five places at once, these days.

“Any sign of danger?” he questioned, vivid green gaze fixed on Vance.

“Hard to tell. I think there was smoke, but not much. Surely if there was a fight they would have sent word? Rosmerta can do a Patronus messenger, I know she can.”

Kingsley wasn’t reassured. “Only if she’s well and able to cast it,” he pointed out. “We need to go down there.”

Harry nodded, though he didn’t look any happier about it. “How many are you taking?”

Kingsley thought for a moment. “Myself and five others. If we need more, I’ll send an elf.” The Hogwarts house elves were taking quite happily to being messengers for the war effort, particularly the odd one that seemed to have attached itself to Harry.

“What do you need, Boss?”

He didn’t let himself smile, even as he looked at Tonks, reporting with a serious face but twinkling violet eyes. He — for he was definitely a man today, even though he didn’t show it, even though his body was feminine — stood at attention, ready for instruction, as if they were still aurors at the Ministry. As if Kingsley was still his superior.

One day, that wouldn’t be the case anymore. But until then, Kingsley had to keep it professional.

“Auror Tonks, you’re coming with me. I want Bill Weasley, Arthur Weasley, Remus Lupin and Apolline Delacour, at the gates as soon as possible.” Four combatants he trusted and a healer, just in case.

Tonks nodded, and hurried out of the hall.

“Kingsley,” Harry called, before Kingsley could get to work. The boy’s face was solemn, an expression Kingsley was far too familiar with by this point. The face of someone expecting the worst. “Be safe.”

He nodded, and turned on his heel, striding for the doors.

He couldn’t make any promises.

The Dark Mark in the sky sent an instinctive shiver down his spine as he walked quickly across the Hogwarts grounds. He’d seen far too many of those in his time, and none of them meant anything good.

Kingsley pushed away the unease in his gut, and kept going.

Tonks was fast, Kingsley would give him that. Soon the younger auror was practically jogging towards him, Kingsley’s requested team at his heel. At the gates, the edge of the wardline, Kingsley surveyed them all. “I’ll be honest with you, I have no idea what we’re walking into. Be on your guard.”

Five determined faces nodded back again, and they set off.

There was definitely smoke coming from the village, Kingsley realised as they grew closer to Hogsmeade. Not much, not enough to have him truly fearing for his life, but definitely some.

It was either a good sign or a very, very bad one that no one from the village had come to the castle for aid.

As soon as they reached the main village itself, Kingsley saw the problem — down at the end of the road, far away from the more student-friendly side of the village, the Hog’s Head was a smouldering pile of lumber.

“Auror Shacklebolt!” It was Rosmerta, hurrying over to him with a grim expression. “We weren’t sure if you’d come. We didn’t know if it was worth the risk.”

Kingsley hated how bad things had gotten, that the people of Hogsmeade weren’t even willing to ask for help from the castle barely a hundred feet away, just in case it was a trap.

“Of course we came, Ros,” Tonks insisted, always the earnest foil to Kingsley’s stony countenance. “What happened?”

“There were four of them,” Rosmerta said, wringing her hands anxiously. “Didn’t seem like they wanted to pick a fight. They threw some flaming potion into the Head and next thing we know it’s up like a pile of matches.” A sad smile twisted her lips. “Amount of booze old Ab had in there, can’t say I’m surprised. They watched it burn for a bit, threatened anyone who came close, then shot that monstrosity in the sky and turned tail.”

“Good Merlin,” Arthur murmured. “Was anyone inside?”

Rosmerta’s face said it all. “As far as we know, only Aberforth. He doesn’t open ’til at least five most days, says there’s no good business in the hours before dinner.” She cast her eyes at

the still-smoking wreckage. “We couldn’t help him. It all happened so fast... they were in and out in less than ten minutes.”

She choked on a sob, and Arthur put his arm around her soothingly. “It’s not your fault,” he soothed. “If it was that quick, there likely wasn’t much you could do anyway.”

As the Weasley patriarch comforted the pub owner, Kingsley took a few steps closer to the Hog’s Head. It was a seedy hellhole to be sure, but there had been a certain charm to it. It was a good place to get a drink without judgement.

Aberforth Dumbledore had been a good man. He didn’t deserve to go out like this.

“Why would they do this?” Kingsley didn’t realise he’d been followed, but Tonks and Remus were barely a step behind him. “What good does it do them? Unless Ab pissed off the wrong person...” Tonks shook his head, scowling. “Why go for just the Hog’s Head, of all the buildings in the village? Hell, why not burn down the whole village?”

“It’s a message,” Remus said, his nose wrinkled slightly as the acrid smell of smoke was blown their way by the wind. Had to be much worse to wolf senses. “He’s still after Albus. He’s trying to make him mad, draw him out.”

It made perfect sense, but it still made Kingsley grimace. He had almost forgotten about that loose end, about Albus out there somewhere with his own grand plans. Was he coming, for the battle? Did he have some idea of swooping in to claim glory at the last minute?

Was he even still alive?

At his side, Tonks wrapped his arms around himself. Kingsley put a hand on his shoulder, wishing he could do more, offer a better kind of comfort. “I had my first ever alcoholic drink there,” Tonks said quietly. “Fourth year, morphed myself into looking like one of the seventh years. Ab knew it was me — I had the nose all wrong, and I couldn’t get my voice to change for the life of me — but he served me anyway.” There was a flicker of a smile on his face. Kingsley squeezed his shoulder.

Back at the castle, he could hug him properly. Mourn for a man tainted by his brother’s legacy. Find some quiet corner to decompress in together, and then step out into the world and pretend they were just colleagues, sleep in separate rooms barely feet from each other like they were students all over again. Worse — even the students were sharing rooms, sharing beds!

After the war, Kingsley would change that. He couldn’t live like this anymore, couldn’t keep pretending. Life was too short.

But they had to win, first.

.-. .

Hogwarts had always been a home away from home for Sirius, but right now it felt like a prison. Another cage — bigger than the last, but no less chafing.

Sometimes it felt like Sirius' whole life had been a series of cages. His parents, Azkaban, Grimmauld, now this.

He could hardly stand to breathe, sometimes, feeling the iron bars of confinement wrap around his lungs, closing him in.

At least he wasn't alone in this cage. He glanced beside him, at Charlie lying in bed next to him, book open but not really reading it. Both of them were lost in their thoughts too often, these days.

The end was coming. Harry's birthday was only days away, and he'd seen the look in his pup's eye. That kid was working on a plan, had something up his sleeve.

This cage would be broken, one way or another. Sirius just wondered what kind of freedom he would find on the other side of it.

The ever-present knot of fear and worry tightened in his chest, the cold seeping in, the kind of feelings that always made his brain beg to be Padfoot, to not feel those feelings for just a little while. He didn't give in, not this time.

Instead, he shuffled closer to Charlie, tucking himself under the dragon tamer's muscular arm. Pillowed his head on that broad chest, let his fingers find the dog tattooed on Charlie's left pec. Just looking at it made his heart swell with affection.

"Hello, sweetheart," Charlie murmured, putting his book down and shifting to hold Sirius better. "What's the matter, then? Or are you just bored?" he added, giving a wolfish grin. It would be too easy to go with it, to start teasing his fire-haired love and replace the knot of worry with the hot flood of arousal. But it wouldn't solve the problem, and Sirius had learned over the last few years not to let things fester.

"Just thinking," he replied quietly, throwing one leg over Charlie's, plastering himself against his side like an extra layer of blankets. Like a shield.

"Terrible stuff. I try not to if I can help it," Charlie said, giving a faint smile. Sirius snorted. The redhead grew a little more serious, tangling a hand in Sirius' long hair. "Anything I can help with?"

"Only if you can promise me we'll all come out of this alive," Sirius replied bitterly. He felt Charlie tense beneath him, and briefly regretted bringing it up.

"Would if I could, my love." Charlie's arm was warm around Sirius' bare shoulders, their room a little stuffy in the late-July heat. "All I can do is promise my best."

Sirius sighed, a long, slow release of air. He buried his face in Charlie's throat, squeezing his eyes shut. "I wish it was just you I was worried about," he confessed. "I mean, I wish I wasn't worried about any of it. But when I stand in that hall, when I look at everyone I know is going to be fighting..." Remus, Narcissa, Tonks, Severus. *Harry*. Draco, the kids, so many people who should not have to put their lives on the line before they'd even had the chance to

live them. Just like James and Lily had done, the first time round. Just like countless others had done.

“I know what you mean,” Charlie agreed. Of course he did — every member of his family, both blood and not, was going to be on that battlefield. Even Ron would be there, and he was a prick, but none of them wanted him to die for it.

“Sometimes I look at them, look at Harry, and I just think... I’d give my life for them, to make sure they’re okay. They’ve got so much more to offer this world than I have. If I die defending the people I love... it’ll be worth it.”

Suddenly, Charlie was moving — his big arms manhandled Sirius to the centre of the bed, and that bulky form was covering him, cocooning him in Charlie’s warmth and weight and the scent of leather. Sirius let out a quiet whimper, unable to help himself — he didn’t quite turn to brainless jelly beneath Charlie, not anymore, but it was still a close thing.

“You’d better not,” Charlie breathed, his lips brushing Sirius’ jaw, his forearms bracketing the animagus’ head. Sirius watched the flickering candlelight play over the bold black lines tattooed up Charlie’s shoulders, and wondered how the hell he got so lucky. “I’ve got plans for you, Sirius Black. Plans that involve spending the rest of forever with you. So don’t you go dying on me now, alright?”

Sirius let out a sound that wasn’t quite a cry but wasn’t a gasp either, bringing one hand up to stroke the Gryffindor lion tattooed on the right side of Charlie’s ribcage. It preened under his touch, shaking out its enormous mane. “I don’t want to,” he assured. “Gods, Charlie — I have plans for you, too, yeah? Plans for *us*.” Four years ago he never thought he’d have any plans at all past revenge on fucking *Pettigrew*, vengeance for Lily and James. “I don’t want to die. But if it’s me or Remus, me or Harry, me or *you*. Well. That’s an easy choice.”

Charlie growled lightly, the rumble vibrating through his chest straight into Sirius’. “Then I’ll just have to stay right by your side and make sure that’s not a choice you have to make,” he vowed, kissing the corner of Sirius’ mouth. He shuffled down a bit, resting his head on Sirius’ chest, reversing their earlier position. Like Sirius, his hand found the ink over a quick-beating heart. But in this case, it was an old tattoo, over a decade sat on Sirius’ skin — two canine paw prints beneath a proud nine-point rack of antlers, all set under a shining full moon.

Once upon a time, there had been a rat tail framing the whole thing, but now it was just a messy circle of scar tissue. In Azkaban, Sirius had dug the ink out with his own bare hands, hating the memory of that traitor on his skin.

“Tell me, about these plans,” Charlie urged, his body still half-pinning Sirius to the mattress, the perfect anchor. “We’ve never talked about... after.”

Neither of them had ever been brave enough.

“I want those kids,” Sirius admitted, staring up at the ceiling while his fingers traced lines between the freckles on Charlie’s upper back. “If we can. If they want us. I want to give those kids a home. I want *us* to have a home. And...” He trailed off, shaking his head. “It’s stupid.”

“Tell me anyway,” Charlie pleaded, smiling against Sirius’ skin.

Sirius hesitated only for a moment. Charlie had seen him at his worst, he wouldn’t mock him for his fanciful dreams. “I want to open a wizarding primary school. A place for kids to go before Hogwarts. Bring the muggleborn kids earlier, but also... I was so lonely, back then. Just me and Reggie, and occasionally other kids my parents approved of. I never had a proper friend before I came to Hogwarts. And homeschooling in families like mine... well, let’s just say the indoctrination starts young.” He sneered at the memory, at all the dark curses he knew about before he’d even held his own wand — either through being taught about them, or being punished with them. “I just... I don’t want there to be any more lonely little kids like I was. And I don’t want kids with only their families to show them what the world is like.”

Prejudice wasn’t automatic. It was taught, even subconsciously. He’d been a prime example of that, even if it wasn’t the traditional way — in rebelling against his awful family, he’d decided everything Slytherin was just as bad, everything *pureblood* should rot.

Magical kids grew up sheltered, and deep down Sirius thought that maybe he could fix that.

Silence followed his declaration, long enough that Sirius would have started squirming if Charlie didn’t have him pinned so firmly.

“That’s not stupid at all,” Charlie said eventually, lifting up a little, folding his arm over Sirius’ chest and propping his chin on it. He stared up at Sirius with those adoring blue eyes and Sirius’ heart about stopped. “I think it’s a brilliant idea.”

“I— really?”

“Yeah! I mean, you and I had very different childhoods — I don’t think I spent a second alone until I got to Hogwarts,” Charlie admitted ruefully. “But we still only really played with the kids in the area. Mostly it was me and Bill and Percy playing together. A different kind of sheltered, but almost as bad, I think, sometimes. Same sorts of problems to it.” He grinned, cheeks dimpling. “A school before Hogwarts would be great. Level the playing field a bit, let everyone make friends before they’re split into houses.”

“Exactly,” Sirius agreed, enthusiasm growing like a tiny spark on a pile of kindling. “Basic lessons — how to hold a quill, how to prep different potions ingredients, basic magic theory and history and stuff. Kids’ quidditch,” he added, grinning fondly just at the idea of a bunch of little kids flying around at waist height, tossing squishy quaffles at each other and chasing a tennis-ball sized snitch.

“Well, then,” Charlie murmured, moving his arm, kissing the centre of Sirius’ sternum. “My plans mostly involved dragons and the kids, so I reckon that’ll line up nicely.” He winked, flashing white teeth and a boyish smile. “We’ll go with yours, yeah?”

Sirius almost laughed — he made it sound so simple, like that. So easy. Win the war, adopt some kids, start a school. Insert dragons as applicable.

It was nice to imagine, though.

....

Harry had thought it over, and talked with Salazar, and he was fairly sure he had a plan. Or at the very least, the beginnings of one. And his plan involved one Severus Snape.

He was unsurprised when the castle directed him down to the dungeons in search of the man — Snape was brewing, and Harry hesitated at the threshold.

“What is it, Potter? Do cease your hovering.” The harsh tone made Harry hide a smile.

“May I come in, sir?”

“If you must.” The pair of them looked disgruntled at being in each others’ presence, right up until the door was locked and warded. “What’s the matter?”

“I know how to get Voldemort here when we need him,” Harry blurted. Snape froze over his cauldron. “I—I need your help, though.”

The man’s lips thinned, and he Vanished the contents of his cauldron. Harry hoped it wasn’t anything important. “Talk.”

Harry perched on the edge of the empty workbench, meeting Snape’s gaze. “Everyone knows by now that Dumbledore did *something* to my family magics, right?” he began. “The rumours got a bit warped, but it’s common knowledge that he fiddled around with it.”

Snape blanched briefly. “Please don’t ever use the word ‘fiddled’ when discussing the headmaster’s actions, especially towards you,” he requested evenly, and Harry made a face.

“Ew, gross. *Anyway*, no one really knows the specifics. And we know now that Voldemort is pissed the Hogwarts wards held him out. So I thought, if you go to him and tell him that I’m trying to postpone the war until after I’m seventeen — tell him that whatever Dumbledore did to my magic means it’s going to make my maturation difficult. Make me weaker. Tell him I’ve been keeping it secret til now but I finally let it slip, and I need everything to hold off until I can regain my strength.” Harry smirked, eyes flashing at the look of intrigue slowly crossing Snape’s features. “I’d bet my Firebolt he’ll show up at the gates bang on time, thinking I’m ripe for the killing.”

The Slytherin frowned, brows furrowed in thought. “It’s risky,” he said slowly. “He may show up early. And, for all we know, Albus’ rituals *will* make your maturation difficult.”

“The goblins said I’m fine,” Harry dismissed easily, waving a hand. “And if he shows up early, we hold him off until it’s time.”

“Can Miss Abbott handle that?” Snape asked.

“She says she can.” Harry had talked to Hannah before coming to Snape. She was able to sit up, now, but still couldn’t leave her hospital bed. “If an elf moves her bed to the Wardstone, she can do it. There’s nothing wrong with her magic.” Just her spine, dissolving itself over and over again as the dark magic embedded itself in her body, fighting against their attempts to remove it.

Harry ran a hand through his hair. "Face it, Severus. At this point, it's the best we've got." All his other plans had been far riskier. Far too *Gryffindor*, according to Salazar. "So will you do it? Will you go to him, convince him he needs to attack on my birthday?"

Slowly, Snape nodded. "I will try." His eyes darkened in something like concern. "Are you ready?"

Harry's answering smile was humourless. "I have to be."

He couldn't keep putting it off forever.

.-. .

Somehow, word spread. Even though Harry only told his closest allies of his plan with Snape, it got around that the battle was coming, and fast. Letters were sent out, the hope of last-minute allies from far reaching places. Potions were brewed, protections were reinforced, the elves and even the ghosts more alert than ever. Children were kissed, lovers were held, promises were whispered into the night. Promises that, for some, were sure to be broken.

Harry couldn't leave his room without getting stared at like a specimen in a jar. No one asked him, but everyone wanted to know he had a plan. Everyone wanted to be sure that their saviour would come through.

This whole battle would be pointless if Harry couldn't kill Voldemort, once and for all.

The evening of the 29th. Harry didn't bother going down to dinner. He asked Dobby to bring him a plate, and he and Draco ate dinner on the sofa in front of the fire in the Gryffindor common room. And slowly, people joined them.

Neville and Ginny, tucking themselves away in the armchair. Remus, ruffling first Harry's hair and then Draco's. Narcissa, not touching any of them but looking at the boys like they might disappear if she turned away. Sirius and Charlie, settling on the floor, leaning back against Harry's shins. One by one, his friends, his family, gathered in the common room — even Snape, a shadow lurking in the corner, a dark guardian angel behind Remus Lupin's chair.

No one spoke, but they didn't have to. There were no words they could say to make it any easier. Not when everything sounded like a goodbye.

So they sat together, listening to the quiet breaths around them, the crackle of the fire, basking in the love that flooded the room, heavy with the knowledge that this may well be the last time all of them sat in a room together.

Harry leaned into Draco's embrace, breathing in his scent, until the sun had fully set outside.

"I think I'm going to bed," he said eventually, breaking the silence between them all. "Long day tomorrow."

Someone snorted. It might have been Fred.

“Goodnight, pup,” Sirius murmured, reaching up to squeeze his knee. “Night, Draco.”

“Goodnight.” Harry looked around the room one last time — not memorising faces, not that he’d admit to, but just getting his fill of this moment, his family.

Then he took Draco by the hand, and led him upstairs.

Neville and Ginny followed soon after — evidently Harry’s departure had been the catalyst for everyone else’s — but they didn’t say anything to each other, and by wordless agreement the partition was raised and warded as soon as all four were in the room.

With it, Harry could forget about anyone on the other side of the makeshift wall. His world narrowed down to just him and Draco, their gasps and sighs filling the still night as they made love, holding each other with an edge of desperation that neither had the strength to hide.

And when they were sated, curled together under a thin sheet in the summer heat, they still didn’t speak. What could they say that hadn’t been said? They kissed, and they closed their eyes, and they breathed.

A long night was coming. Best to rest while they could.

Chapter End Notes

...Sorry :P Have a great and safe weekend, folks, and I hope 2022 starts well for you all
<3

Chapter 104

Chapter Notes

Here we go, folks~

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

In the midst of it all, in the fear and uncertainty and quiet but frantic preparation, most people forgot it was Neville Longbottom's birthday.

In their little private oasis in the Gryffindor dorm, they didn't. In the morning, Harry took down the partition — after knocking first, of course — and revealed a little cupcake with a single candle sticking out of it, a quiet grin on his face.

Neville was bleary-eyed and shirtless, his hair sticking up all over the place and the most enormous hickey on his collarbone that Harry tried not to stare at too much. "Wha?" he murmured when Harry held out the cupcake. Beside him, also shirtless, wearing a pair of Gryffindor boxers that were probably Neville's, Ginny giggled.

"Happy birthday, Nev," Harry chirped. Neville blinked owlishly.

"Oh, yeah. Thanks, guys."

"Make a wish," Ginny pestered, plastering herself over his back as he stared at the cheerfully dancing candle flame.

Neville's gaze finally sharpened, and when he blew out the candle, Harry could make a pretty good guess what he'd wished for.

"What time do you come of age?" Draco asked, stretching out his arms and cracking his neck. Ginny giggled again, louder this time.

"D'you need a Nail Clipping charm, Harry?" she asked, apropos of nothing. Harry stared at her, bewildered.

"What?"

She nodded towards Draco, and Harry watched his boyfriend dig around the dresser for his clothes, admiring his arse in those bright green boxers — and then trailing his gaze up over the red scratch-marks still visible over his shoulders. Harry blushed, glaring at the redhead girl.

"Shut up," he muttered petulantly. "Like you can talk; Nev looks like he's been mauled."

That just made Ginny look smug, running a hand over her boyfriend's chest. "He does, doesn't he?" she agreed proudly, patting Neville's cheek when he blushed.

"I need to go shower," Draco declared. "So put your tits away before I have to open the door, Weasley, in case your mother finds out how scandalous you are."

Ginny laughed, summoning a shirt from across the room. "If I must," she mock-sighed. "Although that reminds me — I was thinking about getting a nipple piercing, sometime before we go back to school. Pretty sure I can blackmail Charlie into taking me to his tattoo artist friend for it. What do you think?" She turned in Harry's direction, cupping her breasts and looking at them with a curious expression. Harry snickered, seeing Neville turn a vibrant shade of red.

"Pretty sure you're asking the wrong bloke, Gin," he said mildly. "But right before school is the best idea, less chance for your mum to find out. Also if you do go, let me know, I want a tattoo."

"Ooh, tattoo and piercing date," Ginny said delightedly, pulling her t-shirt over her head. "You're on, Potter."

It was such a *normal* morning. The easy movement between them, discussing their return to school like it was a sure thing, the teasing and the banter and Neville's eternal blush. Like it was any other day.

"You never answered my question, Neville," Draco reminded. "What time d'you come of age?"

Neville took a second to stop staring at Ginny's chest, even though it was covered by fabric, no doubt imagining a piercing there. "Oh, yeah. Quarter to midnight," he said, running a sheepish hand through his hair. "Barely today."

"As the seventh month dies," Harry murmured to himself, earning an odd look from the taller boy. "Nothing, nothing." Neville had never heard the Prophecy, didn't know how close he'd come to being in Harry's shoes. If Harry had his way, he never would.

A lithe form pressed against Harry's back, a hand pinching his arse. "Shower time," Draco said, eyes smouldering as he looked at Harry. "Coming?"

Harry summoned his clothes quickly, ignoring Ginny's cackling laughter as he followed Draco out.

It was going to be a difficult day; they had to take their joy where they could.

. . .

They knew what was coming when Snape disappeared.

The Potions Master had told them — the family, those who knew the truth — that the Dark Lord had asked Snape to be at his side when the battle came. Snape was one of the best duellists on the Dark side, after all. Voldemort had so few left these days,

So when, not long after dinner, Remus sidled into the Great Hall and over to Harry, jaw clenched and eyes faintly glowing, Harry knew what was coming.

The countdown had begun.

"Here we go, then," he said, releasing a deep breath. Remus nodded.

"Here we go," he echoed. He cupped the back of Harry's neck, pressing their foreheads together, scenting Harry's temple. "Look after yourself, cub."

"You too, Moony." It took everything Harry had to pull away, offering the man a tight smile.

"It's go time then, is it, chaps?" Fred asked briskly, watching the exchange. Harry nodded.

"Some time in the next few hours."

"Least we got a good meal in first," George commented. "I'd hate to go to war on an empty stomach." He winked, and Harry laughed, even as his own dinner turned to lead in his gut.

"I'm going to find the others." He looked at the twins, smirking. "Give 'em hell, boys."

The pair saluted, brown eyes bright.

The twins were Harry's seconds, as far as the HA were concerned. They were the ones to get everyone mobilised.

Harry had his own work to do.

He got to his feet, keeping his shoulders back and his head high as every head in the room swivelled in his direction, the whispers starting to spread. He would not look scared. He would not show a hint of the anxiety buzzing inside him.

At the doors, a hand slipped into his. He looked down, meeting Luna's smiling face. "Neville's coming," she assured. "The castle's letting him know."

Harry nodded, and they left, hand in hand. Sure enough, Neville met them at the stairs, dirt on the knees of his jeans from working in the greenhouses.

As they made their way upstairs, taking the long way for once, Harry noticed the signs of preparation. Underage students were being gently chivvied downstairs, ready to take refuge in the dungeons. People were walking that little bit faster, jaws set resolutely. They stepped aside for the three heirs, their eyes knowing.

They made it to the Hospital Wing, and Hannah took one look at them and grimaced. "How long have we got?" she asked simply. Harry glanced out the window, looking at the gates. There was no one there, yet.

He checked his watch. Quarter past eight. "I'd give it about two hours, maybe three. He won't want to show too early." He wanted to catch Harry at his weakest, at the moment of his

birth. Seven minutes past two in the morning. Not truly as the seventh month was dying, but close enough to it.

“Oh, good.” Hannah settled down in her bed. “I can let my food settle before I have to take a pain potion.”

“Are you sure you’re up for this, Hannah?” Neville fretted. She looked up with hard eyes.

“Do I have a choice?” she retorted pointedly. “I’ll be fine, Nev. Sooner we get this out of the way, the sooner they can call in a specialist and sort me out.”

Anyone who thought that Hufflepuffs were weak or spineless had never met a true Hufflepuff, Harry thought to himself. Here Hannah was, quite *literally* spineless, and she was still ready to go to war however she could.

“We won’t have to hold it for as long as last time,” Luna pointed out serenely, patting Neville’s arm.

The door to Pomfrey’s office opened, and the mediwitch walked out with Draco at her side. When he saw the four of them, he stopped in his tracks. “Oh, fuck,” he declared emphatically. “So soon?”

“Not immediately,” Harry assured. “Couple of hours. Sev’s gone,” he added as explanation, ignoring Neville’s narrow-eyed look at the address. There would be time for those truths later.

“Well,” Pomfrey said, running her hands over her apron. “That changes things. I’ll send an elf to Horace, see if he can send up the last of those Blood Replenishing potions he’s been brewing. I trust the headmistress has been alerted?”

Harry hadn’t seen McGonagall in the Hall when he’d left, but he was sure someone had run to find her, so he nodded.

“Good. Mr Malfoy, would you ready Miss Abbott’s evening potions, please?” Pomfrey requested. Draco jumped to work, and the three heirs perched on the edge of the bed beside Hannah, pressed shoulder to shoulder as she downed four potions, grimacing between each one.

“Thanks, Draco,” she said when he passed her a glass of water.

It was torture, the waiting. Watching Pomfrey and Draco ready the Hospital Wing for whatever emergencies it may bring, watching the other healers and volunteer assistants file in with grim faces.

After an hour, Luna stiffened. “We should go,” she declared. Harry and Neville shared a look.

“Okay, then.”

Harry had an eye on Draco, watching as the blond sucked in a sharp breath as soon as he saw they had stood. He almost dropped the roll of bandages he was holding, but set it down on a

tray instead, taking three long strides across the room to stand in front of Harry.

"Promise me, Potter," he whispered furiously, cupping Harry's cheeks with loving hands.
"Promise me you'll find me, when you join the battle. Promise me we'll do this together."

"I will," he said, glad Draco hadn't asked for anything more, for a promise he couldn't make.
"I love you."

"I love you," Draco said back to him, kissing his lips, then kissing the barely-there lightning bolt scar on his forehead.

Only then did he step back with a shaky breath, jaw clenched as he nodded to the other three.
"Good luck. Here," he added, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a vial of Pain Reliever for Hannah. "You'll need this."

She smiled gratefully, then looked to her fellow heirs. "I'll meet you up there."

After that, there was no more stalling. Harry had to walk away, leave the love of his life behind knowing that the next time they saw each other they'd be fighting for their lives.

The bustle of the Hospital Wing didn't stop for them, but everyone was watching as they left.

Harry didn't want eyes on him, not now, not anymore, and he was fairly sure Neville and Luna felt the same. They didn't complain when he dragged a secret passage into existence behind a tapestry, leading them into a blessedly quiet stairwell.

He thought about all the people he hadn't seen yet, all the ones he hadn't said goodbye to. That was perhaps for the best — if he had to look anyone else he loved in the eye and then walk away, Harry didn't think he would make it.

Hogwarts was thrumming anxiously in the back of his mind. Or perhaps that was his own anxiety, projected onto a castle that was far too sentient for its own good sometimes.

The door to the Room of Requirement opened, and the Wardstone was revealed.

Now they were in position, Hannah could join them — Dobby brought her whole hospital bed with her in it, positioning it carefully at the West point, not obstructing any of the others but close enough that Hannah could get a hand on the crystal.

Then the little elf threw himself at Harry, hugging him around the knees. "Dobby will protect Hogwarts, Harry Potter sir," he swore firmly. Harry patted the elf on the head with a fond smile.

"I know you will, Dobby."

The house elf disappeared, off to man whatever station he had decided was his for the fighting.

Harry stepped up to the Wardstone, in his usual spot. He looked to Hannah, who was positioned somewhat awkwardly, lying down on the bed with her arm outstretched. "You

okay?"

"It'll do," she assured. "I'm gonna hurt regardless, this can't make it much worse."

Well, that was one way to look at it.

They were as ready as it got, now.

"After this is all over, I want a proper birthday party," Neville blurted suddenly, startling them all. "Like last year. A party for me and Harry, with everyone there, to celebrate us turning seventeen. This birthday has been shit."

Harry laughed, grinning at his friend, seeing the girls smile too. "We'll make it happen," he promised. "Proper party, for the two of us. We'll have it at my place; it's got a swimming pool." The Pottery's pool was bigger than the one at Seren Du, even.

"Perfect," Neville said with a satisfied nod. "Glad we got that sorted."

And then he put both hands on the Wardstone.

Harry did the same, sinking into the now-familiar liminal space between his magic and the castle's, bridging the gaps between them until every beat of his heart pulsed in the stones themselves. He bridged the gaps between the heirs, too, reaching for Hannah and Luna and Neville, his magic twining with theirs joyously.

There was no sudden flare of pain when the assault on the wards began. This time, they were ready. They softened the blow, drawing deep from the roots of the Forbidden Forest to press back against Voldemort's cloying darkness.

Once again, time ceased to exist. Except for one moment, at eleven forty-four PM, when the heir of Gryffindor came of age.

At that moment, Neville's full power rushed through the wards, bright as a flare, bursting through the tightly-woven net of magic and making the castle sing. The swirls of red in Harry's vision grew brighter, bolder — all the excess magic that usually poured off someone at the moment of their maturation, siphoned directly into the Hogwarts wards themselves.

He wondered if Voldemort was getting angry, yet. He wasn't trying nearly as hard to crack the wards as last time — he was waiting. Biding his time, with just enough pressure to let everyone know he was there. Practically knocking on the door.

Harry could envision it; Voldemort stood with his half-hearted attack on the wards, while all around him his followers gathered for their final fight. They would have trolls with them, most likely, and dementors. Perhaps even giants if the rumours were true.

It wouldn't matter. They could handle it.

He didn't even question that Voldemort knew exactly the moment of Harry's birth. Snape would have told him. The only reason Harry himself knew was because Remus told him.

He could feel it, when it started to draw near. Not in his body — he was so deep into his magic he was barely aware of even *having* a body — but in his soul, in his magic, tiny crackles like static electricity before a huge lightning storm. It built, and built, and built.

And then it let go.

Neville's burst of power, impressive though it was, was *nothing* compared to Harry's. Four ancient lines converging within him, on top of an already incredibly powerful innate magical core. Every last drop of that surge, directed right into the wards, carefully restrained. Harry waited a beat, then two. Voldemort's magic rose in an enormous wave of power, crashing against the wards.

Harry pulled his hands off the Wardstone, and told the wards to drop.

The others had moved at the same time, reinforcing his decision. They could feel the wards 'fail', feel the influx of dark magic as it spilled onto the grounds.

Hannah couldn't stifle her gasp of pain as she moved her arm back down. Harry's eyes darted to her in alarm, and she shook her head ever so slightly, eyes squeezing shut. "It's fine. I'm fine. Go. Good luck, all of you."

It felt wrong, leaving her there. But there was no other option — Hannah could not fight, and they needed one of them there to protect the Wardstone, just in case.

So they exited the room, stepping back out into the castle.

The sounds of battle weren't immediately obvious. The castle gave them a shortcut down, and Harry's wand slid into his hand as he hurried down the steps. He felt *strong*. His magic was humming through his veins, eager to be used, more powerful than he had even begun to imagine.

At the bottom of the stairs, Harry paused, halting his two friends. "Be safe," he said, meeting each of their eyes in turn. "I want to see you on the other side of this. Both of you."

They nodded, and stepped through the door.

Immediately, they were right in the midst of the action — people were hurrying through the Entrance Hall out to the grounds; they wouldn't let the fight get inside the castle, not if they could help it. Not with the students in there.

To Harry's surprise, the suits of armour that usually lined the corridors had mobilised, marching outdoors with military precision. Where the hell had McGonagall been hiding that spell?

He didn't have time to think. He reached for the wards, reached for the magic he knew better than anyone's. Draco was outside, and Harry had to find him.

Neville and Luna stuck with him as they entered the fray — Harry didn't think, shooting spells as easy as breathing, his magic jumping to obey him without a second of hesitation.

He had to rein it in, had to at least *appear* to be struggling, for a little bit. Voldemort thought him weakened. Any surprise was Harry's advantage.

Neville and Luna knew the plan, so they covered for him when he pretended to have his magic fail. Harry ducked a jet of bright blue light, and Luna sent her own in return — a Blasting curse, which caught the black-cloaked figure in the chest, sending them flying backwards and sprawling to the ground. They didn't get up.

This was not the time to have mercy.

The night was lit up with spells, the half-moon shining high in the clear sky. His eyes adjusted remarkably quickly — after years in the cupboard, Harry had no problem seeing in the dark. He had the fleeting thought that they should have done more night-time training, should have planned for this eventuality. Hopefully the light shining from the castle was enough.

If it wasn't, the light from the Patroni keeping the swarm of dementors away would certainly help.

All around him, Harry could see familiar faces. Students he'd grown up with and teachers he'd learned from and people who had become family to him in just a few short years. He saw Oliver and Cassius, fighting side by side; the Patil twins, bracketing Lavender Brown, who seemed to have already amassed quite an impressive pile of broken wands at her feet. Tonks, hair a bright pink beacon in the midst of it all, standing guard over a downed figure — Harry couldn't see who. His heart jolted in alarm, but in moments a house elf appeared, grabbing the prone form and vanishing it from the battlefield.

Good. That was good.

He looked around, following the pull of magic, eyes straining for a head of silver blond hair. At last, he spotted him — Draco was alone, duelling two Death Eaters at once, and the sight of it made Harry's lungs seize. He sprinted over, shielding as he ran, Neville and Luna right on his heel. Without hesitation, he fired a Cutting curse at one of the Death Eaters duelling Draco. With his maturation still buzzing through his veins, the curse came out so powerful it sliced the man clean in half at the waist.

"Whoops," Harry remarked, throwing a shield up as Draco turned around, sheer relief filling those mercury eyes, just for a moment before Draco's attention turned back to the battle.

"Happy birthday, darling," he called airily, dodging a nasty-looking hex and firing back.
"You'll have to wait for your present."

Harry laughed, shoulder pressing briefly against Draco's, slotting into the space at the blond's side as he'd trained to do for the last year.

"Nev, Luna, go!" he urged to the pair. "We're going to find him. Go help whoever you can."

Neville looked like he might protest, but Luna just grabbed him by the arm and tugged him away, the pair running to give assistance to Cho Chang.

Draco hit his opponent with a spell that had them falling to the ground, and they kept moving.

It was easy, looking for Voldemort — he just had to feel in the wards for the magic that felt like a complete blight on humanity. Everything about the man felt *wrong*, twisted, broken.

Actually *getting* to him, however, wasn't quite as easy. The Death Eaters had spotted Harry, and were gathering to try and slow him down, determined to make him work for the *privilege* of duelling their master. Harry thought it was quite bold of many of them, in all honesty — they thought themselves safe enough to risk trying to kill him, stealing Voldemort's vengeance from him? What idiots.

But Harry wasn't alone; he had Draco, yes, but there were others, appearing once they realised the group were converging around Harry. Doing their best to distract and disrupt the Death Eaters. As they drew closer to the edge of the Forbidden Forest, Harry was both amused and deeply disturbed to see acromantula scuttling out from the cover of the trees, grabbing humans between their pincers and dragging them back to the forest. Harry doubted they had been asked to do so — and indeed, they didn't seem to be discriminating between Death Eaters and not, though Hagrid managed to reclaim the student who almost met a very grizzly end. Some of the acromantula were just grabbing fresh corpses and going to town right there.

Harry shook his head; whatever. If it saved them the clean up, he hardly cared.

They were edging closer, making it through the Death Eater ranks. Harry knew he was almost at his destination when he came up against Rabastan Lestrange, his sleeve ripped and his clockwork arm gleaming with every flash of spellfire.

“You want me to take your other arm?” Draco taunted, watching Lestrange’s face screw up in fury, his mask abandoned long ago.

“I’ll kill you!” the man roared, so focused on Draco that he neglected to see the *other* head of blonde hair approaching.

“You will do no such thing!” Narcissa slashed her wand down in a firm arc, and all of a sudden Lestrange’s eyes began to bulge as he gasped for air, choking on nothing, drowning on dry land. He dropped to his knees, and Narcissa didn’t release the spell until he’d stopped moving entirely. Then she sniffed delicately. “I never did like him,” she declared, as if she had merely escorted the man from a tea party rather than choked him to death.

But there was no time to stand and admire her handiwork; with Lestrange down, there were plenty more willing to take his place.

And then Harry pushed forward, through a break in the line, and found himself stood face to face with Lord Voldemort himself.

Harry’s first thought was that the man had aged; his strangely smooth, pale face was weathered like peeling paint, dark circles below his luminous red eyes. He didn’t hold himself quite so elegantly as he had before.

“Hello, Tom!” Harry greeted cheerfully, taking a few more steps forward. His heart lurched at leaving Draco behind, but this was the plan.

Everyone else would take care of the crowd, and Harry would deal with their leader.

Stood at Voldemort’s side, ramrod straight and face entirely impassive, was Severus Snape. He looked almost *bored* by it all, his wand held in his hand but lax at his side. As if that made him any less dangerous.

And on Voldemort’s other side, curled up in the grass, was Nagini.

The final horcrux.

“*Potter*,” Voldemort hissed, in English but with such venom it almost sounded Parseltongue. “Facing your death like a true Gryffindor, I see.”

“Oh, but haven’t you heard?” Harry replied, still in that same cheerful tone, “I’m the heir of Slytherin now!”

Voldemort’s face twisted in fury, and a bolt of green light shot from his wand. Harry ducked, hoping those behind him were still paying attention. “You make a mockery of the name of Salazar Slytherin!” the Dark Lord crowed. “I shall destroy you, and claim my rightful place as Slytherin’s *true* heir.”

Harry continued to duck and dodge and shield as they talked, keeping half an eye on Snape. The man was edging ever closer to Nagini, behind Voldemort while the man was distracted.

“Yeah, see, if you had the ability to do that, you would’ve done it by now,” Harry jibed. “But the family magic doesn’t want you. You *fail to meet the requirements*.” He had to conjure a shield to block another Killing curse, and apparently the first thing on his mind do to so was an entire wooden door, which shattered on impact. A chunk of it came flying back at him, cutting deep into his left arm, and he winced. Not doing that again, then.

“You lie!” Voldemort roared. “It is you who is falling short, Harry Potter — I felt your wards fail, felt your magic weaken as you came of age. How did it feel, Potter, to know that the headmaster you trusted had betrayed you so? Continued to damage you, even now? How did it feel, to have your maturation *stunted*?” There was a mocking sneer on his thin lips, but Harry just laughed, shooting a dark curse he’d learned from Remus that would turn someone’s elbow joints backwards. It didn’t hit, but he hadn’t expected it to; he just needed to keep all the attention focused on him. *Find your moment, and take it*, Salazar had told him. But Harry couldn’t find his moment until Snape had taken care of the last loose end.

“Actually, Tom, I feel pretty fucking fantastic,” he drawled, ducking low and coming up with a spell already glowing on his wand. He put the full force of his magic into it, and though it hit Voldemort’s shield it was still strong enough to send the man skidding backwards. Snape was forced to quickly sidestep out of the way — right behind Nagini. Perfect.

“You didn’t actually *believe* that whole thing about Dumbledore’s blocks fucking up my magic, did you?” Harry asked incredulously, seeing Snape raise his wand. “Honestly, Tom,

you're so *easy* to fool. I got those blocks removed when I was thirteen, they haven't troubled me for years." He smiled sweetly at the astonished Dark Lord. "I just wanted to get you here so we could do *this*."

At once, Severus' wand moved in a complicated spiral and flick pattern. "Fiendfyre!" he said clearly, and flames leapt from his wand, instantly swallowing up the enormous snake on the grass.

A horrifying scream rent the air — not from Nagini, but from the horcrux within her, dying in the cursed flames.

It was a risky move, using something as quick to anger as Fiendfyre, something that could so easily burn the entire place to cinders under the wrong hand — but this was Severus Snape, the man of an iron will and such firm Occlumency shields that he had managed to fool both Lord Voldemort and Albus Dumbledore for years. Fiendfyre would not *dare* break loose from his control.

The flames lasted just long enough for the scream to fade, and then they faded too, sucking back into Snape's wand like a vacuum and leaving nothing but a pile of ash.

"Severus!" Voldemort exclaimed, turning his wand on his follower. "What — you traitor! I should have known all along you were Dumbledore's man!"

"You're wrong," Snape spat, dark eyes flashing. "I am no more Dumbledore's man than yours — I did this for Lily, and for Harry. I helped destroy your horcruxes, every last one of them. I let you believe you could trust me, and now I have brought you to your end!"

Voldemort raised his wand, the tip already glowing green, and Harry moved his at the same time.

"Avada Kedavra!"

A figure dropped to the ground, dead.

And Severus Snape smirked.

"Quickly, Potter," he ordered, gesturing to the body of Lord Voldemort, crumpled and lifeless on the grass. "Clean up your mess."

The next words from Harry's mouth were Parseltongue, his wand moving in sharp jabbing motions over the corpse. "*Cleanse this body, destroy this soul, banish it from this mortal plane. Let no harm come from this magic any longer.*"

Magic, stronger than anything Harry had felt so far, flooded through him, pouring into the body in front of him. He could feel every atom of his existence powering the ritual — the castle, boosting his magic with its own, with *Hannah's*, still pushing so hard to help the fight even from her hospital bed. He forced it all forward, praying the ritual would work. He was sure they had got all the horcruxes, but just in case there was anything *else* Voldemort might

have done in the search for immortality, Salazar had assured him this would prevent anyone from resurrecting him again.

Voldemort's body glowed a searing white, as Salazar had said it would. Then, it dissolved, becoming nothing but tiny white particles, like a pile of sand next to Nagini's ashes.

Harry sucked in a deep breath, meeting Snape's gaze. It was done.

But the battle wasn't over.

Harry whirled around, wanting to see how things had gone while he'd been otherwise occupied. The sun was just starting to peek over the horizon now, the pale golden glow illuminating the scenes of destruction. His friends were still fighting — Neville and Draco were back to back, Neville with blood running down his face and one eye swollen shut, not letting it slow him down for a moment. Beyond them, Ginny and Daphne fought together, and not far off Narcissa was holding her own — beside her was a familiar head of long dark hair and a rakish grin, wand moving with almost lazy grace. *Sirius*. He was still alive, still fighting. Thank Merlin for that.

Harry grinned viciously, and raised his wand to his throat. "LORD VOLDEMORT IS DEAD!" he announced, amplified by a Sonorous charm. "IF YOU SURRENDER NOW, YOU WILL BE TAKEN ALIVE."

Cheers went up, echoing back as far as the castle itself, but Harry didn't have time to celebrate. At the announcement, the Death Eaters began to panic. Many of them turned back towards the property line, but the heirs weren't having that — with no need to fake Harry's weakness, they locked the wards down tight, banishing the dementors and preventing any of the Death Eaters from getting away. They were not going to let them run and pretend they had never been part of this travesty.

Some took his words to heart, dropping their wands and raising their hands in surrender — those ones were Stunned and bound. Others went down fighting, raging at losing their master, trying to take down as many people as they could with them. Harry threw himself back into the midst of it all, Snape at his side this time. He was starting to flag, he could feel it, but he kept pushing just that little bit further, not wanting to lose a single person more now they were so close to the end.

And at last, Hogwarts was quiet.

Harry stood up straight, sucking in a deep breath — the air tasted of ash and ozone and blood. Or perhaps it was his mouth that tasted of blood, he wasn't sure.

"Harry!" He turned, just in time to catch the body that slammed into him, meet the mouth that pressed urgently to his. Draco tasted of blood, too, but Harry didn't care, letting all his relief out into that kiss. "You did it," Draco gasped when they parted, clutching his shoulders. "You're alive."

"So are you." Harry grinned, hugging him tight, feeling the tears sting at his eyes. If nothing else, he had Draco.

All across the battlefield, similar reunions were happening. The quiet was broken; this time by shouts of joy and relieved sobbing, as loved ones found each other and relished in being alive.

More people converged on Harry. Sirius hugged him so tight his feet left the ground, babbling about how proud he was. Neville grinned at him despite his bloodied and beaten face, before being knocked to the ground by an enthusiastic Ginny who seemed to have lost half of her hair and possibly the tip of her ear in the battle.

Harry tried not to panic, at the faces he didn't see. The house elves had been fast in moving injured fighters off the battlefield; they could be up in the Hospital Wing, already healed. There was *no need to panic*.

He looked back, seeing Snape's eyes scanning the crowd, looking for the same head of greying tawny hair that Harry had noticed was missing. Harry reached out, grabbing Sirius by the shoulder. "Where's Remus?" he asked urgently. Sirius looked at him, then looked at Snape, who had whipped round at the name.

"Last I saw him, he was defending a couple of kids from a troll," the dog animagus said. "He was bleeding a bit, but still standing. Severus, I'm sure he's fine."

Snape's lips tightened, but he nodded.

Harry went light-headed all of a sudden, the spike of fear for his other godfather sending his pulse skyrocketing. He vaguely heard Draco call his name, before there was a sharp *twist* in his stomach, then he was bent double and expelling the contents of his stomach onto the grass. His head pounded, but strangely he felt a lot better, and he was grinning as he straightened up. "I'm fine," he insisted, seeing stars in his vision only for a moment or two. "I'm fine."

"Is this a bad time?" It was Kingsley, hurrying over — his battle robes looked a little charred in places, but he was otherwise unharmed. And behind him stood Amelia Bones.

"Oh, thank fuck you two made it," Harry blurted, "we'll finally have a competent government."

Kingsley blinked, while Amelia looked like she was fighting a smile. "That's the hope," she agreed wryly. "We came to tell you we're headed to the Ministry with a few others who are up for it — reclaiming the building, spreading the word. We have to move quickly."

Harry was impressed that they had the energy to jump straight in to such a thing. "That's good. With any luck, he'll have left it mostly empty." Harry couldn't see Voldemort leaving behind potential cannon fodder in his siege of Hogwarts.

"That's what we're hoping. But we're going armed and ready all the same. If anyone feels up to joining us, we'd gladly take some extra wands," Amelia added, looking around the mismatched group.

“I’ll go,” Sirius volunteered. Harry narrowed his eyes at him. “I’ll come back safe, I promise.” He leaned in, kissing Harry’s forehead. “Get some rest, pup. You’ve earned it.” As he squared his shoulders, he winked at Snape. “Look after our boys ’til I get back, Severus.”

Snape placed a hand on Harry’s shoulder, nodding tersely, ignoring the many people staring incredulously at him for the exchange.

Kingsley, Amelia and Sirius all hurried off, and Harry and Neville shared a sheepish look as they both realised at once that they were still holding the wards too tight; no one would be able to get out. Harry eased his grip on the presence in his mind, feeling Hogwarts relax in turn.

That connection felt stronger, too, now that he was of age. Was that normal, or a side effect of being connected to the Wardstone during his maturation?

He and Neville would find out, he supposed.

“I have so many questions right now,” Ginny said, staring at the long-fingered hand on Harry’s shoulder. “But quite frankly I’m too tired to give a shit.”

Harry snorted, swaying ever so slightly. “Tell me about it,” he agreed. His mouth still tasted of bile, and he grimaced, shooting a Cleaning charm at it. His magic surged up happily, but his whole body ached with the force of it, surprising him with the flare of pain and vertigo. Draco’s quick arm around his waist was the only thing that stopped him from falling flat on his face.

“Okay, that’s it, inside time for you,” the blond murmured. “I need to check you over — I can see you bleeding in at least four places, and I dread to think what else is wrong that you haven’t even noticed yet.”

Considering Harry could only feel two places he knew he was bleeding, that was probably a fair assessment.

The castle wasn’t far off, but to Harry’s exhausted body it felt like miles. Still, he’d had worse, so he kept on walking, leaning heavily against Draco’s side.

He could sleep for a week, after this.

. . .

The work didn’t end when the battle was won.

With many of the still-fit fighters off with Kingsley and Amelia to reclaim the Ministry and spread the word, those who remained did what they could. Those with any knowledge of healing magic tended to their own wounds and the minor wounds of those around them, all in unspoken agreement that the Hospital Wing should be saved for serious injuries. Anything not life threatening could wait a bit.

Someone must have told those seeking refuge that it was over, because Harry could see students who were definitely not of age, and adults who had not been involved in the fighting

— they were headed outside, helping those who needed assistance coming in, helping repair any damage done. Helping deal with the dead.

Harry sat on a bench in the corner of the Great Hall, leaning back against the table as Draco scanned him for injuries. The blond's familiar, soothing magic washed over him, knitting together the skin pierced by the shattered door, and the other bleeding wounds he wasn't sure how he'd acquired. He felt something pop in his chest and wondered at what point he'd broken a rib. Draco's expression was more exasperated than anything else.

"Drink this," he ordered, holding out a potion vial. Harry necked it back without even looking. "And this." The second one went down as easily as the first — that was a Pepper Up, he could feel it already, the steam gushing through his ears as the false energy raced through his system.

"I'm gonna crash *so hard* after this," Harry said, and Draco snorted.

"You won't be the only one. Your magical core is all over the place, so for my peace of mind, please try not to do anything excessive or ridiculous for the next twenty-four hours?"

"Yes, dear." Harry pecked him on the lips. "How are you? Do you need healing?" Green eyes narrowed in concern, but Draco waved him off.

"Nothing I haven't already dealt with." His lips pursed, and he turned. "For Salazar's sake, Neville, get over here and let me heal that, it hurts just to look at you."

Harry tilted his head back, grinning somewhat dazedly, seeing Neville approach sheepishly and sit beside Harry. Draco happily got to work, and Harry took the opportunity to look around the hall.

They weren't the only ones who had come inside to lick their wounds. The house tables had been pushed aside like they often were for training, but people were sat on the benches, or on the floor, or up at the staff table. Harry was relieved to see McGonagall up there, her hair having escaped from its usual tight bun but otherwise seemingly unscathed.

In the centre of the hall, things weren't so light. Through lack of other options, they had chosen to lay their dead out there, covered by conjured white sheets but with faces left visible so they could be identified by their loved ones. There were more than a few sobbing clusters around white sheets. Even more still being brought in on stretchers.

"Charlie!" Ginny was off like a shot as her brother limped into the room, leaning very heavily against Viktor Krum. The Bulgarian seeker seemed to have a broken nose, dried blood sticking to his chin and all down the front of his robes. Between the two of them, they looked like they'd had a particularly bad quidditch accident.

Charlie's eyes filled with relief at the sight of his little sister. "Ginny, thank Merlin!" He let her hug him gently — his arm that wasn't around Viktor was hanging at an unnatural angle.

Harry caught Viktor's eye, beckoning the man over. Draco was already up on his feet, finished with Neville's face, and he laid Charlie out on the tabletop with confident

movements. Looking at him, Harry couldn't help but smile faintly — he could certainly see the blond a few years from now, wearing those awful lime green robes, working that firm-but-efficient bedside manner on patients.

"Harry," Charlie sighed out, wincing when Draco reset his shoulder in place. "Have you seen Sirius?"

"He went with Kings and Amelia to go retake the Ministry. He promised he'd come back in one piece."

Charlie scowled, though that might have been the pain of having several broken fingers reset. "He'd fucking better," he muttered.

"What the hell happened to you, anyway?" Harry asked.

"Edward Parkinson. Thought he'd torture me a little before killing me," Charlie explained hollowly. "Viktor here saved my life."

Harry took that to mean Parkinson was dead. Pansy would be pleased.

Ginny burst into tears, hugging Viktor tightly around the waist. "Thank you," she rasped. Viktor pat her on the back awkwardly.

"I am glad I made it in time," he said simply, making Harry wonder just how close a call Charlie had had. His stomach squirmed just thinking about it.

His gaze shifted back to the mourners in the middle of the hall. More and more bodies had been brought in, but it seemed like the flow had stopped now. Dare he hope that was it?

Other than those in the Hospital Wing who couldn't be saved, of course.

An urge rose within him. He didn't want to, felt panic claw its way around his heart, but at the same time he *had* to.

He had led them into this mess. He had to lead them through the hard parts, too. He stood up, ignoring his friends' concerned calls, walking on shaky legs towards the middle of the hall.

The first few faces he saw, lax in death, were strangers. He moved slowly down the row, reluctantly dragging his eyes from one to the next, waiting to see a face that utterly floored him.

He recognised Emmeline Vance, one of the Order members. Then, further down the line, a girl he knew to be a Ravenclaw seventh year, though he wasn't sure of her name.

But beside that girl was a body that hit Harry like a punch to the gut. "No," he gasped, staring down at Colin Creevey's still, lifeless form. The boy's blue eyes, usually so bright and full of joy, stared blankly up at the ceiling.

Harry staggered — and the body that caught him was surprisingly strong, for its frailty. "You did everything you could, Potter," McGonagall whispered, holding him by the shoulders, her

voice firm. “You gave him the best chance you could. Sometimes, even that isn’t enough.”

“He was sixteen,” Harry croaked, and McGonagall’s lips thinned.

“He was. But he died taking a curse for his younger brother, and I cannot imagine a nobler death.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “Dennis.” Their youngest fighter by far, a boy who never should have been on the battlefield to begin with. All of them had lost their arguments in convincing the kid to stay in the castle. Harry had hoped a house elf would grab him and put him safely in Hufflepuff, but clearly that was not the case. “Where is he?”

“Sleeping off a concussion, as far as I’m aware. A troll knocked him on the head.”

Harry winced. Straightening up, he turned back to the sheet-covered bodies, but McGonagall didn’t let him go. “Don’t torture yourself, Potter,” she urged. He shook her off.

“I need to know.” He needed to check that his family was not there, lying dead on the stone tiles.

McGonagall pursed her lips once more, but walked by his side all the same.

It seemed Colin was the first of many familiar faces. Padma Patil, Wayne Hopkins. Two seventh year Hufflepuffs. Professor Sinistra. Seamus Finnegan.

But for a battle mainly fought by students, most of the casualties seemed to be adults. Then again, Harry had been preparing his students for this far longer than any of the adults even realised.

Finally, he reached the end of the double row of bodies. Not nearly as many as he had feared. He hoped that meant they had done well for numbers, and not just that the Hospital Wing was overrun. He had to get up there, look for the rest of his family...

He looked up at McGonagall, seeing the deep furrows in her brow and around her mouth, her age made worse by her grief. She had probably taught every single one of those bodies, at some time or another. “Is there anything I can do?” he asked. McGonagall smiled sadly, her eyes softening more than Harry had ever seen from her.

“I quite think you’ve done enough, for now, don’t you?” she murmured. She squeezed his shoulders. “You should be proud of all you have done, Mr Potter. Not just today, but everything it took you to get here. Everything I missed right under my nose — like the reason Severus Snape is watching you like a mother duck with a wayward duckling,” she added, raising an eyebrow. Harry flushed. “I should very much like to hear how all this came to pass, one day. But not now. Now, you should get some rest. You’ve done your part, let us old hands do ours, hmm?”

There was a weariness in her gaze that made Harry wonder how many times she had done something like this; cleaned up the aftermath of death and destruction, looked at the dead bodies of her former or current students.

Never again. Harry would make sure of it.

“Okay,” he agreed — he was exhausted, after all. “But, if I’m needed...”

“Word will be sent,” McGonagall assured, though by the look on her face Harry doubted anything short of the castle collapsing would be enough of an emergency to warrant her calling for him.

She sent him on his way with a gentle push, and Harry went back towards Snape and the rest.

“Who?” Ginny asked simply, looking at his face. She was leaning against Neville, his hand clutched in both of hers.

“Seamus,” he said, watching pain fill both their eyes. “Padma. And... and Colin.”

Ginny sucked in a sharp breath. “No.”

“I’m sorry, Gin.” Harry knew they were friends; year mates, bonding first over a mild obsession with Harry Potter and then through other things, the HA only strengthening that bond.

“Does Dennis know?” she asked, tears filling her eyes. Harry nodded.

“McGonagall said Colin took a curse for him. That’s how... that’s how it happened.”

Ginny blinked furiously, clenching her jaw, throat bobbing as she swallowed thickly. “Then it’s how he would have wanted,” she croaked. Neville put an arm around her, kissing her half-shorn hair.

“I’m so sorry, Gin.”

“Harry.” Draco’s quiet, solemn voice made him turn. “We should go upstairs,” he said, and at first Harry thought he was suggesting sleep, but then the blond continued. “I haven’t seen Mother since... she went down from a Bone-Breaker at the very end of the battle, someone getting one last shot at Lucius Malfoy’s wife,” he snarled. “I need to know she’s okay.”

“Of course. You should have said sooner.” He looked back at their cluster at the table; Charlie looked better now, sat up and rolling out his sore shoulder. “We’re going to the Hospital Wing. Seeing who we can find.”

“Sounds good,” Neville said. “I think we’re gonna sit here for a bit.”

Ginny didn’t look in any state to move, still reeling from the news of Colin’s death.

Harry and Draco headed for the doors, and Snape moved into step beside them. He was taking Sirius’ instruction very seriously, it seemed.

The whole way up to the Hospital Wing, Harry was mentally convincing himself that even if he didn’t see people, there was no reason to panic. There was plenty of activity still going on

— people cleaning up outside, or off at the Ministry, or just taking a private moment for themselves to decompress. Harry could understand that urge.

And yet, the flurry of red hair that he saw upon entering the Hospital Wing almost made him faint with relief.

They didn't even seem to be patients — Mrs Weasley was bustling from bed to bed, handing out cups of tea, while Fred and George appeared to be working on healing some people. Ron was sat beside a bed that held Hermione, a bandage creeping up her neck and shoulder. That was still a few Weasleys short. Thinking over the group, Harry was sure they had to be with the Ministry lot — Percy, and Arthur, and Bill and Fleur. They would want to be involved in that.

“Mother!” Draco half-dragged Harry over to a bed, where Narcissa Malfoy was sat up and drinking tea, her leg propped up on a pillow.

“Oh, my darling boys,” she greeted happily. “All three of you! I’m so glad to see you.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Snape’s face turn quietly disgruntled at being referred to as one of her ‘darling boys’.

And then the man seemed to drain of colour entirely.

Harry followed his gaze to a bed in the corner, in which lay a worryingly still Remus Lupin.

“Severus!” Narcissa’s sharp voice wrenched the man from his daze. “He’s alright,” she assured, gentler this time. “He was awake earlier. He got mildly crushed by a dead troll, so I’m told, but managed to hold it up so a student was not flattened to death. It all sounds rather heroic indeed.” Her lips curled at the corners. “Strains, bruises and a broken collarbone; nothing Madame Delacour could not fix. I believe he’s only out from exhaustion — you could go and wake him, if you like.”

Snape stayed put, fists clenched at his sides, torn between going to Remus and sticking with the boys he’d sworn to protect. Harry reached out, putting a gentle hand on his arm. “Go to him,” he urged. “I promise, Draco and I are just going up to the dorm after this. Shower and sleep, nothing dangerous. We’ll be fine. He needs you more than we do, Sirius will understand.”

After a beat of indecision, Snape nodded, and strode off to go and sit beside Remus’ bed, carefully shaking his un-bandaged shoulder. Harry held his breath until he saw the werewolf’s eyes flicker open, saw him smile broadly at the sight of Snape unharmed.

They didn’t embrace, or kiss, or even hold hands. But that didn’t mean a thing compared to the love and relief on Remus’ face, or the small but genuine smile on Snape’s.

It was a good thing no one was paying attention but Harry.

“Word has been sent to St Mungo’s.” Narcissa’s voice drew him back to the conversation. “There should be more healers coming through as soon as the floo is back up and running.”

"That's good." Poor Madam Pomfrey looked rushed off her feet. "I... have you seen Hannah?" He couldn't see the Hufflepuff heir anywhere in the ward. Perhaps she was behind one of the curtained-off beds?

"Dobby moved her to a private room, once she was done at the Wardstone," Narcissa assured. "Madam Pomfrey checked on her a little while ago; she's sleeping. Which is exactly what you two should be doing," she added sternly.

"I had to see you were alright," Draco protested. Narcissa patted his hand.

"And now you have, so you can go to bed."

"If you insist, Mother." Draco leaned down, kissing her cheek. "We'll see you later."

Harry was starting to lose his already tentative hold on his awareness, dazedly saying goodbye to Narcissa and letting Draco lead him away. He was mentally cognisant enough to pull up a shortcut to Gryffindor — though how much of that was him and how much was the castle, he couldn't be sure. The Fat Lady tutted sympathetically, swinging open to let them in, and Harry stumbled through the portrait hole on clumsy legs. Draco chuckled, arm sliding around his waist.

"Come on, love. Let's go try not to drown you in the shower, yeah?"

Getting up the stairs was a battle in itself, and Harry very much wanted to just collapse in bed, but Draco cajoled him through to the bathroom, vanishing Harry's tattered robes with a spell. Harry blinked, suddenly naked, and began to shiver violently. "Oh, and there's the shock; I've been waiting for that," Draco murmured, more to himself than Harry. He turned on the shower and stripped himself with another spell, nudging Harry under the spray.

He couldn't feel the heat of the water. Could barely feel Draco gently scrubbing the blood off his skin, trailing worried fingers over his bruises and brand new scars. Knew enough to tip his head back to rinse the suds from his hair when Draco lathered it up. Latched onto the blond like an octopus while Draco washed his own hair and body efficiently.

Once the shower was off, Harry was wrapped in a fluffy red towel, and a spell dried his hair and body. "S gonna look ridiculous tomorrow," he complained, brain stuttering over putting one foot in front of the other but somehow remembering how frizzy his hair went when dried magically.

Draco snorted. "Of course that's your priority. Daft lion." He led Harry back out, still completely naked himself, long past the point of caring about modesty.

A near-feral sounding groan ripped from Harry's lungs at the sight of his bed, and Draco barely managed to jerk the duvet back with a twitch of his fingers before Harry was face-planting straight into it. The towel was removed, which made him whine, but then Draco slipped in beside him, tugging the duvet up to their shoulders. Harry burrowed into his side, clinging tightly. Over Draco's shoulder, he caught sight of the alarm clock on his night stand.

It was ten past nine in the morning.

Only seven hours since the moment they had dropped the wards. Seven hours, and so many lives lost.

The dam broke, the first sob escaping him — a raw, painful thing, shaking his shoulders and making his whole head ache, tearing through him worse than any spell he'd taken that morning. Once he started, he couldn't stop, sobbing hideously into Draco's chest, tears and snot and the whole shebang, blubbering his apologies; to Draco for making a mess, and to Colin and Padma and everyone else for not being fast enough, not being strong enough, just not being *enough*.

Draco stroked his hair, and hugged him tight, and didn't make a single comment about the snot. He just kept holding him, his own tears coming more quietly, a release of all the fears he'd ever had in his entire life. The fear of losing his mother, the fear of losing *Harry*, the fear of having to bow to Lord Voldemort and act like he meant it.

Those fears were a thing of the past.

It was this way that the two boys eventually fell asleep, tangled so close together it looked almost painful, their eyes puffy and their shredded hearts slowly beginning to piece themselves back together.

They had survived, and that was the important part.

Chapter End Notes

I thought about dragging this out over multiple chapters but, quite frankly, I hate writing battle scenes lmao. Still, we've got a little ways to go before this story is fully put to bed!

Chapter 105

Harry slept for almost an entire day. And when he woke up, he *hurt*.

A low groan bubbled from his lips, and he heard a soft chuckle above him, fingers running through his hair. “Sleeping Beauty awakens,” Draco teased in a fond whisper.

The blond was propped up on the pillows, Harry’s head on his chest. Harry wasn’t wearing his glasses so everything was a little fuzzy, but he thought Draco was smiling when he craned his neck up.

“Time izzit?” Harry rasped, his voice hoarse. His head was pounding, his face and throat and even *ears* hurt — probably all the crying, he realised belatedly.

“Half six.” Harry frowned; that wasn’t *that* long. “In the morning.”

Oh.

Slowly, Harry sat up, rubbing at his eyes and rolling his stiff shoulders. His body definitely *felt* like he had been through a battle. “I’ve been out the whole day?” he realised, tensing suddenly. “What did I miss? How is everyone? Sirius—“ Draco cut him off with a kiss, thumb stroking the back of his neck soothingly.

“Is fine,” he promised. “I woke up last night around eight, called him on the mirror, had something to eat.”

At the mention of food, Harry’s stomach rumbled viciously. Draco snickered. “Should we call for breakfast in bed?”

It was tempting. Very, very tempting. But now Harry was awake, awareness slowly returning to him, he wanted to move. He’d never slept so long in his *life*, and even though his limbs were sore he knew they’d feel better once he got up and walked around a bit.

And he wanted to see what had happened, in the time he’d been asleep. A whole *day*, when there was still so much to be done — how could everyone let him sleep so long?!

“Let’s go downstairs,” he decided, reaching for his glasses, setting them on his face just in time to catch Draco’s frown.

“Are you sure? It’s early; people might not be up.”

“The elves will.” Harry wanted to thank them, for all their help during the battle. Many more people likely would have died without their intervention.

Draco sighed, but didn’t argue when Harry rolled out of bed, searching for some clothes.

Careful not to wake Neville and Ginny, who were fast asleep and hadn’t even bothered to raise the partition before passing out, the two boys dressed and crept from the room. With a

quick detour to the bathroom so Harry could wash his face in an attempt to feel more human, they went downstairs to the common room. To Harry's surprise, Fleur was up, curled in an armchair by the fire. She smiled widely at the sight of them. "Harry!" she greeted, quiet but excited. "It is good to see you well. You too, Draco."

"Same to you," Harry said vehemently, feeling a rush of relief at the sight of her. "You're okay? And—and all the family?"

"All Weasleys present and accounted for," she confirmed, grin playing at her lips. "Percy lost a few fingers, and Arthur will need to rest for a few days — Bludgeoning 'ex to the ribs,' she elaborated. "But everyone is alive. Blaise and Angelina and Sirius are alive. And my parents, though Papa is in the 'ospital Wing. He lost a lot of blood." At Harry's look of concern, she shook her head. "No, no, he is fine. I think he enjoys the chance for Maman's attention," she added teasingly.

"Well that's alright, then," Harry said with a chuckle. "That's... that's really good." An enormous weight off his chest, to hear the family made it through relatively unscathed. There were so many of them, he had worried it was too much to ask for everyone to survive... but they had trained well, and had a hell of a lot to live for. They were fighters.

They left Fleur to her quiet morning, the summer sun already mostly risen. There weren't many people in the corridors at such an hour, but the few they did pass grinned widely at Harry, nodding their heads in respect.

In the kitchens, the elves cried joyously at the sight of them, and then cried even more when Harry thanked them. Dobby wailed about how great a wizard Harry Potter sir was, and obligingly fetched them tea and toast and fruit — nothing too heavy, not on Harry's already confused system.

After that, Harry knew there was one more place he had to go.

The Great Hall was no longer a makeshift mausoleum. The bodies had been moved — where to he wasn't sure — and the house tables had been reset. A surprising number of people were up and about, and the moment Harry walked through the door, they were on their feet and applauding.

Harry froze like a deer in headlights, hand clamping down on Draco's, entirely unsure how to respond. Why were they applauding him? They had all fought too! They had worked just as hard! Just because he'd been the one to get Voldemort in the end...

Thankfully, Harry spotted Sirius and Charlie at the Gryffindor table, and hurried towards them as the applause died down. Sirius beamed at him, opening his arms to wrap Harry in a hug once he sat down.

"I'm surprised to see you two up," Draco commented, and Charlie shrugged.

"Woke up a little after five, couldn't get back to sleep. Our schedules are gonna be a bit wonky for the next few days anyway." He sipped at what smelled like very strong coffee.

“How are you feeling, pup?” Sirius asked, grey eyes concerned.

“Not too bad.” He wasn’t going to be playing quidditch any time soon, that was for sure, but he couldn’t feel any real injuries. Draco had done an excellent job patching up, and he said as much, just to make the boy blush. “My magic feels weird.” It was hard to describe; it felt simultaneously sluggish and wired, far more *present* than he was used to.

“Yeah, that’ll likely even out in the next few days. You overdid it right after your maturation, that always screws with the system. That’s why they tell you not to do it,” Sirius added, snorting at Harry’s rueful expression.

“Didn’t have much of a choice, did I?” he shot back. Sirius sobered, ruffling Harry’s hair.

“You did wonderfully, kiddo,” he murmured, brimming with pride. “Couldn’t have asked any more of you.”

That brought a lump to Harry’s throat, and he blinked away the tears that threatened to spill. How could Sirius say that, when so many people had died?

Draco poked him hard in the side. “Get that look off your face,” he scolded. “You’re not responsible for every person who walked on that battlefield, the same way I’m not responsible for every person who needed healing out there. Agreed?”

Well, there was little Harry could do to argue that.

As the morning stretched on, Sirius relayed everything that had happened after they had parted the day before. The Ministry had indeed been mostly empty, and it hadn’t been difficult to separate out the genuine Dark loyalists with those who had just been too scared to go against it. The Ministry had been reclaimed, and Kingsley and Tonks — who Harry hadn’t seen yet, and was relieved to hear was alive — had arranged for all the surviving Death Eaters from the battle to be contained at the Ministry holding cells, their wands snapped if they hadn’t been already. It amused Harry to hear that almost no Death Eaters had wands intact by the time the battle ended; the HA had very much taken that lesson to heart, the ruthless little blighters.

So the word had started to spread around the country, the owls of Hogwarts put to good use as people sent letters to loved ones in hiding. It would take a while, for everyone to return to their homes — if they still had homes — and to pick up the pieces of their lives, but they had time now. They had peace.

The later it got, the more people began to show up. The tables filled with an assortment of breakfast foods as if it were a normal school morning, and Harry was so ravenous from his extended sleep he ate a whole second breakfast while chatting with Cassius and Oliver. The keeper apparently had some new scars from a Flaying curse, but it was nothing permanent. He kept sending adoring looks at Cassius, detailing to anyone who would listen how the man had jumped in to save him from certain death.

Harry was startled when the post arrived — for some reason he’d forgotten entirely that such things still happened. Letters had been so rare for the last month, everyone too worried about

interception.

A copy of the *Daily Prophet* fell to the table in front of Sirius, and Harry groaned loudly at the front page.

'Boy-Who-Lived becomes Man-Who-Defeated. You-Know-Who dead, Ministry reclaimed.'

"They couldn't come up with a better nickname?" Harry complained, glaring at the paper.
"'Man-Who-Defeated', Merlin, that's even more of a mouthful than the last."

"At least you're a man now," Charlie pointed out amusedly. "Won't have to live with being called a boy forever."

That was hardly a glowing endorsement, and Harry continued to scowl, eyeing the picture of him stood bloodied and dishevelled in the midst of all the destruction, his wand at his side. When the hell had someone even gotten that picture? Who brought a camera to a battle?

Sirius spread the paper out over the table so everyone could read it — inside, there was a long article recounting the battle from someone who had apparently been '*in the centre of the action*', though Harry didn't recognise the name in the byline. To their credit, it was a fairly accurate account of things. A lot of it was information that was brand new to Harry; he'd been a bit single-minded at the time, and hadn't noticed a lot of what was going on around him. He hadn't known about the troll that made it all the way to the castle walls only to be slaughtered by the animated suits of armour, or the house elf that had bludgeoned Amycus Carrow to death with a cast-iron pan. From the description of the elf, it was very likely Dobby. Harry hadn't realised his small friend was so bloodthirsty.

For eight pages the article went on about the battle, and then it led into a much shorter description of the reclaiming of the Ministry — no one involved had wanted to share details, it seemed. At the end, a full page was taken up with a request for all those employed by the Ministry prior to the Dark Lord's insurrection to come into the office at their earliest convenience, to reclaim their jobs and begin dealing with the mess. It also stated, to Harry's delight, that Amelia Bones had been made interim Minister, and there would be a formal election as soon as such things could be arranged.

That delight quickly faded, however, when he turned to the final pages of the paper, and found the obituaries.

It was nothing detailed. A list of names, split into two sections; those who died fighting for the Light, and those who died wearing the garb of Death Eaters. The latter section was much larger, but it still made Harry's heart ache to see a whole twenty-nine names in the former section. He couldn't tear his eyes away from the neat printed letters; *Colin Creevey, Hogwarts Student, 16.*

Far, far too young.

Harry was startled out of his reverie by a commotion up at the staff table — a red-faced and crying man was being held back by two of his fellows as he tried to lunge at Professor Snape, who had just left the table. Rage flaring within him, Harry was up like a shot, hurrying over.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” he roared, raising his wand in defence of Snape, placing himself between the two.

“Even you’re defending him!” the man spat. “How the hell is he just sitting there, easy as you please — he should be in the cells with all the other Death Eater scum! We all saw him yesterday, right at his *master*’s side, the perfect little lap dog. We’ve all known for years about his true loyalties! Murdering piece of shit!”

The man tried to lunge again, but was held back, though there was a slowly gathering crowd behind them who looked like they may share the man’s sentiments. Harry’s stomach curdled — in all his relief, he had almost forgotten about this part.

“Severus Snape has been spying on the Dark for longer than I’ve been alive!” Harry growled. “He was with Voldemort yesterday because that was exactly where *I* needed him to be. Did you ever think that maybe there were plans going on that you weren’t fucking privy to?”

The man didn’t falter. “He’s got you right fooled, hasn’t he, Potter? Wrapped around his slimy little finger, believing he was on your side all along. He’s a traitorous little worm and he deserves to rot for everything he’s done!”

“*Everything he’s done?*” Harry repeated incredulously. “Do you mean all the Death Eater raids he informed the Order about in time for them to send help? Or the misinformation he gave to Voldemort for years? Or do you mean training me himself for the last three years so I would actually have the ability to last long enough to off the bastard?” He sneered, watching the man go from very red to very pale in a matter of moments. “I don’t need to explain myself to you,” he added hotly, “but safe to say Severus Snape is the only reason I was able to kill Voldemort— *STOP FLINCHING*, it’s just a name, he’s bloody dead!” he snapped, seeing how many people still shuddered every time he said it. “There’s more to this situation than you know, so don’t start thinking you have the right to judge him when you know *nothing*. Hell, he’s more of a hero than I am!”

The man still glared at Snape over Harry’s shoulder. “How do you know you can trust him? How can you put your faith in that greasy little turncoat? You say he wasn’t the Dark Lord’s — then he was Dumbledore’s man for a bloody long time; how do you know he isn’t going to kill you as soon as your back is turned?”

Harry opened his mouth to argue, but before he could get even a word out, there was a loud bang.

Remus Lupin had shoved the door to the hall open so hard it hit the stone, and was stood in the open doorway, absolutely *fuming*. His eyes glowed a vibrant gold, lips pulled back in a snarl, and even with his left arm in a sling to protect his healing collarbone he still managed to look intimidating. “*Anyone*,” he growled, stalking down the aisle between the tables, “who wants to get at Severus Snape, is going to have to go through *me*.”

The man arguing with Harry scrambled back a step in fear as Remus placed himself protectively in front of Snape. “We did not spend eighteen bloody years hiding the truth for some whiny little idiot to damn Severus for crimes he was forced to commit just to keep people *alive*.” He puffed up as if his hackles were raising, glaring at the man, looking *exactly*

like the person who would lift a full grown troll corpse off a school child — and exactly like the werewolf he was, the predator everyone forgot he could be.

Then he straightened his back, gold eyes looking around the hall as if daring anyone else to try him. “I did not fight this goddamn war just to lose the man I love to your fucking prejudice.”

And then he turned on his heel, fisted his good hand in the front of Snape’s robes, and pulled him in for a fierce, passionate kiss.

Harry could do nothing but stare — Snape didn’t even argue, tilting his head for better access, arm sliding around Remus’ waist as the werewolf utterly devoured his mouth right there in front of everyone.

He’d known these men for *years*, known about their relationship, the truth of their lives, everything, and yet it was just hitting him now that he had never actually seen them kiss. Not more than a peck on the cheek, not in front of him, and always so careful never to get caught around the house unlike Sirius and Charlie, who didn’t give a single fuck.

Looking at them, Harry was sort of glad for that — if he’d seen them kiss, if they were always like *this*, back when he’d been a fourth year, well... it may have led to some very confusing dreams for him. *Damn*.

The hall was nothing but stunned silence. Until finally, a wolf-whistle pierced the air. “Put the man down, Moony!” Sirius called, barely holding in his laughter. “There are children about!”

Harry was sure that if his hands weren’t otherwise occupied, Remus would have flipped off his best friend there in front of everyone, but he did end the kiss, pulling back slowly and looking at Snape with so much love it made Harry’s breath catch. “I’ve waited all this time,” he said, still with a bit of the wolf in his voice, carrying clearly through the expanse of the hall. “They can’t have you. You’re *mine*.”

Snape’s kiss-swollen lips twisted in a smirk. “Yes, I think you’ve made that quite clear,” he agreed wryly.

Harry tore his eyes away, looking back at the man who had started the whole argument, who was utterly gobsmacked. “Walk away,” he warned, voice quiet but threat very clear. “Don’t involve yourself in situations you know *nothing* about.”

Finally, the man slumped, and allowed his fellows to lead him back to the table.

When Harry turned around, a smug grin took over his face, seeing Remus and Snape still in a loose embrace, Snape more dishevelled than Harry had ever seen him in public. “Well, that’s that cat out of the bag, then,” he remarked. Both men turned to look at him, Remus having the grace to look just barely embarrassed.

“It was going to happen sooner or later,” he said, shrugging, then wincing as he remembered he was still healing. “Can’t say I’m sorry about it.”

A quiet snort escaped Snape. “Of course you’re not,” he muttered, shooting his partner an exasperated look. “Damned fool Gryffindors.”

He didn’t sound mad about it. Harry laughed, hugging the pair of them, uncaring about all the eyes still on them. “I’m really glad you both made it out okay,” he said fiercely. He felt someone press a kiss to his hair.

“You and me both, cub,” Remus murmured. “You and me both.”

.-.-.

After that rather eventful morning, Hogwarts finally began to clear out a bit. Everyone was fairly fed up of being cooped up in the castle for the last month, and Harry was quietly relieved when he saw so many people packing up and heading out. He was really quite sick of being stared at.

Through lack of anything else to do, his body still weary and his brain still somewhat scrambled from everything that had happened in the last forty-eight hours, Harry remained seated at the Gryffindor table, watching the world pass him by. Occasionally someone stopped to talk — it seemed everyone wanted to thank him before they left the castle — but mostly he just sat with Draco and watched everyone else begin the day.

He was just contemplating making himself useful in the hour or so before lunch, when a throat cleared behind him. Susan Bones smiled at him, her left eye covered in patch made of yellow fabric dotted with tiny gold suns. “Susan!” he greeted, startled. “What happened?”

“Cutting curse to the face,” she relayed matter-of-factly. “Pomfrey healed the scar, but she couldn’t save my eye. It’s fine, though; doesn’t even hurt. I just keep bumping into things, my depth perception is shot to hell.” She gave a dismissive shrug. “Theo jazzed up my patch a bit, though, do you like it?”

Looking at the cheerful patch, thinking of the somewhat dour Slytherin, Harry grinned; that was unexpectedly adorable of him.

“It, uh, looks great. But that’s awful, I’m sorry.”

“It’s not that bad,” Susan insisted. “Still got the other one, after all! Anyway, I was hoping to catch you — Aunt Amelia is going to call a Wizengamot meeting tomorrow. She wants every eligible seat claimed proper, so we can start cleaning this mess up.”

“Oh,” Harry said, surprised. “That’s fast.”

Susan grinned. “You did your bit,” she replied, “it’s my turn now. We aren’t going to have a full session — there’s a whole lot of work to do before we can start fixing the laws around here — but it’ll be enough to get everyone sworn in and introduced and all that. Make the old relics who still have their seats aware that we’re coming for them.” She grinned a shark-like smile, eye gleaming eagerly.

For a brief moment, Harry felt very sorry indeed for the existing Wizengamot members.

A sudden thought struck him. “Have you asked McGonagall?” he asked, frowning. “I mean, she should be fine with it, but... half of us are still students, after all. It’s going to disrupt our studies, she should be aware of it.”

Susan frowned too. “I hadn’t thought of that,” she confessed. “You don’t think she’ll make us assign proxies, do you?”

“I doubt it. She knows enough to know we’ve been planning all sorts for a while, I think she’d be happy to let us just get on with it. Hell, I think we’ve all proven that external distractions won’t mess with our grades.”

That made the Hufflepuff girl laugh. “Fair point. Look, why don’t we gather everyone up, go find her in her office. Well,” she faltered, frowning. “Maybe not everyone. Parvati...”

Harry grimaced, that sharp grief returning. “How is she?”

“About as you’d expect. Lavender’s with her, so that’s helping a bit, but... I think she’s going to go home, as soon as the meeting’s over tomorrow. India-home, not England-home.” Susan’s lower lip wobbled.

“That— yeah. She should be with family.” He couldn’t imagine what it was like to lose a twin.

Sniffing quietly and shaking her head, Susan forced a smile back on her face. “Shall we go now, then? Do you know where McGonagall is?”

Harry rummaged through the castle’s wards. “She’s in her office. I’ll nudge everyone.” He sought out his friends, all the student heirs, pushing his magic through the wards to send them a prod and a mental image of McGonagall’s office.

Susan blinked, eyeing him weirdly. “That is *bizarre*, could you always do that?”

“I don’t think so? But I can now.” His connection to the castle was so much closer, now.

“Huh. I wonder if Hannah can do that.” She shrugged. “Not important. Let’s go. I— are you coming, Draco? Or is your mother going to keep holding proxy?”

When Harry stood, Draco stood with him. “She’ll keep proxy of all the other seats my father amassed — she’s still tracking down heirs for most of them — but the Malfoy seat is mine.”

“Perfect.” Susan linked arms with Harry. “She’s terrifying, your mum, so that works out well for us.”

Draco snickered. “I’m telling her you said that.”

“Please do. I meant it as a compliment.”

The three of them headed up to their headmistress’ office, and met up with the small crowd of other heirs at the door. Not all of them had come — some, like Hannah, were still in the Hospital Wing.

“Please don’t do that again, Harry,” Ernie said with a weary sigh. “I was in the shower and you frightened the life out of me.”

“Sorry,” came Harry’s sheepish reply. “Emergencies only in future, promise.”

Susan squeezed his hand, then stepped up to the door and knocked. “Come in!” McGonagall called, freezing in place when she saw how many students awaited her. She was sat at her desk, quill in hand, writing what looked like a stack of letters.

Condolence letters, Harry realised with a sick twist of his stomach, for the families of students who had fallen in battle.

“If you’re about to disrupt my day, Potter, you and your friends can come back in an hour,” she said flatly. Harry snorted.

“We’re not. At least I don’t think we are,” he promised. “We just need a quick word.”

All of them filed into the room, Susan almost tripping over the chair opposite the desk. She gave McGonagall the same information she’d given Harry, about the meeting gathering in the morning. “All of us are eligible to claim our seats, and fully intend to do so tomorrow. But Harry said we should run it by you first, since it means we’ll need to leave school sometimes and whatnot. I know Dumbledore *strongly encouraged* students to keep proxies until they graduated,” she made a face, “but that really isn’t going to sit well with us, Headmistress. All due respect, of course.”

McGonagall’s lips twitched. “Indeed,” she said dryly. “Well, Miss Bones, you’ll be pleased to hear that I have no intention of putting my nose in where it doesn’t belong; I am your headmistress, not your guardian. As long as your duties to your family do not begin to impede your studies, you’ll have no trouble from me or any of the staff about it.” Her eyes flashed. “It’s about time I took my own seat, after all.”

That reminded Harry of something he hadn’t even realised until that very moment. “What about the Hogwarts seats?” he blurted. “I— technically they’re ours. But they usually come with being head of the school...” Sure, they all had other seats of their own, but...

“If the founders’ magic has risen within you, it is for more reasons than just protecting this school from danger,” McGonagall said evenly. “Far be it from me to argue with that sort of magic. All four of you should claim your seats, as is your birthright. Though Miss Lovegood may need to come of age, first, despite the... interesting circumstances behind all this.”

“Luna’s making me her proxy,” Daphne volunteered. “If the hall allows it.”

Harry swallowed thickly, wondering if anyone had found Mr Ollivander yet.

“That’s settled, then,” McGonagall assented, nodding firmly. “I look forward to watching the lot of you turn the entire Ministry on its head.” The amusement returned in the barest curl of her smile. “Now, if you’ve nothing else to discuss, I have quite a lot of work to be getting on with.”

They left her to it, parting ways in the corridor as everyone returned to their plans for the day. Harry leaned against Draco, pressing his forehead to the blond's temple and breathing in deeply. "Do you need to lie down?" Draco asked worriedly, but Harry shook his head.

"No. No, I feel a lot better, actually." Susan's task had been just what he needed to kickstart his brain again, remind him that he couldn't start drifting into uselessness now. In some ways, the battle had just begun. "Let's go find Sirius. There's some things I need to get sorted."

Draco frowned, confused, but didn't argue.

.-.-.-

Perhaps Harry may have jumped the gun, just a little bit.

Between him and Sirius, they had a list of Black family properties currently being used as safehouses, and split it evenly between them — many of the people in hiding were not likely to trust a letter, or the *Prophet*. They would not leave until they could be absolutely sure things were safe for them.

So the pair of them left the castle together, and apparated separately to their first destinations. Technically Harry doing so was illegal, but he rather suspected the Ministry had bigger things to worry about.

One by one, he knocked on doors and greeted families, spreading the good news. He was hugged and cried on and thanked profusely, every house full of people whose eyes shone at the news they could finally rejoin the world.

His last stop was the Pottery, and by the time he got there he was somewhat light-headed from all the apparition jumps. Maybe it wasn't the best idea to expend such magical energy the day after nearly emptying his core fighting Voldemort.

But he was almost done now. Just this one, and then home.

As always, stepping through the Pottery wards felt like a warm hug, the whole place welcoming him home. A frisson of excitement ran through him at the possibility of soon making this place his *actual* home. Filling it with all the furniture from the Potter vaults, turning it into a space he could spend the rest of his life in. Build a family in.

There were a few kids running around the garden, making the most of the summer sunshine, and they skidded to a halt at the sight of Harry walking up the driveway.

"Can you round everyone up and come inside?" Harry called, catching Nashira's eye as she was the oldest of the group he could see. "I need to talk to everyone."

He hated the way her face hardened, clearly expecting the worst.

Harry entered the house, and immediately Essie and Tinker were in front of him. "Hi, guys. Could you get everyone in the house to the ballroom, please? Everyone in the tents, too."

The pair nodded eagerly, disappearing, and Harry headed straight for the largest room in the house.

The occupants gathered quickly, wary as they looked at Harry, hope creeping into their eyes at the smile on his face. He stood at the head of the room, waiting patiently until what looked like everyone was inside. It had to be at least seventy people — Merlin, he hadn't realised they'd crammed so many in!

"I'm guessing some of you have seen the *Prophet* this morning," he began, watching several sets of shoulders grow tense. "It's real. Lord Voldemort is dead; I killed him myself. The war is won."

A collective intake of breath, followed by a few murmured prayers. "All of you are free to go, if you wish. I'm going to give the Fidelius another week before I end it, just to give you all time to sort yourselves out. If you need to stay a little longer — if your home isn't in the same state you left it — that's absolutely fine. Take as long as you need to get back on your feet. There's no rush." He didn't want anyone to feel like he was kicking them out.

"It's the truth?" someone gasped, stunned. "It... it's finally over?"

Harry nodded. "We can't guarantee there isn't a Death Eater or two lying low somewhere, but we got all the ones who turned up at Hogwarts to fight. And we're working on straightening out the Ministry." Between Amelia and Kingsley, Harry was sure things would soon be put to rights, the staff thoroughly vetted — both for undercover Death Eaters, and for those just so corrupt and heartless that they aided the Dark for their own gain.

"What about us?" The small voice of Nashira, calling out clearly over the muttering. She was stood with her twin siblings and a huddle of other kids; all underage, and all with parents either missing or dead.

"Kingsley Shacklebolt is liaising with the muggle government to try and track down families of muggleborns who might have gone into hiding without using magic," Harry told the kids. "I'll be honest — we don't know how long it's going to take. But we're doing the best we can. If any of you have friends or cousins or other people you'd like to go and stay with, we can work out getting in touch with them. But all of you are welcome to stick around for the summer." Most of them would be going back to Hogwarts in September, now it was safe. Those who were too young even for that... by September, they would have figured out the guardianship situation. He hoped.

By the looks on their faces, Harry could see that at least the older children understood that there was a very high chance their parents wouldn't be found. Kingsley had said the muggles were pretty good at keeping track of deaths, especially those that had happened under suspicious circumstances in the last eighteen months — hopefully they could provide closure, if nothing else.

"We're in your debt, Mr Potter," Mr Pershore declared solemnly, squeezing through to the front of the crowd and dropping to one knee, holding his wand up in supplication. "If you need anything of the Pershore family, anything at all, it would be an honour to aid you."

At his words, several others kneeled as well, offering their wands. Harry coughed uncomfortably.

“There’s no need for any of that,” he insisted, fidgeting under the intensity of all that gratitude. “I just did what was right. If you really want to honour that, help us rebuild. Help each other rebuild. Magical Britain is a small community, in the scheme of things — we need to stick together.”

Luckily, that gained a general murmur of approval, and people got to their feet once more.

Now that Harry had confirmed the good news, the occupants of the Pottery jumped into action, the whole house buzzing with excitement as everyone made plans to return to their houses and contact their loved ones. Harry left them to it, smiling and promising to be in touch if anyone needed anything. At the edge of the wards, he gathered his tired magic for one last apparition.

The crack that heralded his return to Hogwarts was much louder than usual, but he was all in one piece, so Harry counted that as a win. At least, he did until he took a step forward and the world lurched sideways.

“Oh, dear.” A surprisingly strong arm linked through his, keeping him upright, and a delicate floral perfume tickled his nostrils.

Narcissa Malfoy smiled fondly at him, patting his cheek. “Overdone it a bit, have we?” she said knowingly. “I’ll save the lecture for my son.”

Harry groaned. “Do we have to tell him?”

Setting off towards the castle, Narcissa laughed. Harry tried not to lean on her too obviously as they walked. “You had better get used to it. My dragon is awfully protective of those he loves.”

“Understatement of the century,” Harry said, and she laughed again. “How were things at the Manor?” He knew Narcissa had gone to do much the same as him and Sirius — those staying at her house were even less likely to trust the word of the *Prophet*.

“They’re delighted, of course, but... many of them now have family to mourn, even if they’re really quite relieved that family is dead. It’s a difficult situation.”

Harry hummed in agreement, remembering how torn Draco had been when his father died. You could be aware that someone was a foul, bigoted prick, but that didn’t stop them being family. Didn’t stop you remembering the good times as well as the bad.

“At least they can start to move on, now,” he mused.

With the castle in sight, Harry took a moment to survey the grounds ahead. He hadn’t really given it a good look on his way out, too focused on Sirius and their plans. It was... well, it certainly looked like a war zone. All around them the grass was churned up, deep gouges of spellfire cutting through the earth, darker patches of what was definitely dried blood dotted

about the place. The lake seemed murkier, too, and Harry did a double-take at seeing a tentacle breach the surface of the water holding what looked like a troll leg.

At least the squid was having fun.

"It's nothing that can't be fixed," Narcissa said gently, following his gaze across the bare expanse of earth. "I believe Professor Sprout and your friend Neville are already discussing the best ways to return the grass to its former glory. There was even discussion of a flower garden, as a memorial."

Harry swallowed thickly. He'd like that a lot.

"While I have you to myself, darling, I wanted to thank you." Harry looked oddly at the blonde woman.

"What for?"

She let out an airy chuckle. "What for, he asks! Harry, my son is alive, my family is *safe*, and I am not facing persecution as a Death Eater. None of that would have happened had you not been involved."

"I didn't do all of that," Harry argued. "You stood up against the Death Eaters after Lucius died. You helped keep everyone safe, too."

"But I was only able to do so with the knowledge that I had Harry Potter in my corner. Your name carries a lot of weight, you know."

He blushed, uncomfortable with the reminder. "All I did was fall in love with Draco," he muttered abashedly. "The rest sort of just happened, after that."

Narcissa giggled, squeezing his arm, resting her head on his shoulder for just a moment. "Indeed. Then may I just say I am very, very glad you did so. And not just because it led to my own safety." She looked up at Harry, grey eyes softening, creasing at the corners. "I have never seen my son happier than when he is with you. It is all I ever wanted for him in the world, and more; to be loved as fiercely as he offers his own love. We Blacks can be rather... intense, with our emotions." Harry snorted; that was putting it lightly.

"He deserves all that love, and more. He deserves everything." Everything Harry could give him, and then some.

"As do you," Narcissa said, and his chest tightened. "You are family, Harry, and I will do everything I can to aid you and my son in building the future you have worked so hard to reach. However that future may look; you have my support."

A lump rose in Harry's throat, his heart filling with an unexpected burst of warmth. "I have a ring," he blurted before he could help himself. "From the Potter vaults. I... he thinks he's going to be the one to propose, but I..."

Narcissa chuckled, mischief flashing in her eyes. "Yes, I daresay that will ruffle his feathers a bit, getting beaten to the punch." Harry held his breath, stopping in his tracks, as Narcissa

took his hand and met his gaze. “You have my blessing, Harry. Not that I think you need it, but if there was any doubt in your mind — I cannot think of anyone better suited to my son than you.”

He swallowed hard. His eyes itched. “Thank you,” he rasped. “I— that’s good to know.” Narcissa was right, he would have done it regardless of her opinions, but... he would much rather have her on board.

“You silly thing,” she tutted, kissing his forehead. “As if I would turn you away. Sirius and Andi would never speak to me again, for one!”

A choked laugh erupted from Harry’s lips, and Narcissa gently urged him forward once more. “Come on, darling. If I’m not mistaken, it looks like there might be a party brewing.”

Harry blinked, looking up at the castle, the illuminated windows shining brightly in the gold-hued evening light.

A party sounded nice. But a nap sounded better.

.-. .

Luckily, Harry got his nap — Draco took one look at his ashen face and marched him right up to bed, muttering all the while about foolish Gryffindor idiots who didn’t know their own limits.

Draco napped with him, cuddling him close above the blankets, the window open to let in a cool breeze and the sound of birdsong. It was perfect.

They woke in time for a late dinner, and came down to the Great Hall to find that a party had indeed been brewing, and was now in full swing.

There were just two tables left in the hall, both laden with mouthwatering food, and Harry eagerly took a seat beside Ginny and began piling his plate high. “I like the hair,” he complimented. She beamed.

Where the night before it had been tufted and slightly charred, the left side of her hair at all sorts of ragged lengths in the wake of whatever spell had caught her, now it had been cleaned up a bit, made to look intentional — the side of her head was shaved to a soft red fuzz up to her side-parting, a juxtaposition with the fiery curtain of hair on her right side. It looked incredibly *cool*, and Harry wondered if she was about to start a new trend.

“Tonks did it!” Ginny enthused. “I actually really love it — I’d been thinking about changing up my hair, y’know. Wasn’t planning on something quite as drastic as this, but it looks way better than I expected. And feel how soft it is!” She grabbed his hand, lifting it up to stroke the shaved side of her head. It was indeed velvet-soft. “Fleur’s mum got my ear grown back, too!”

Harry hadn’t even noticed that; the entire top half of her ear had regrown, not quite the same shape it once was, but present all the same. “Congrats.” He tweaked the ear gently, making

Ginny scowl and duck away, laughing.

It looked like just about everyone who had come to the castle for refuge had left it now the world was safe for them — looking around the room, Harry only saw his family and friends, and those who fought alongside them. Except for a few he suspected were waiting on loved ones to be released from the Hospital Wing, it seemed the castle was back down to only hosting a few extra bodies. The core of the rebellion, still in need of a base of operations while they figured out how to move forward.

Harry had never seen them all so happy. The hall was filled with laughter and bright conversation, even those still recovering from injuries in good spirits. They hadn't forgotten what it cost them, of course — Harry saw more than one toast to fallen friends happen that evening — but alongside the mourning, they had to take the chance to celebrate their victory. To remember why it was all worth it.

The entire past Gryffindor quidditch team — Harry's original quidditch team — were clustered around the end of one table with their partners and Viktor Krum, Oliver Wood's exuberant hand gestures making Harry suspect they were talking quidditch. Charlie was with them, too, one hand tangled in Sirius' on the tabletop, both of them in entirely different conversations but still connected, always in each others' orbit. Opposite Sirius, Remus was practically sitting in Snape's lap; the werewolf was glowing with joy at finally being able to express his love openly, arm draped around Severus' back as he chatted with his best friend. Snape didn't really *do* 'glowing with joy', but he was smiling ever so slightly, and putting up with all the noise, so that said it all as far as Harry was concerned.

Most of the heirs were on the other table, none of them bothering to try and go home when they'd all have to go to the Wizengamot in the morning. Besides, they had earned this — they had fought in this battle that the adults insisted they were too young to handle, and they had survived it and won and they deserved to be proud of that. They were with other students, too; the HA past and present, all those who Harry had started out with just a Disarming charm and a simple Protego. How far they had come, now.

"Are you getting maudlin, Potter?" Draco asked with raised eyebrows, drawing Harry away from his perusal of the crowd around them. Harry smiled sheepishly, leaning into him.

"Not maudlin," he insisted. "Just... relieved."

Draco's gaze narrowed. Then he pressed a kiss to Harry's lips, and a glass in Harry's hand. "Have a drink and stop thinking so much," he insisted. "You've earned it."

Harry knocked back the drink, coughing slightly at the fierce burn of high quality firewhiskey. "Blimey. Where'd that come from?"

"Charlie," Draco told him, smirking and topping up Harry's glass. "He stopped by the dragon reserve to check in with work, and I guess someone over there had a big stash of the good stuff, decided to share."

That explained a lot, actually; from Charlie's stories, dragon tamers were notoriously good at handling their alcohol. Harry looked down at the cup, then turned suspicious eyes on his

boyfriend.

"Are you trying to get me drunk?" he drawled, watching as Draco's smirk widened, his eyes darkening.

"A drink or two won't hurt." His tone was even, but there was no mistaking the spark of lust in that quicksilver gaze. Harry leaned in, nuzzling his temple.

"If you want me to fuck you against the wall again, you don't need to get me soused," he breathed huskily. "Or d'you just want me getting all handsy with you so everyone in this room knows I'm taken?" Like they weren't already well aware.

Under the table, Draco squeezed his thigh. "Why can't it be both?" he asked innocently. "Slytherin dorms have all been emptied. I checked with the elves."

Heat pooled in Harry's gut. "Later, then," he promised, kissing his cheek and then pulling back, taking another swallow of alcohol. There was no need to leave the party early — they could keep it in their pants for another few hours.

As the food cleared from the tables and more and more alcohol appeared from seemingly nowhere — seriously, this was a *school*, where was it all coming from?? — Harry let himself finally relax, joining in with the festivities.

Fred and George, being Fred and George, produced a whole bunch of their indoor fireworks, which caused McGonagall to just sigh exasperatedly and loudly declare how grateful she was that they had graduated.

They all got up from the tables, mingling freely; adults and students alike, all levelled by their experiences, all revelling in the possibilities of the new future that awaited them. Across the hall, Susan and Justin were loudly expounding on their plans for the Wizengamot to a group of slightly terrified looking HA members, while Theo stood at Susan's side with a smile that said he was very proud of his girlfriend but also would be happy to murder anyone who stood in her way. Not far from that, Luna seemed to have started a dance party with no music, joined by a handful of people drunk enough to join in enthusiastically. Mrs Weasley was stood with her husband and a few other ex-Ministry workers, sending increasingly concerned glances at her daughter, who seemed to have challenged Viktor Krum to a drinking match. Ginny had a dismayed Neville on one side and a surprisingly enthusiastic Hagrid on the other, the half-giant cheering her on as she downed cider at a rate that had Harry goggling.

On the one hand, he could see what the Weasley matriarch was worried about. On the other, he figured Ginny had earned it. And Hagrid was supervising! She'd be fine.

Laughing to himself, he turned back to the group he was with, shoulder pressing against George. Draco and Blaise had wandered off to talk to Cassius and some others about Slytherin things — or possibly wedding things, Harry wasn't sure — so their two Gryffindor boyfriends had banded together.

“Harry!” The exclamation came from Sirius, who by this point was absolutely plastered. Harry couldn’t really blame him; the war was over, their family was alive, and his godfather had an excellent future ahead.

“Harry!” Sirius grabbed him by the shoulders, shaking him slightly. “You—you’re the best, y’know? I told Prongs, I told him when you were born — this kid is gonna be *brilliant*. And I was right!” He beamed widely. “If him and Lily could see you now! They’d be so bloody proud of you. *I’m* so bloody proud of you. My godson, defeater of Voldemort!” he shouted, and a cheer went up around the hall. Harry blushed, even as he smiled. “I love you so much, pup. You’re my son! Not, not *really* my son — I never ever touched Jamie’s girl, not ever, I swear it! — but, but, you’re my son *in here*.” He thumped his chest, over his heart. Over his godfather’s shoulder, Harry saw Remus stifling his helpless laughter in Snape’s shoulder.

“I love you too, Padfoot. And—you’re my dad, in here, too,” he added, putting a hand to his own chest, refusing to admit to the tears welling in his eyes.

Sirius blinked rapidly, his own eyes getting misty — then he leaned in and pressed a big wet kiss to Harry’s forehead. “Hey, hey Harry,” he pestered again, grabbing Harry’s wrist, stepping back. “Y’know Charlie?” He pointed at the dragon tamer, who was much better at holding his alcohol, sat on the edge of the table and watching his drunk boyfriend with an indulgent expression.

“Yeah, I know him,” Harry confirmed, trying not to laugh. Sirius’ eyes sparkled, looking between the two. Then he let go of Harry’s wrist, and stood right in the middle of their little circle of people.

“I am gonna marry that man,” he declared firmly, pointing his finger vehemently at Charlie. He stumbled closer to his boyfriend, poking him in the chest. “I am. I’m gonna marry you.”

Charlie’s smile widened, bringing out the dimples in full force. “Are you, now?” he drawled, raising one red eyebrow. “Well, I have to say it — that was a shit proposal, sweetheart. You’re gonna have to do better.”

All of them laughed at Sirius’ exaggerated pout. “I will,” he promised, falling against Charlie’s chest, the redhead’s arm automatically steadyng him around the waist. “I’ll do better. I love you!”

“I love you, too, Sirius,” Charlie assured fondly, kissing the taller man’s jaw. The smile that stretched across Sirius’ face was the biggest one of them all, and Harry couldn’t help but grin widely in response.

“I need another drink!” Sirius declared, straightening up and swaying as he did so.

“I really don’t think you do,” Tonks replied with a laugh. Sirius whipped around to her, pointing an accusing finger.

“That’s what a sober person would say!” he accused. “*You* need another drink. Or any drink. I haven’t seen you drink! Why aren’t you drinking?”

Now that he mentioned it, Harry couldn't recall seeing anything but water in Tonks' hand all night.

The auror blushed a furious red. "I just don't feel like it, alright," she defended. "I don't *have* to drink at parties."

"No, but you usually do," Charlie said, eyes narrowing at his best friend. "You're usually keeping pace with me. You didn't even get hurt, you've got no excuse!" Tonks went wide-eyed, her mouth opening and closing in soundless stutters. Suddenly, Charlie gasped. "Ohhh. *Fuck me!*" he yelled, much louder than intended, drawing the attention of half the room.

"Yes please," came Sirius' immediate response.

"Are you serious?" Charlie continued, ignoring his partner and staring wide-eyed at Tonks. "You're *not*. Are you—"

"Alright!" Tonks cried out, her purple hair turning red with the force of her blush. "Yes! Fine! You got me! I'm not drinking because I'm pregnant!"

Harry choked on his own drink. And then he heard a glass shatter.

All of them whipped around to see Kingsley Shacklebolt, previously mid-conversation with Amelia and Narcissa, staring with comically huge eyes in their direction, a growing puddle of beer on the floor where he'd dropped his glass in shock. "You're..."

"I'm pregnant," Tonks confirmed, quieter this time. "I was going to say something later. *Privately*. But these two idiots had to go and give the game away." She turned an annoyed glare on Sirius and Charlie.

Ignoring the splinters of glass in front of him, Kingsley strode over, not looking away from Tonks for a second. "You're pregnant," he echoed, once he was stood in front of her. His gaze dropped to her stomach. "There's..."

"There's a baby in there," she said, grinning tentatively. "Or at least, there will be, once it's grown a bit. I'm only ten weeks."

"You went into battle at ten weeks pregnant!" Mrs Weasley screeched as she hurried over, summoned by the talk of babies. "What were you thinking!"

"I was thinking I needed to give it every chance I could to make this world a place worth raising a child in!" Tonks defended. "I had a shield up. It was fine! It's fine. The baby's totally fine. Pomfrey checked." The last part was said to Kingsley again, who had gone ashen at the reminder of Tonks' presence on the battlefield.

"You should have told me. Before," he said. Tonks looked at him with challenge in her eyes.

"You would have made me stay in the castle," she argued. Kingsley didn't deny it.

"I didn't even know she was seeing anyone," George muttered at Harry's side, though the sound carried in the shocked silence. Harry snorted — he still hadn't figured it out yet??

Kingsley stepped even closer, one hand pressing gently against Tonks' stomach. *Much* closer than a co-worker would get, or even a friend. "A baby?"

"A baby." A cautious smile tugged at Tonks' lips. "Is that... okay?"

Kingsley's only response was to hug her tightly, lifting her off her feet and spinning her around, kissing her like his life depended on it. As he pulled back and set her down, there was a beaming smile on his face, wider than Harry had ever seen from the stoic man. "It's *fantastic*," he declared firmly.

"So *that's* why you didn't want the Head Auror job," Amelia said in realisation, brows drawing together amusedly.

Arms still around Tonks, Kingsley looked over to her, sheepish. "Um. Yes. Well. About that."

Harry laughed loudly, and all of a sudden Tonks was swarmed with people, all wanting to ask about the baby and Kingsley and how long they'd been keeping that one hidden.

George looked around at the unsurprised faces of everyone he stood with; Harry, Sirius and Charlie, Remus and Snape. "You knew," he said, "you all knew!"

"Tonks is family," Harry replied, an admission in itself.

"You'll soon come to learn, Georgie boy, that the Black family are very fond of their secrets," Charlie told his brother, squeezing Sirius around the waist with a conspiratorial grin. "I don't think I've had even a fraction of them! Hell, I probably never will. But there's a lot these little buggers have been keeping under all our noses for the last few years."

George looked almost put out by the knowledge that there was plotting and secrets going on without him. Harry patted him on the shoulder. "I'll tell you what I can some other time," he promised consolingly. He wasn't even looking at George — his gaze had been caught by movement across the room, a toss of shining blond hair and a careless push of shirtsleeves up to elbows. The heat in his belly returned. "Look, George, I'll see you later. In the morning. Yeah?"

He didn't wait for the bewildered reply, stalking across the hall and draping himself across a lithe back, kissing a pale cheek. "Hi," he greeted, wrapping his arms around Draco from behind. He canted his hips subtly, making Draco aware of the half-hard erection growing in his trousers. "Having fun?"

"I was," Draco confirmed, craning his neck to meet Harry's eye. "Did you need me for something?"

Harry grinned wolfishly. "That's a very loaded question," he replied. Several of the Slytherins around them snickered.

Draco didn't look remotely embarrassed by this clear — and fairly sloppy — attempt at seduction. Harry had never been more in love with him in his life. "At least let me pretend we

have some sort of decorum, love,” he sighed, making Harry grin wider and wiggle his eyebrows.

“Why bother? I’m fairly sure they would figure it out regardless.”

“We did assume,” Daphne said with a long-suffering sigh. Draco’s ears turned a little pink, but he was smiling.

“Go on, Malfoy,” Cassius urged playfully, “go take our *saviour* here off to celebrate somewhere private before he starts really trying to convince you to leave.”

“Oh, I don’t need convincing,” Draco assured airily. “I had just planned for a slightly more graceful exit. But, Gryffindors.” He and Cassius and Blaise shared an exasperated look, and Harry thought he should probably be offended by it.

“Are we going now, then?” he asked keenly, peeling himself off Draco’s back but only enough to tuck the blond against his side.

“We are,” Draco said, gaze flicking to his friends. “Goodnight, all.”

“Be safe, you two,” Daphne replied with a blatant leer.

Harry tugged Draco away, ignoring the cat-calls from the Slytherin crowd — and then the much louder cat-calls that came when everyone else noticed the pair leaving.

“Good ni-ight!” he called to the hall at large, hand already sneaking up under the hem of Draco’s shirt. “Don’t stay up too late!”

“We could say the same to you!” Bill retorted to another round of laughter and wolf-whistling.

Harry smirked unrepentantly. “You’re all a bunch of fucking hypocrites!” he told them, laughing, the pleasant buzz of alcohol coursing through his veins. “And I think I’ve fucking earned this!” With that, he took Draco by the hand, tugged on the castle’s magic, and walked head first into the wall next to the door.

His next stride put him right in the Slytherin common room, stepping out of the wall next to the fireplace. Draco followed close behind him, staring around in awe. “What the *fuck*, Potter,” he said, stunned. “Since when could you do that?”

“I’ve been pulling passageways for ages,” Harry said, frowning in confusion. Draco goggled.

“Passageways! Not *transporting through walls!*”

Oh, that. Harry hadn’t really been expecting that either, but Hogwarts was full of surprises. “Came of age with both hands on the Wardstone,” he explained, shrugging. “The castle likes me.”

The blond blinked, gaping incredulously, then shook his head. “This is what it’s going to be like, isn’t it? Being with you. You’re never going to be done with the ridiculousness.”

“I hope not!” Harry said cheerfully.

Draco frowned briefly. “Should we have told Neville and Ginny about coming down here? So they don’t worry they’ll walk in on us in Gryffindor.”

It was awfully sweet, hearing Draco worried about such things, but Harry waved a careless hand. “Nev’s an heir, he’ll check the wards, figure it out.” They would probably appreciate the dorm room to themselves.

Apparently satisfied with that answer, Draco tugged on his hand, heading towards the dorms, but Harry didn’t move. “Don’t tell me you were just teasing, Harry,” the Slytherin drawled, eyes darkening. He let go of Harry, adjusting his rolled-up sleeves, forearms flexing like he knew *exactly* what that did to Harry’s insides, the smug bastard.

“Oh, I’m not teasing,” Harry assured, reaching out to undo the top button of Draco’s shirt. “But you missed something, love.” He undid another button, fingers just barely brushing Draco’s chest.

“What did I miss?” Draco asked breathlessly, sliding hands down to grab Harry’s backside. Harry’s answering smirk was pure and utter Slytherin seduction.

“They cleared out the dorms. *All* the dorms.” Draco still didn’t seem to get it. “We, my love, are currently the only two people present in the *entire* Slytherin dungeon.” The light dawned in Draco’s eyes. “And, as the heir of Slytherin, I can keep it that way.” It was the work of barely a thought to lock the common room entrance, make it so that not even Snape could gain access.

He finished unbuttoning Draco’s shirt, pushing it back off the blond’s narrow shoulders. “Why go to the dorms,” he drawled, trailing kisses up Draco’s right shoulder, “when we can fuck right here in the common room instead.”

Draco moaned softly, hips grinding against Harry’s thigh, erection straining at his trousers. “I like the way you think, Potter,” he gasped, tilting his head back to give Harry better access to bite gently at his neck, sucking vivid purple marks into the porcelain flesh.

Harry walked him backwards, pushing him down onto the black leather sofa, straddling his lap and tightening a hand in that silky blond hair. Draco’s hands were straight on his chest, practically ripping the buttons apart in order to get to bare skin, mouth latching on to one of Harry’s peaked nipples, drawing a cry from the Gryffindor. He shed his shirt, pulling back, undoing the zip of his jeans before the pressure within got to the point of painful. Shimmying them down his hips and kicking off his shoes, he stood in just his boxers and socks in front of his boyfriend, heart hammering in his chest. “This is your show,” he offered. “Your common room. What first?” He wasn’t going to pretend that this was the only time they’d be able to do this, or the only round they’d go that night. Harry had spent almost an entire day sleeping before, and now he was wired, filled with an almost manic energy and wanting nothing more

than to stay up all night wringing as many orgasms as he could out of Draco's gorgeous body.

"I believe," Draco drawled, getting to his feet, gripping Harry through his boxers and making the Gryffindor's whole body jerk at the surge of pleasure, "that I was promised a fucking against a wall." Harry moaned, Draco's fingers trailing up his stomach. "That sounds like a good warm-up. Then we're going to go right to that table and I'm going to bend you over it and fuck you 'til you see stars."

He gestured to an ornate table off to the side of the room, likely a space where Slytherin students sat to do homework in their common room. Harry smirked at the idea, imagining Draco all throughout the next school year, trying to sit and study at the table and getting distracted by memories of pounding Harry into it.

"Sounds good," he breathed. "But that sounds like you think you can last through me fucking you," he added, raising one eyebrow daringly. "And that sounds like a challenge to me."

Draco smirked, pulling him close. "And a Gryffindor doesn't back down from a challenge, does he?" he drawled teasingly. "So get to it." He dipped his head, pecking Harry on the lips. "Impress me, Potter."

As always, those words sent a roar of heat through Harry — he looked up, seeking out a decent spot of wall, and quickly decided to use the very same section they'd entered through. He backed Draco up against it, expertly undoing the many buttons of his fly, kicking aside the trousers and underwear once he yanked them down.

Last time it had been a little clumsy, figuring out how it all worked, how to hold Draco up and still get the right angle and not risk dropping him when his knees buckled. But this time, Harry knew what he was doing — he grabbed Draco by the arse and lifted him up, gasping as their cocks pressed together, the blond's legs wrapping around his hips.

They stood like that, kissing languidly, arousal coursing through both of them as thin hands gripped muscular shoulders, Harry bracing himself against the wall and keeping one hand under Draco for support. If he had to use a little magic, that was just fine by him, not wanting to risk dropping his partner. He bucked his hips against Draco's, both of them crying out. Harry was on far too short a trigger for a long build-up, and he adjusted their position, hitching Draco a little higher so he could line things up properly.

"Lube?" Draco reminded, and Harry rolled his eyes, reaching out with his magic — flying through the open door to Draco's dormitory was a vial of lube, left behind when the boy packed up to move to the Tower. He uncorked it with his teeth, letting his magic do most of the work in holding Draco up as he coated fingers in the slick substance, finding Draco's hole. Even with the slightly unfamiliar angle, Harry was an expert in Draco's body by now, easily finding that sweet spot and crooking his fingers to press against it. Draco's hands tightened on his shoulders, a moan escaping him as his cock left a damp smear on his belly.

"So sure about that challenge?" Harry teased, breath hot on Draco's neck, grazing his teeth lightly across the blond's sensitive skin.

“Fucking get on with it,” Draco demanded, heels digging into Harry’s thighs, trying to pull him ever closer.

Happy to comply, Harry slicked himself up, taking a steady breath as he slid into his lover, stars sparkling behind closed eyelids at the tight heat enveloping him. Draco’s breathy moan echoed in his ear, fingernails digging in to his shoulders almost painfully. Harry snuck his slick hand between them, but Draco slapped him away. “No touching,” he scolded. “S cheating.”

Harry grinned — Draco was that close already, was he?

The blond didn’t stand a chance.

One hand against the stone, Harry set a fast pace, fucking deep into Draco while the blond gasped with every thrust. He opened his eyes, watching the ecstasy on Draco’s face, suddenly hit with the knowledge that they were free, the war was over, he could have this *forever*. He jerked his hips harder, biting at Draco’s shoulder, chasing Draco’s orgasm and his own. The angle was perfect, pressing right against the Slytherin’s prostate, and Harry could see the strain in his neck as he built ever closer to release. His skin flushed rosy pink, his head tipped back against the wall, his cries echoing through the Slytherin common room — such an open area, so exposed, but private and just for them for now, for the rest of the summer if they wanted it.

“Draco,” he hissed, in what might have been English but could well have been Parseltongue. “Draco, come on. Come for me, love.” He was so close, he could feel it, the blond’s heart beating so fast, sweat dripping down the curve of his neck. Harry was so focused on Draco’s pleasure he hardly noticed the swift rising of his own — his ears began to ring and the tight coil in his belly tightened further, right on the crest of bliss. One more thrust and suddenly the heat around his cock got tighter, Draco’s whole body spasming, and it was too much; Harry went tense, orgasm punching through him with a visceral wave of utter perfection.

He rode out the mind-shattering pleasure, trying not to crush or drop Draco as his brain short-circuited for the moment, until eventually the rush faded and he could hear himself breathing once more, hear Draco’s heavy breathing as the blond finally loosened his grip on Harry’s back.

His thighs began to quiver, his knees a little weak, but Harry stayed standing and grinned smugly at his lover. He leaned in to kiss him, gasping at the sensation on his still sensitive cock. “I win,” he declared, feeling the sticky mess on his abs. Draco scoffed.

“Because losing was such a hardship for me,” he replied, easing up the pressure of his legs locked around Harry, just a bit.

Harry had to pull out before the aftershocks overwhelmed him, leaning heavier against Draco, the blond’s feet lowering to the ground. The buzz of alcohol still tickled his nerves, but it was just a lingering tipsiness, a languid melting of his limbs.

“It’s a good thing there’s no portraits in here,” he mused, nose pressed to Draco’s neck, inhaling the scent of sex and sweat. He felt Draco laugh.

"Harry, there are definitely portraits in here," he informed the Gryffindor. "They just all ran for it when you started taking my shirt off."

Harry pulled off him with no small amount of effort, looking over his shoulder at the common room at large. Now that he actually paid attention, he could see at least four frames with various empty backdrops and landscapes. "Oh. Oops."

He looked back to Draco, leaning nude against the wall with come all over his belly and thighs, hair a mess and lips swollen and so stunning Harry could hardly breathe. "Well I don't think they'll be coming back any time soon," he commented, "so we can take a breather before round two." And maybe round three. Possibly even four, if he was really being ambitious.

"Just give me a minute," Draco murmured. "Can't feel my legs."

With a bark of laughter, Harry stepped in close, picking up Draco's legs to wrap around him once more. Then he carried the blond back to the sofa, both of them collapsing into the surprisingly comfortable cushions. Draco's elbow was in his side, and they were sticky, and leather was not the greatest thing for sweaty bare skin, but all Harry could feel was a tingling, electric happiness through his entire body.

It was damn good, being alive.

Chapter 106

Chapter Notes

Little late this morning. Having a bit of A Day. Enjoy~

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It was a very disgruntled crowd of people that dragged themselves to breakfast the next morning at half past seven. Even Amelia herself looked like she was regretting calling such an early meeting.

“Was I just really drunk last night,” Sirius began, nursing a cup of coffee and very clearly hungover, “or did you two walk through a wall?” He eyed Harry and Draco warily, and Harry laughed.

“You were really drunk, but also yes.”

“Yeah, I was wondering about that,” Anthony Goldstein piped up, raising skeptical eyebrows.

“Apparently that’s a thing he can do now,” Draco said, reaching for a plate of bacon. “*The castle likes him*, so he told me.”

“It does,” Harry confirmed with a shrug. “Neville, you should try it sometime. It’s gonna make getting between classes a *breeze*.” He was already thinking longingly of the extra time in bed it would give him in the mornings, not having to bother with all those stairs.

“Is it too late to resign as headmistress?” McGonagall said with a heavenward glance. “I don’t know if I can handle one more year of your shenanigans, Mr Potter.”

“It’ll be *fine*,” Harry assured her breezily. He stole half a bacon sandwich from Draco’s plate — now he had a cup of tea in him, he was feeling slightly more human and willing to try eating food.

Sharp footsteps on stone made all of them look up, several of the students making surprised noises at the sight of Snape heading towards them. The man was dressed in his usual black teaching robes, ever-present scowl on his face. However, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of vials. The first two went to Harry and Draco, and Harry, as had become habit, uncorked it and drank the contents without even looking at it.

“Harry, you don’t even know what that is!” Parvati gasped, then looked fearfully at Snape like he might put her in detention for suggesting he would poison his student.

“Hangover potion,” he relayed with a blissful smile, the tension in his head easing and the rolling of his stomach subsiding. “Severus, you’re my new favourite.”

“Oi!” Sirius protested, only to be tossed a vial of his own. “Okay, yeah, new favourite, sorry Moony.”

Remus was not there to argue, but Snape’s lips twitched.

“I only do that for Severus and Draco,” Harry assured, seeing several concerned looks around the table. “I don’t just blindly drink any old thing I’m handed, promise.” He could trust those two — both to not give him poison, but also to know exactly which potions he could take safely at any given time.

Despite his scowl, Snape had brought enough potions for everyone who needed one, stoically ignoring any and all gratefulness in response.

“Did you just come to sober us all up so we don’t make tits of ourselves at the Ministry, or did you need something?” Charlie asked, one of the few people at the table who was far too used to Snape to take offense at the man’s general countenance.

“I am coming with you,” Snape replied. “Grimmets has confirmed that I am indeed still eligible for the Prince seat, and I am long overdue in claiming my birthright.” Harry was sure only he and perhaps Sirius and Narcissa could see the tension in Snape’s shoulders, the slight hesitation at his admission. He was nervous, confessing these secrets of his past to a group of mostly students.

Susan gasped, eye lighting up excitedly. “I wondered where Dumbledore’s last seat came from! It’s been you all along!”

“Indeed.” Snape inclined his head. “I went straight from Hogwarts to my Apprenticeship and then to teaching, so I was never given the opportunity to come forward. Dumbledore,” he sneered, “has been my proxy since my mother passed. It is high time that changed.”

“Doesn’t that mean Dumbledore’s got no seats left?” Ernie pointed out. “Unless he’s been willed any proxies in the last year.”

“I think we’re mostly present and accounted for,” Narcissa confirmed. “As far as I’m aware, the only sitting Wizengamot members who died in battle were ones who almost certainly willed their seats to my late husband. Unless they updated their wills recently, I should be gaining quite a few more.” She looked less than pleased by that outcome.

“I think some seats will have died off, now,” Draco mused, a dark edge to his voice. “Crabbe and Goyle were the last of their families. And I think the Lestranges have gone extant, too.”

“We shall see,” said Narcissa primly. “And on that note, we had best get going.”

“Do you have room for one more?” Professor Slughorn slipped through the open door, hands on the lapels of his velvet jacket. “I’m running rather late, my apologies. But I ate in my quarters, so if you are all on your way then might I accompany you?”

In all the chaos, Harry had completely forgotten that Slughorn was also on the Wizengamot.

“Of course, Horace,” McGonagall agreed with a half-smile. “I would be glad of the escort.” Since the battle, Harry noticed, the cane she’d used after being hit with all those Stunners last year had started to return every now and then. Seeing it made his stomach twist uncomfortably; a reminder that his battle-axe of a housemistress was not as indestructible and immortal as she had always appeared to be.

Slughorn brightened up, offering his arm to the headmistress, and together the lot of them set off out of the hall.

Harry walked with Draco’s hand in his, looking around the group in quiet amazement. Twenty-nine seats between them — possibly more to come depending how things went when all the Death Eaters were processed and all the wills enacted. Almost the entire Wizengamot, finally in capable hands. Harry was under no impression that they would all agree on everything, but he knew he could trust all of these people to make decisions with the whole country’s best interests at heart.

“I’m still very impressed the whole lot of you managed to convince your previous house heads to give up their seats to teenagers,” Amelia remarked as they strode across the grounds, carefully sidestepping around the battle scars. “Those of you with only proxy guardians is one thing, but the rest! Mr Macmillan, I am quite frankly astounded that your father is stepping down in your favour.”

Ernie shrugged, looking a little bashful. “We had a chat about it yesterday, when I went to get them out of hiding. I think going through this war a second time has made him reconsider what he wants in life. He was surprisingly agreeable to the whole thing, said that half our problems was the old traditionalists hanging on to their seats too long, and the Ministry could do with a few young revolutionaries.” He grinned at his friends, and they all grinned back.

The Ministry was about to get *plenty* of those.

Not every heir in the school had won over their guardians like Ernie had, though. Hannah’s mother, understandably, was retaining her seat at least until Hannah was out of her hospital bed, and very likely until after she was graduated too. But Blaise’s mother wasn’t retiring from the politics game any time soon, and Lord Patil wouldn’t hear a single word of it, so fresh from losing his daughter.

But it was a solid start. They had years, decades even, to get the rest on board.

“Harry, my lad,” Slughorn said quietly, prompting Harry to hang back a bit and fall into step beside the two professors. “That matter we discussed, before term ended — it has all been dealt with appropriately, I trust?” His eyes held a decades-old wariness. It took Harry a moment to figure out what he was referring to. Of course, he was concerned about the horcruxes.

“Yes, sir,” he assured. “All sorted. Every last bit.”

Slughorn just about shook with relief. “Good. Good lad. I had hope, when I heard about Severus and the snake, but... this old man’s heart can rest easy, now.”

Harry patted the man's arm, saying nothing more and ignoring McGonagall's perplexed frown.

The old professor might have made a terrible mistake in giving the information to Tom Riddle, but Harry could see how much the regret had been weighing on him ever since. It was a burden he was more than happy to relieve.

Past the gates, they gathered to apparate to the Ministry; the floo network was still being brought back online, and Hogwarts had not yet been reconnected.

"Harry," Amelia said evenly, once they were in the Ministry atrium. "After the meeting, you will come with me and complete the paperwork for your apparition license, yes?"

It was only then that Harry realised he hadn't even attempted to pretend he needed a side-along. Oops. "Yes, ma'am."

Susan snickered quietly at his meek response.

Looking around, Harry realised that this was his first time visiting the Ministry while there was actually work going on. The last — and only — time he'd been there, it had been deserted and he'd ended up destroying half of the Department of Mysteries.

He hoped the Unspeakables weren't still mad about all that.

Now, it was a hive of activity; still likely not as busy as it was supposed to be, given the number of people who had yet to return to their jobs and the countless empty positions throughout the building, but enough that their whole group apparating into the designated zone took a few minutes to be noticed.

"Good morning, Minister Bones!" one woman called cheerfully as she walked past.

"Morning, Minister!" another greeted, then dropped the briefcase she held in shock. "My word, is that Harry Potter?"

"Oh, Merlin, here we go," Harry groaned under his breath. The group closed ranks around him, but the damage had been done — all through the atrium, people were stopping in their tracks, trying to get a look at the seventeen year-old saviour.

"You'd best get used to it, pup," Sirius said apologetically, ruffling his hair.

Luckily, with Amelia heading the pack they could avoid going through the whole rigamarole of wand screenings, heading straight for the lifts. There were so many they had to split between the two, and even that was a tight squeeze.

Harry wondered if Susan, Neville and Daphne were remembering that fateful trip to the Ministry in as much vivid detail as he was right now.

"Y'know," Sirius said as the lift shuddered and screeched to life, "last time we were crammed so tight in one of these, Char, we snogged in front of your dad. You remember that?"

Harry was jammed into the opposite corner, plastered against Draco's front, but he didn't need to look to know Sirius was grinning smugly. He groaned, head falling forward on Draco's shoulder. "More information than we needed, Padfoot."

"Just trying to ease the tension!" Sirius defended. "Honestly, you'd think we were all headed into another battle! This is the easy part."

They were saved having to try and find a response to that by the lift slamming uncomfortably to a halt, practically spitting them all out when the doors opened. Sirius was still grinning, winking at Harry when he caught his godson's eye. Harry had to admit, it was a good distraction from the way they turned past the door to the Department of Mysteries and towards the Wizengamot meeting room.

"This is where we leave you, then," Amelia declared softly, pausing at the door. "You all know what to do."

She pressed a kiss to Susan's brow, then she and the others who had already claimed their seats entered the hall. The Wizengamot would need to be in session before any further claims could be acknowledged.

The wait was excruciating. Harry tried not to fidget, but Draco had to grab his hands to stop him picking at his fingernails. He kissed Harry's palms, one at a time, then threaded their fingers together.

Even *Snape* looked nervous, if you knew what to look for. Harry sidled over to the man, leaning ever so slightly against him. "Think of how furious all those Death Eaters going to Azkaban will be when they learn that they've lost everything and you're now a sitting Lord," he murmured under his breath. Dark eyes slanted in his direction, and thin lips curled in a smirk.

Then at last, it was time.

The door handle glowed a bright green, indicating it was acceptable for them to enter. Somehow, Harry ended up pushed to the front, urged to open the door. Honestly, all his friends were so *dramatic*.

He squared his shoulders, and stepped over the threshold.

The magic of the Wizengamot meeting room felt... ancient. As ancient as Hogwarts, but different, more austere. This was not a magic that had grown off the blossoming power of children, but off the restrained power of adults trying their best to keep it to themselves. This magic had fed off the souls of criminals, and judged countless people worthy of their family names.

This was not a magic you wanted to mess with.

None of them spoke. When Harry looked up at the gathered Wizengamot, he ignored all the startled faces and looked straight at Sirius' smiling eyes, wrinkled at the corners.

“As the last of my family line,” Harry began in a firm, steady voice, “I, Harry James Potter, have come to claim the Potter, Peverell and Slytherin seats of my birthright, and relieve Lord Black of his proxy duties for those houses.”

The names he listed made several people gasp, and Harry wondered how the fact of him being Slytherin’s heir wasn’t common knowledge by now.

Then he felt the magic reaching into him, searching his core and his blood, checking he had the right to make the claims he had. Harry kept his breathing steady, holding back the instinct to fight the intrusion.

Three seats glowed with a bright white light beneath them. His robes shifted, becoming the plum garb of a Wizengamot member, and the magic converged electric-cold on his hand to form his lordship ring — able to shift between the three crests at his will.

Harry knew his choice was important’ whichever seat he took was the title he would be addressed by, though he had the right to all three. He walked forward, and offered Augusta Longbottom a smile as he sat down beside her.

“Welcome, Lord Potter,” Amelia greeted, inclining her head towards him.

Lord Potter. He was a lord, now. With all the powers and responsibilities that came with it.

If he had surprised the Wizengamot, then the next claim had some of them almost falling off their chairs.

“With the permission of my grandmother; I, Neville Francis Longbottom, have come to claim the Longbottom and Gryffindor seats of my birthright. I also claim the proxy guardianship of the Hufflepuff seat, with full permission of the current Heir Hufflepuff.” Harry filled with pride at the way Neville’s voice didn’t waver once, his head held high and not a hint of fear or shyness in his frame.

Beside Harry, Mrs Longbottom stood. “I gladly pass this mantle to my grandson, and relinquish all claim on the Longbottom seat.”

As she shuffled down the steps, her robes became a set of neat navy dress robes, while Neville’s transformed appropriately. The tall Gryffindor kissed his grandmother on the cheek, then headed up to take the seat at Harry’s side, giving him a shaky grin. Harry offered a discreet thumbs up.

One by one, seats were claimed. Some were expected — Theo; Anthony; Draco. The blond claimed his seat like he had waited his whole life for such a moment, and Harry saw Narcissa dab her eyes with a handkerchief. Daphne shocked many by claiming proxy of the Ravenclaw and Ollivander seats, waving cheekily at her uncle sat across the room in the Greengrass seat. Through it all, Percy Weasley diligently took notes on the proceedings, in his new official position as Senior Undersecretary to the Minister.

Then Severus Snape stepped forward, becoming Lord Prince, to the most prominent silence of all.

McGonagall was quiet but dignified in claiming the Ross seat, and at last Susan was the final person to step into the centre of the room. Many of the older Wizengamot members were eyeing her with confusion, unsure why she would be there when her aunt was clearly planning to stay in power.

“With the permission of my aunt, I, Susan Constance Bones, have come to claim the Bones seat of my birthright.”

“I gladly pass this mantle to my niece, and relinquish all claim on the Bones seat,” Amelia replied formally. She had no need to move seats, as she was occupying the Minister’s seat in the room. Beside her, Arasi Shafiq gasped.

“Minister Bones, this is highly irregular,” he burst out as Susan claimed her seat. “You do realise that should you fail to win the election, you will no longer have any place within the Wizengamot?”

“I am aware, Lord Shafiq,” Amelia replied mildly. Harry had to admire her confidence, in making that irreversible move. “I also—“ She cut off mid sentence, as the door opened once more.

Draco’s sharp intake of breath was the only sound within the hall as two girls walked hesitantly into the room. “I— are we too late?” Pansy Parkinson asked, wringing her hands anxiously. “There were issues with the floo.” At her side, Millicent Bulstrode stood blank-faced and tense. Both Slytherins had been missing since term ended, feigning loyalty to Voldemort to keep from being disinherited and left with nothing. They’d hoped the pair had fled to Germany, to Millie’s betrothed. Feared much worse fates for them.

When Harry glanced over at Draco, his boyfriend’s knuckles were white around the arms of his chair.

“You are just in time, ladies,” Amelia assured with a smile.

One after another, the Parkinson and Bulstrode seats were claimed.

“As I was saying,” Amelia continued, “I also recently discovered that prior to her incarceration, Dolores Umbridge, Lady Selwyn, willed her seat specifically to ‘*the Minister for Magic*’.” Her lips quirked. “Therefore, with the permission of its bloodline, I, Amelia Grace Bones, do hereby claim proxy guardianship of the Selwyn seat, for as long as I serve as Minister.”

Harry wasn’t the only one who couldn’t hold back a snicker.

“As we can see, the magical family lines of Crabbe, Goyle, Lestrange, Travers and Crouch have ended, as judged by the Wizengamot Chamber,” Amelia announced, turning solemn. “Griphook’s bank have been notified, and will deal with the house assets appropriately. Lady Malfoy, your proxy guardianship of the four lines you have held is now ended — we thank you for your diligent care.”

Narcissa only nodded in acknowledgement. Harry was surprised by the last name — surely Crouch would have died out when Barty Jr died? Evidently there had been another magical heir to the family in the Death Eater ranks. They were all so intermingled, it made sense.

It was a horrifying display of how much damage Voldemort had done, that five families had gone completely extinct under his reign, and several more only held heirs through as-yet undiscovered bastard children and squib descendants. That several more families held only one possible representative of their line, right in this chamber.

It would take time to rebuild, and some things were lost forever. Such was the way of war.

“I call this Wizengamot session to order, as all appropriate inheritance announcements have thus been acknowledged,” Amelia said, her voice ringing out through the stone chamber. The expression that followed was one Harry knew all too well — he’d seen it on Susan dozens of times, that glint of mischief and that barely restrained smile. It usually came right before some bold move or unexpected bombshell. He braced himself, wondering what was to come next.

“With that said, I pass the floor to the new Lady Bones,” she continued. “She has brought a number of concerns to my attention, and I believe they are best explained by her.”

Then Amelia sat down, and Susan stood behind her desk. Her eyepatch today was a pale lavender, and depicted the Bones family crest. Theo was getting really quite good at the details, now.

“Thank you, Minister Bones,” Susan said with a nod of acknowledgement. Then she reached into her pocket, and pulled out a small cube — which quickly resized itself into an enormous stack of parchment. A stack that, as soon as she set it on the table, quickly replicated itself for every member of the Wizengamot to read for themselves. Harry reached for his, grinning at the familiar handwriting.

“These are just our immediate concerns,” Susan informed the chamber at large, keeping an impressively straight face even as her fellow student Wizengamot members failed to hide their glee. “The further concerns can wait until the new Minister is elected and things are less dire. But as you can see, there is a lot to be done here.”

The adults in the room stared agog at this seventeen year-old girl, only two days fresh off a battlefield and already telling the Ministry what for.

Amelia Bones sat back in her chair, and beamed with pride.

.-.-.-.

They were several days past the battle now, and the celebrations had gone nation-wide. As wixen emerged from hiding and returned from overseas, magical Britain filled once more with people, all keen to celebrate the true death of the Dark Lord. Diagon Alley was thriving once more — the twins and Lee had been working non-stop on the fireworks orders coming in, while Blaise and the three ex-Gryffindor chasers manned the shop itself. Mr Ollivander had been found in a dungeon in Hampshire, and had returned to his shop like nothing had

ever happened. Even Fortescue's had reopened. The Ministry, such as it was, was rushed off their feet with the need to contain the festivities and stop the muggles from noticing. It was certainly keeping everyone busy.

It was good, Harry thought, for them to have things to do. Without all that, he dreaded to think of how he'd just be... drifting. Thinking about the deaths of his friends, wondering how they could have been prevented. Parvati had left for India, promising to keep in touch in the last few weeks of summer. Harry hadn't seen Dennis Creevey since the battle, but he knew the boy had gone home with his muggle parents, who had been in one of the Black family safehouses.

Perhaps that was for the best.

But he had found himself with a rare afternoon free; Sirius and Charlie were with Narcissa, taking all the currently displaced muggleborns for Inheritance Testing at Gringotts. Harry had thought about going with them, but he hadn't wanted to overwhelm Nashira and the twins if what they suspected was true. There would be time to meet them properly later.

He and Draco were the only students left permanently in the castle, now. Though due to the entire extended Black family still living there, it wasn't unusual to find visitors in search of one or another of them. Amelia was around regularly, discussing the handover of the DMLE with Kingsley, who still didn't seem to have quite registered that he was going to be a father soon.

Harry was glad for the quiet. He had never been great in crowds, and while at first it was fun having all his loved ones surrounding him and so *joyous* with relief, it had soon become suffocating. The Chamber of Secrets had once again become a necessary refuge, though he did have to put up with Salazar now pestering him to start sorting out journals to 'accidentally' discover and release into the world.

This time he didn't need that kind of solitude, though. He wasn't *hiding*, per say, he was just... enjoying the view from the Astronomy Tower. Neville and Professor Sprout had worked hard to re-grow the grass, and other than a few dips that hadn't been there before, you could hardly tell what had happened. Plans for a flower garden were underway, with rumours of some sort of memorial statue.

Harry wanted absolutely no part in that, but he had warned both McGonagall and Amelia that if the statue was in any way shape or form designed to look like him or his lightning bolt scar, he would turn the castle to rubble.

But it was a nice evening, warm and breezy, the sun reflecting off the mirror-still surface of the lake. He'd not seen the squid since the day after the battle — perhaps it was sleeping off its large meal of troll parts.

"So this is where you wandered off to."

He turned, smiling at Draco as the blond's head popped up through the trap door. "Hey, you." Harry happily shifted over on his stone ledge, making room for Draco to tuck in beside him. The Slytherin straddled the ledge, one leg hanging over the edge, so Harry could lean back

against him. Harry wasn't worried about them falling — Draco could turn into an owl, and he was pretty sure his own connection to Hogwarts would make him bounce or something equally ridiculous.

So they cuddled together on the lip of the tower, the grounds spread out below them. "Have you been looking for me long?" Apology seeped into Harry's tone. Draco rubbed Harry's shoulder.

"Not really. Checked the obvious places, then went and asked Hannah. Thought you might be down in the Chamber."

Harry forgot that Hannah was still in her private room in the Hospital Wing. All other patients with long-term injuries from the battle had been moved to St Mungo's, but between the delicate state of her back and the unknown quantity of her connection to Hogwarts, it was decided she would recover best in the castle. A specialist in dark curses had come to see her, removing the last of the magic from her body; now it was just a matter of time while the potions regrew her bones and nerves and muscles. As much as they could manage, at least.

Terry Boot was in a holding cell, soon to be in Azkaban, having surrendered at the end of the battle. Harry hoped he rotted there.

"Want to tell me what's got you so worried?" Draco asked knowingly, tangling Harry's hand with his own. Harry sighed, slumping heavy against his warm boyfriend.

"Dumbledore," he admitted. "No one's heard even a whisper of him since January. I would've thought he'd have popped his head up by now, if only to try and say Voldemort's still not dead and I've got to be murdered to save the world." His lips twisted in a grimace, and he felt Draco tense.

"He's probably just gone and died somewhere from that curse on his arm," Draco said diplomatically, thumb running soothingly over the back of Harry's hand. "Uncle Sev did say he wouldn't have much more than a year left."

Harry wanted to believe that, he really did, but he couldn't shake the worry that something deeper was in the works. Dumbledore still had the Hallows, after all. Could he even die, with a power like that?

It made him sick to his stomach just to contemplate.

Lips pressed against the back of his neck. "Stop worrying about things that will likely never happen," Draco insisted, the soft nuzzle of his nose against the base of Harry's skull slowly turning him to goo inside. "If he's not dead, he probably will be soon. And if he does show up — you're the most powerful wizard in the country, and he's an old man on his last legs. I doubt he'll be much of a challenge for you."

The unquestioning confidence in Draco's voice made Harry smile. He made a fair point.

Surely if Dumbledore had some sort of mystical Death powers, he would have come for Harry by now? He would have revealed himself, tried to encourage the wizarding world to

treat him like some sort of divine figure.

The gentle nuzzle became a firmer press of lips, and Harry became suddenly aware of an insistent press against his lower back, too. “Is that a wand in your pocket, or are you just happy to see me?” he drawled lightly, feeling Draco’s quiet snicker.

“Such a cliché, why am I so in love with you,” he mock-despaired, biting at Harry’s earlobe. “I just figured, while we’re up here and everyone else is busy... you always hear such scandalous tales of the Astronomy Tower. We could see what the fuss is all about.”

Harry swung around, facing Draco with an arched brow. “Now who’s the cliché,” he retorted. Draco just swooped in, capturing his lips in a kiss.

“Come on, you know you want to,” he cajoled, stroking Harry’s thigh, fingers tracing the inseam of his jeans.

“Pretty sure all the *scandalous tales* happen at night-time. Y’know, when the stars are out?”

Draco was unperturbed. “We can come back later, too. Pretend we’re breaking curfew, sneaking about like it’s fourth year all over again. I can’t believe we never came up here back then, honestly.”

“Too high a risk of getting caught.” That wasn’t a problem now, not with Harry’s ability to sink into the very stones of Hogwarts and pop out wherever he liked. “I suppose we can tick this place off the list,” he agreed, moving off the ledge, pulling Draco further into the room, where they were less likely to have an unexpected drop ruin the mood. He tugged on Draco’s belt. “Would be better if we were in uniform, though. More authentic.”

“I’ll show you *authentic*,” Draco muttered, rubbing Harry through his jeans. Perhaps they truly *were* going to take a nostalgia trip to fourth year, frotting against each other fully clothed and snogging until their lips were numb. Harry could absolutely get on board with that.

Then Draco paused, meeting Harry’s eyes. “Hang on, did you say you have a *list*?”

“No!” Grey eyes narrowed, and Harry faltered. “I mean, not on paper or anything. Just. Y’know. We’ve got a year left in this castle. I can travel through walls and control the wards. That leaves lots of places for me to get you off.” He moved his hands to Draco’s backside, gripping two firm handfuls and grinding their cocks together. “It’s not *really* a list.”

Draco leaned back against the wall, the line of his pale neck into his undone shirt collar drawing a needy whine from the back of Harry’s throat. “You make a fair point,” he said, rolling the words slowly over his tongue, considering the matter even as he snuck a hand under Harry’s t-shirt. He tangled a hand in Harry’s hair and yanked, kissing down his jaw. “But if there’s going to be a list, we start over on September first. Doesn’t count if school’s not in session.”

That was fair. A shiver of anticipation raced down Harry’s spine, imagining all the places they could try and have sex without getting caught. God, McGonagall was going to *hate*

them.

“Deal,” he agreed, pushing his leg between Draco’s thigh. “Let’s just call this a practice run.”

.-.-.

The next school year was going to be *terrible*.

Severus could feel it in his bones already. Having to deal with all the damn students who had seen Remus kiss him in the middle of the Great Hall. Listening to the whispers of his *star-crossed love* and his *tortured soul* as a spy for the Light. Somehow, between Harry and Remus, the public had gotten it into their heads that Severus’ entire personality was also part of the ruse to keep Voldemort oblivious of his true loyalties.

They were trying to be *nice* to him. Expecting him to be nice in return! The world had truly gone mad.

He stalked into his quarters, pausing at the sight of Remus sprawled out on his sofa, dozing. Guilt wormed through him when the werewolf startled awake. “Oh, Severus. You’re back. What time is it?”

“Not long past four.”

“Why do you look like someone cracked your favourite cauldron?”

Severus scowled, but didn’t hesitate to sit beside the man when Remus lifted his legs up pointedly. He settled them back in the Slytherin’s lap, one knee bent over Severus’. “I just had to deal with a staff meeting in which no less than six of my colleagues tried to *thank* me for my contribution to the war, apologising for thinking I was *truly so cruel* all these years.” A slow smile crept onto Remus’ face, and Severus glared at him. “Pomona tried to hug me, Remus!”

Remus outright burst into laughter at that, which was not helping Severus’ ire any. “I’m sorry,” he said, though his eyes were still dancing. “Really, I am!”

“You don’t look it, you damned wolf,” Severus groused, propping his own feet up on the coffee table. Remus smiled wider, reaching for Severus’ hand. He played with the fingers, massaging the digits, often so tense from hours holding a knife or a stirring rod.

“I just— it absolutely baffles me that these people seem to think it was a lie. Pomona taught you! She knows you’ve been your own personal storm cloud since the day you left the damned womb!”

“Yes, well, she seems to think that the love of a good man has *softened* me, but I’ve been hiding it all this time to allay suspicion,” Severus explained, rolling his eyes, and Remus scoffed.

“I’m not nearly a good enough man for that,” he remarked ruefully. “If it makes you feel better, Sev, I’m sure they’ll soon stop thinking you’ve in any way changed since the war ended. Once they see you terrify all the students into submission once more.”

"If I can even look those students in the eye knowing they watched you *molest* me." Remus barked out a laugh, grinning like the cat that caught the canary.

"Okay, I'm not sorry about that one. I couldn't help myself. That has been a fantasy of mine since I was fourteen years old."

Severus would never admit that he, too, had sometimes dreamed of staking such a public claim on Remus Lupin.

"I just don't know what to do with all these people suddenly expecting me to smile or joke or *hug*," he spat the word like a curse. "People I hardly know, even! Going to the Ministry has become impossible." He'd gone a few times; first to sort out various family affairs, then to testify against some Death Eaters, and lastly to help the Department of Education with their plans to re-integrate the Hogwarts students who had spent the last year in hiding. Minerva had made him her deputy for some *god-forsaken* reason, and he was starting to think she'd done it just to make him suffer. "I blame your brat godson more than I blame you."

Harry bloody Potter, the beacon of light and good and Gryffindor; if the public were wrong about Severus, they were even more wrong about Harry, but they would one day learn that he was a sneaky little Slytherin *shit*. Right now, they believed that the *hidden mentorship bond* between the pair of them meant that Severus was secretly some sort of warm, jovial father figure. Merlin forbid the Man-Who-Defeated be trained by someone who was exactly the miserly, severe, dark-aligned bastard that Severus absolutely was.

"Our brat godson," Remus corrected. "I keep telling you, we share him now."

"And I keep telling you, you can keep him," Severus argued by rote.

He looked at Remus, studying the lines on his face — scars, yes, but the creases at the corners of his mouth and eyes, the furrow of his brow; those were all laugh lines, smile lines. Even though for twelve years Remus had had very little to laugh or smile about, he still remained positive, caring, compassionate.

Not for the first time, Severus wondered what the hell a man like that was doing with a man like him.

"Would you prefer it, if I were nicer?" he asked suddenly, cringing at the way it came out. "In public, that is. I understand that now our association is known, there will be... unavoidable social events. I have no desire to tarnish your reputation by being my usual self."

All of a sudden, Remus used his grip on Severus' hand to pull himself into a sitting position, his legs still flung over the Potions Master's lap. "Severus," he began, and Severus braced himself for the worst. "Severus, you have been an irascible bastard since the very second I met you, and that's exactly the man I fell in love with." The Slytherin blinked, and Remus' honey eyes softened. "I don't care what people think of me, if they judge me for being with you. Quite frankly it's none of their business. I don't care if they think you're some soulless old bat — I know you, inside out, back to front and all over. I've seen you at your worst, and at your best. And I've seen what you're like with people you *actually* care about; you are entirely capable of warmth and love. I see it every day when you look at me! As long as you

don't hide that part of yourself away from me, or our friends, or the boys, or—" he paused, biting his lip, "or our kids. The general public don't matter."

Severus' breath hitched. "I... I doubt myself, sometimes. My... capabilities." His ability to express positive emotion. He still had a habit of resorting to cutting words when he got upset, even with people he loved. Especially with people he loved.

"Then it's a good thing you've got me here to have confidence in you," Remus pointed out, cupping Severus' jaw. "I'm sure it's awful having all these people crossing your boundaries and assuming things about your personality. But it'll pass. You just keep being your usual grouchy self, and they'll soon realise that you're exactly the same as you always were, except you're a bit less biased towards Slytherins and a lot less biased against Harry Potter." He grinned teasingly. "And all that changes with us is that I can finally laugh openly at your snarky little remarks instead of keeping a straight face. Honestly, anyone who thinks you don't have a sense of humour is just too thick to realise it."

Severus raised an eyebrow, hand resting on Remus' thigh. "I didn't realise you found me so... amusing."

Remus looked back at him with the same mischief Severus remembered from when they were teenagers. "Distractingly so, sometimes," he confessed. "All these Order meetings, and the staff meetings back when I worked here. Pretty sure Filius thought I had bronchitis, I was constantly coughing to hide my laughter." That gaze changed, sparking with heat that curled right around Severus' insides. "That, and the fact that I am unendingly and overwhelmingly turned on by the sight of you absolutely ripping someone to shreds with that razor-sharp tongue of yours," he drawled, a hint of a growl creeping in. "It's quite a problem, really."

Severus' eyes widened. But really, he shouldn't have been so surprised. Remus Lupin appeared to have been crafted by the universe specifically for Severus in every other way, why not also have him be aroused by what usually made Severus so hated?

Merlin, to think — he actually got to spend the rest of his life beside this man.

.-. .

Harry should have suspected, really, that Susan had tricked him. With her '*you do the hard part, Harry, and I'll take care of the rest*', placating him and encouraging him to just take care of her little Dark Lord problem, promising he could rest when that was done, and then dragging him into *this*.

There was so much to do, now they were part of the Wizengamot. The actual rebuilding of the Ministry was not their problem — certainly wasn't *Harry's* problem, anyway, though he knew Susan was helping her aunt out. And sometimes Kingsley came to Harry for a quick chat about his opinion on things. But that wasn't really working on it! The man asked the same things of Sirius and Narcissa and Remus, even Snape!

But outside of that, there were just *so many laws*. He'd known this, logically. He'd spent more time than he cared to count over the last three and a half years reading through books full of those laws, finding all the ridiculous ones that were still somehow in place. Susan had

made it sound so easy — like they would just make a big list of all the shit laws, throw out the entirely barbaric ones and re-write the less barbaric ones to be actually decent.

She had said nothing about the *arguing*.

In the Wizengamot chamber, every single law had to be discussed. It didn't matter that all of Susan's reasoning had been written out in very clear statements for the other Wizengamot members to peruse at their leisure, and it didn't matter that there was enough of a majority within their alliance that the laws were absolutely going to pass anyway — every one of them had to be brought to the table, and everyone was allowed to say their piece before a vote could even be taken. And *everyone* had opinions.

It had really quite disrupted the older members of the Wizengamot, the first time there had been any true resistance against one of Susan's suggestions — the suggestion to abolish the awful creature laws that stopped 'dark' creatures from keeping jobs, and get rid of the werewolf registration committee. Arasi Shafiq had aggressively pressed questions and scenarios against Susan in an attempt to make her back down, and had definitely not expected Daphne Greengrass to stand up and tackle his criticisms. Nor had he expected Harry to be right behind her.

The students quickly learned that the old guard, as they called them, had thought Susan the only politically-minded one of the lot of them, the rest of them led around like sheep, just agreeing with whatever their friend said. They didn't realise that all of them had spent the last several years helping Susan research these laws and consider corrections that wouldn't utterly terrify the wizarding world with their radical changes. That all of them knew these proposals inside and out, and had put more thought into every one than Harry suspected the previous Wizengamot had put in to an entire year's worth of meetings.

Susan might be their spokesperson, the one running the show, but that didn't make the rest of them idiots. They were young, but they were all capable. They knew enough of the world to know what problems they most needed to fix.

Personally, Harry couldn't *wait* for the Wizengamot and the Ministry to meet Justin Finch-Fletchley. They thought Susan was bad on her own...

They would learn.

Regardless, Harry was feeling quite duped by Susan Bones and her promises that restructuring the wizarding world would be less work for him than destroying Voldemort.

At last, the pair of them finished the reading they were doing in a small conference room off of Amelia's office; it was a counter-proposal to their changes to the laws regarding rituals for celebration, from Tiberius Ogden, and he had some decent points but *Merlin* it was a dry read.

"I think we can call it a day," Susan declared, rubbing at her face. She wasn't supposed to spend too much time reading, her eye not used to taking the full strain by itself. It gave her headaches, and then Theo gave murder-eyes to whoever let his girlfriend work herself up into said headaches.

“Please, God, yes,” Harry blurted, making the redhead giggle. “We’ve got some easier laws next, right? Nothing likely to get their backs up like this?” He hadn’t thought something as simple as bringing the traditional Yule and Samhain and Beltane rituals back into legality would be so divisive; half the purebloods had been secretly practicing them for years anyway. It wasn’t like they were trying to bring back blood rituals!

“Yeah, don’t worry — the next few are just abolishing all those stupid ancient laws about flying carpet regulations.”

Harry sighed in relief, packing up the papers around him into his new dragonhide briefcase. It was a belated birthday present from Charlie — ethically sourced, from a dragon who had died of natural causes. It was bigger on the inside, locked to everyone but him, and with the naturally spell-resistant hide could be used as a shield in a pinch.

Harry wasn’t sure what it said about him that, even with the Dark Lord gone, his family still expected him to get into the types of situations that would require an unexpected shield.

Packed up and ready to go, Susan slipped a note under Amelia’s office door to tell her they were headed back to Hogwarts for the afternoon, then the pair of them headed for the lift.

Even now, a week after the battle and with Harry in and out of the Ministry most days, he still got gawped at like the second coming of Merlin.

They stepped into the atrium, and immediately noticed something was off; there was a commotion further down the busy hall. Both of them had wands in their hands in a split second, creeping towards the source of the noise. Harry’s heart stopped.

It was Dumbledore.

The old man looked every one of his hundred and fifteen years, his body thin beneath his lurid star-spangled red robe, his gaunt face mostly hidden by his ragged beard. His cursed hand was still shrivelled — Harry’s gaze narrowed in on the ring on his finger. The resurrection stone. When had he had that re-set? Severus had told him the original ring housing it was destroyed.

“Really, I must get in to see Minister Bones immediately,” he was saying, facing a security guard who looked deeply unimpressed.

“Minister Bones is busy,” the guard said flatly, “and quite frankly, Mr Dumbledore, the things I’ve heard about you, you should be glad you’re not under arrest.”

“But that’s just it!” Dumbledore exclaimed. “I must speak with Minister Bones and get all this straightened out. It’s just a big misunderstanding, really; a silly thing that got quite out of hand!”

“You kidnapped Harry Potter!” the guard exclaimed, raising his eyebrows.

“It was a ruse!” Dumbledore said, “an attempt to distract Voldemort while Harry and I took the necessary steps to rid him of his immortality. There was never any true division between

Harry and I!" he chuckled, giving that grandfatherly smile. "But as often happens with these things, the story took on a bit of a life of its own, and, well — Harry had to continue playing his part, or else the whole thing would fail."

Harry was done listening, fury rising in his belly. He turned to Susan, whose jaw was clenched tightly. "Get your aunt," he murmured. "And send a message to Mrs Frobisher." The stack of evidence of Dumbledore's crimes she'd been sitting on for the last few months was about to see the light of day.

Susan sped off, and Harry strode forward, the crowd parting once they realised who it was.

"All a ruse, was it?" he called, drawing Dumbledore's attention. "That's the first I've heard of it."

The old man's blue eyes flashed angrily, just for a moment, before they were back to their twinkling warmth. "Harry, my boy. It's so good to see you alive and well!"

"Really, because last time we met you had me tied to a bed with my magic bound, telling me how you needed to kill me to excise the evil within me from the world."

"You don't understand, Harry!" Dumbledore insisted. "I was misguided — I believed the piece of Voldemort within you could only be removed by your death."

"And all that stuff about how he was taking over my mind and turning me into his little minion, and how you bound my magic as a baby to try and snuff it out?"

"Everything I did, Harry, I did for your own good," Dumbledore said earnestly. Harry scoffed.

"That's the biggest load of bullshit I've ever heard. You did it for your own selfish gains — you got a taste of power after you killed Grindelwald, and decided you liked it. You manipulated the children of Hogwarts without them even realising it, turning them against each other — against anything Dark, anything traditional, anything different. You made them turn to *you*, praising you as some saviour of the light, when really you were destroying the magical world from the inside out! You saw the rise of Voldemort as your chance to cement yourself as the saviour once more, to have everyone worship you as the most *powerful* wizard of the age."

Harry smirked, watching Dumbledore stutter soundlessly. "And then there was a Prophecy, declaring a *child* was destined to be the one to defeat the Dark Lord. Not you. So you plotted, and you planned. And you took your chance when my parents were killed. Binding my magic, placing me with abusive muggles, leaving me entirely oblivious to my true place in the world. Then introducing me to magic through the most prejudiced *good* people possible, letting me hear all about how *terrible* and *evil* Slytherin house is, enough to have me argue the Sorting Hat out of putting me there!"

He couldn't stop himself now; all the things he'd kept bottled up inside came spilling out of him in one furious tirade. "And if that wasn't bad enough, you manipulated people I thought were my friends into spying on me, making sure I was making the *right* choices. You

drowned me in compulsions until I'd throw myself into the danger that *you* orchestrated with a fucking smile on my face, and ignore every bit of the world except the bits you deemed acceptable for me! Was it fun for you, making your little plans to test how far I would go without getting myself killed? Making me hate myself, making me believe I had nothing — making me believe my life was only worthwhile as a sacrifice so others could live? You decided from the second you saw that scar on my head that I had to die, so you turned me into a living bomb, chaining my magic so tight that I'd level all of fucking Hogwarts when I came of age unless you chose to release it. All so I could *fulfil my destiny* and you could sweep in and take care of the rest, claim my death was a *tragic accident* and go on acting like your every word is fucking gospel."

Harry trembled with rage as he stared at Dumbledore, his words spent — what else was there to say? None of it would change anything. None of it would make Dumbledore feel one single *speck* of remorse for what he'd put Harry through, what he'd put all of them through.

"Harry..." Dumbledore's mouth drew in a frown, his eyes going serious. "I see now that you are not as free of his influence as I thought. All of these lies fed to you, this poison against me — can't you see how he lurks within you still? His soul, bound to yours?" He shook his head sadly. "As long as he is present, there is a chance for his return, a chance to ruin the peace we have all worked so hard for." The old man drew his wand, and Harry tensed. "I am truly sorry it has come to this, my boy, but sometimes difficult decisions must be made. It is for the greater good."

The first spell came hurtling towards him, and sent the crowd of onlookers scattering. Harry ducked it, firing back one of his own immediately. He could hardly believe this was happening, hardly believe Dumbledore was trying to kill him in the middle of the *Ministry*. What did he hope to achieve, even if he succeeded?

All people would see was him murdering their saviour. He was truly mad if he thought he could repair his reputation enough to save that.

But Dumbledore was giving it all he had; this was not like his duel with Voldemort, in this very space just over a year ago. That duel had been a show of power, a brag, a mockery. Not to harm but to make the other feel inferior.

This time, Dumbledore was aiming to kill.

But he was not the man he had been a year ago. And Harry was not the same boy he had been, either.

Draco was right; the power difference between them was almost laughable. Dumbledore was clearly trying his hardest, and Harry wasn't even struggling with it. Considering the other man had the Deathstick, the Elder Wand, it was truly a show of how far he had fallen.

Or perhaps the wand recognised Harry as a Peverell, and refused to try too hard against one touched by Death.

Either way, Harry knew he had to end it before someone else got hurt. There were at least forty other people still in the atrium, and Dumbledore did not seem to care about who he hit

in the process as long as Harry was dead.

“Expelliarmus!” Harry yelled, hoping to Disarm the man so the aurors could deal with him. The spell hit Dumbledore with enough force to knock him to the ground, while the wand jumped straight into Harry’s left hand. The moment it touched his skin, it felt like a livewire pressing against him, power coursing through his body.

“Albus Dumbledore, you are under arrest!” Tonks’ voice called out over the chatter of the crowd. She strode over with a pair of aurors at her back, and Dumbledore gasped where he was crumpled on the floor.

“No! You can’t— you don’t understand! The boy must die!” He was clutching at his chest, craning up to look at Harry, shock filling his face when he saw the Elder Wand in the Gryffindor’s hand. “No! My... my wand.” The last word came out as a breathy croak, and Harry saw the exact moment life left Albus Dumbledore’s body. The Elder Wand seemed to *shiver* in his hand, warm against his palm. In the middle of the atrium, Albus Dumbledore slumped down, utterly still.

Not waiting for Tonks to move, Harry strode up to him. He had to *know*, had to see if there was any truth to this Master of Death business. Surely, as a Peverell — as *Lord Peverell* — he would feel something of that connection if it existed.

Harry dropped to his knees at Dumbledore’s side, looking right into the man’s blank eyes. As if in a trance, he reached out, placing a hand on his thin chest. He wasn’t breathing. There was no magic to him, not even a tiny fading spark. Just... nothing.

“He’s dead,” he announced dully, looking up at Tonks. “I suppose the shock was too much for him. That curse in his hand...” He trailed off; let the public make of that what they will.

They couldn’t say Harry killed him. Everyone had seen it was a simple Disarming charm he had thrown.

How much damage Harry had done with such a simple spell, over the years.

No one moved. No one seemed to know what to do now — Dumbledore had been raving madness to his very last breath, but before all that he’d been a beacon of hope to them all. How was one supposed to react to that?

Looking back down at the body, Harry’s gaze caught on a glint of something shiny.

Where Dumbledore’s withered hand was still at his chest, there shone the resurrection stone on its plain silver ring. Once a horcrux, now both so much less and so much more.

It was as if another entity was moving Harry’s body. Discreetly, as if just adjusting Dumbledore’s robe, Harry reached forward and slipped the ring off the blackened, shrivelled finger. He tried not to shudder as he touched the cursed flesh; that dark magic was long inert, now.

He pulled back, dropping the ring in his pocket as he got to his feet.

"I'm going back to the school," he said, looking at Tonks as he spoke, barely even noticing the rest of the room. Tonks reached out as if to hug him, to say something, but let her hand fall awkwardly in the space between them.

"Okay. I... we'll sort things out here."

That was all Harry wanted. No one stopped him as he strode towards the floo, picking up the briefcase he had dropped in the fight. No one said a word as he grabbed a handful of green powder and tossed it into the flames, calling for the school and disappearing in a whirl of ash and flames.

The floo spat him out into the Great Hall. Harry took one look at the people gathered there — Sirius and Narcissa and Draco and Charlie, staring at him with confusion at his blank-faced gaze, at the familiar second wand in his hand — and turned on his heel, walking straight into the wall beside the fireplace.

He needed to be alone.

.-. .

Alone, it turned out, was not quite how he ended up; in his emotional state the castle had interpreted his request for privacy in the usual way, taking him down to the Chamber of Secrets. The one place no other living person could reach, not even Neville — like Harry, he could now walk through walls in Hogwarts, but even the castle would not take him to Slytherin's chamber without permission.

No other living person was down there. But the portrait of Salazar Slytherin had plenty to say about Harry's abrupt arrival.

In a way, the castle did the right thing — Harry needed to talk to *someone*, but he needed someone who would understand, who wouldn't judge him. Someone who had seen far too much of the world to be concerned by Harry's fucked up and complicated feelings about the death of his old headmaster, technically at his hand.

"What if that's what the Prophecy meant all along?" Harry pondered, lying on his back on the sofa in Salazar's office, staring up at the ceiling. "What if defeating a Dark Lord meant both of them? I know Dumbledore wasn't exactly a *Dark Lord* but he was certainly cruel and manipulative enough to count for something."

"Does it change anything, if it did?" Salazar pointed out. "They're both dead now. You still live. That is all that matters."

"But... he was everything, to so many people. For a while he was everything to *me*." Dumbledore had been the most incredible person in the world, to eleven year-old Harry. The man who had saved him from the Dursleys and brought him to this wondrous world of magic and warmth and *home*.

And then Harry had discovered the truth of it all, and everything had been ruined.

"Often our idols will shatter the pedestals we put them on, in the end," Salazar said wisely. "Your Albus Dumbledore, while I'm sure a very powerful and capable wizard in his time, was just a man. And men are far too easily corruptible." He frowned down at his young heir. "You have hated this man for longer than you have loved him. You have spent months preparing to destroy his reputation so that he can rot in Azkaban. Now he is dead and gone and no longer has any sort of hold over your life. You should be happy."

Harry snorted bitterly. He wasn't sure what he felt right now, but happy certainly wasn't it.

"Are you upset because he did not suffer?" Salazar asked, no judgement in his tone. "Because he will not live to see you destroy the world's view of him? Because from the sounds of things, you had begun to do so long before today. He spent the last few months of his life in hiding because of you — he got to see the consequences of his actions, if only in part. And he got to see you succeed without him, see you loved and happy despite everything he tried to ruin. He suffered the loss of his dignity, the loss of his magic, the loss of his influence; all in a very public forum. Does that make you feel better?"

Part of Harry hated it, because damn it all, it *did*.

"I don't know what I want," he admitted. "I don't know what I feel. I just... I didn't expect it to go this way." This didn't feel like closure, or relief. He just felt... hollow.

"That's normal," Salazar told him, surprisingly gentle. "I daresay you have the right to be confused about it all. But I *also* think that the best thing for it is time, and comfort. From actual, living humans." Harry gave him a look, and Salazar stared back, unrelenting. "Go back up to the castle, Harry. Find your family, and that young man of yours. Allow them to help you through this — you may find they have a similar mindset."

Harry made to argue, then paused; Dumbledore had ruined more lives than just his. He'd cursed Remus with the spell to make his werewolf half hate him, to use him as an example of the kind of *beasts* that needed taming even if they meant well. He'd let Sirius languish in Azkaban for twelve years because he couldn't bear to have someone around who cared more about Harry than the war. He'd forced Snape to do terrible, terrible things in the name of spying, and allowed the teenage Marauders to harass and almost murder him in the name of *friendly house rivalry*.

Maybe they would understand a little of what he was feeling.

"Fine, you win," he muttered, glaring at the smug portrait. "I'm going."

"Your life will be much easier once you learn to accept that I am always right," Salazar replied. It was such a *Slytherin* thing to say it made Harry snort as he stepped through the wall, reappearing in the Great Hall exactly where he'd left it.

Immediately, Sirius jumped to his feet, bundling him in a hug. "Oh, thank fuck, there you are!" He pulled him close, kissing his crown. "Susan came and told us what happened. Harry... I'm so sorry you had to go through that, love, I truly am."

Harry gripped the front of his godfather's blouse, throat aching and eyes itching like he was going to cry but the tears didn't come. He couldn't steady his tumultuous emotions long enough for his body to decide to cry.

Sirius just held him, murmuring words of comfort, carding a hand through his hair. "Everything is gonna be alright, kiddo," he promised. "It's all over now. Everything's done. You can rest."

Choking on a ragged breath, Harry did just that, burying his face in Sirius' chest and just falling into the embrace. Sirius kept him upright, leading him over to the nearest bench so he could sit and just hold Harry like he was a small child, cradling him. Harry didn't even notice when the animagus lifted his wand and send off a Patronus.

He did notice when several more sets of footsteps entered the hall. He raised his head, seeing the whole family — Charlie, the two Malfoys, Remus and Snape — come hurrying over, stopping just short of the embracing pair.

"Harry," Draco started, worry plain on his face. "I... are you alright?"

"We looked everywhere," Remus said, "where did you even go?"

Draco and Snape both had knowing expressions, and Harry just shook his head. Now wasn't the time to drop that bombshell. "Doesn't matter," he murmured. "I just... I needed some space."

"Of course, yeah," Draco agreed instantly. "Are you okay?"

Harry couldn't help but laugh. What a ridiculous question.

"Tell you what, pup," Sirius murmured, chin still propped on Harry's head. "I think it's time we all went home. We've been living in this bloody castle long enough — you need some distance from this place before you're back in it for the next four months."

"It would do my old heart some good if we didn't live in a place where you could walk through the walls whenever you please," Remus agreed, making Harry smile despite himself.

Home sounded good.

"I— I need to go pack, then," he started, trying to wrestle his way out of Sirius' embrace, but the dark-haired man held fast.

"The elves can handle it," he insisted. "Your friend Dobby."

"I'll send word to Minerva," Snape volunteered.

It seemed they wanted to get Harry home before he changed his mind, wandered off through another wall to a place where they couldn't follow. Guilt gnawed at him for that — it wasn't fair on them, he shouldn't have done that, he just kept worrying people — but he pushed it away, letting Sirius pull him to his feet and start directing him towards the door.

One of these days, Harry would have to figure out if his manipulation of the wards extended to apparating through them. Having to walk all the way to the gates was such a pain.

But not now. He was not in the emotional state to be experimenting with that.

The sight of Seren Du towering ahead of him made Harry's knees weaken with relief. This was a place that the war hadn't touched, this was safety and comfort and *home*.

Ceri greeted them at the door, beaming. "Ceri is glad to have Masters and Mistress home!" she chirped.

"We're glad too, Ceri. Would you do a round of hot chocolates up to the family living room, please?" Sirius requested. "And then when you've got time, head to Hogwarts and help Dobby pack up all our things? We left a bit abruptly."

The elf nodded, disappearing, and Harry dragged his feet up the stairs, still tucked under Sirius' arm. In the living room, the pair collapsed on the sofa together, Sirius easily shifting to cuddle Harry, stretched out across the cushions. A quick spell from Draco had both of their shoes removed, the blond offering a gentle smile.

Harry hoped he wasn't upset, didn't take it personally that Harry was so attached to Sirius. He just... needed a parent, right now.

Ceri arrived with hot chocolate, and Harry sat up carefully so he didn't spill. Holding the warm mug in both hands, he sipped the sweet liquid, feeling it run all the way down to his stomach. His shoulders eased, his brain finally able to think of something other than Dumbledore's eyes losing their twinkle for good, locked with his.

He looked up. Across from him, Remus smiled. "Chocolate cures everything," he said knowledgeably. Harry snorted.

"I just... I can't believe he's gone," he breathed, shaking his head. "I didn't—I didn't mean to."

"No one blames you, pup," Sirius said immediately. "Everyone there saw you use a Disarming charm. He was just old, and suffering under that curse."

"It's a miracle he lasted as long as he did," Severus confirmed.

Harry wondered how it would have been, if Dumbledore *had* died in whatever hole he was hiding in. How long before any of them would have known?

Would it have felt better than this?

"End of an era," Charlie murmured, "and a new one begins." He smiled encouragingly at Harry. "Good thing we've got so many of us making sure it's a bloody good one, eh?"

His words eased something deep within Harry's chest — the worry that he might be becoming like Dumbledore, or worse, like Voldemort. Too powerful, too unquestioned, too unfettered.

Too loved.

It was a different kind of love, he decided. He had the kind of love that was not blind devotion, but the kind that would smack him over the head and tell him he was being a prick when he needed it. The kind that would hold him accountable.

This was not one person building a new empire. This was a whole team of them, building a community.

He sipped at his hot chocolate, and leaned against his godfather, waiting for one of them to ask him to put a name to his feelings, to *let it out*, so to speak.

But they didn't. They all just remained silent, drinking and sitting with each other and offering merely their presence to ease Harry's heart. If he had wanted to speak, they would have listened. But they wouldn't push.

When Ceri came to collect their empty mugs, Sirius quietly declared it bedtime, making Harry realise just how long he had spent down in Salazar's office. No wonder they were all worried.

Every single one of them hugged him goodnight, even Snape. The tall Slytherin paused, his hands on Harry's shoulders. "You have released me from two masters, now," he murmured, eyes meeting Harry's, voice fraught with emotion, "I don't know if you understand how impossible I believed that to be. You are a marvel, Harry Potter. But you are not an island."

Then he kissed Harry's forehead and turned him around, straight into Draco's arms. "Don't let that old fool's nonsense get in your head," he said, louder. "He is but a footnote in history, now."

Harry nodded solemnly, and let his boyfriend lead him to bed.

It felt like a lifetime since he'd last been in his room in Seren Du. So much had happened since then. He was a different person, practically.

But some things were the same. Like Draco fussing over him as he put his pyjamas on, rolling into the centre of the bed to pull Harry close, their legs tangling together. "I love you," Draco whispered, lips pressed to his hair. "Whatever you need, I'm here. No matter what."

For some reason, that did it. That loosened off the vice grip inside his chest, shook out all the emotions jumbled up inside him.

Finally the tears came.

Chapter End Notes

Sometimes, the moral of the story is the things that are terrifying and insurmountable are actually things you are prepared and capable of defeating. And sometimes powerful men are not actually that powerful.

Chapter 107

Harry's first thought in the morning was to wonder where the hell he was. The second was that he really had to stop falling asleep crying in Draco's arms — it was starting to become a habit.

Draco was still asleep when he woke, and he laid in bed for a while, glad to be back in his own room. He hadn't realised how suffocating the castle had begun to feel, his brain still in war-mode long after the battle had ended. Here he could relax. He could start returning to normality.

He snorted quietly. What the hell even was that, for Harry James Potter??

He watched Draco, the blond's face relaxed in slumber. Watched the steady rise and fall of his chest, the way his arm stretched out towards Harry even while unconscious. He was so fucking *pretty*, face all high cheekbones and strong jaw, what had been pointy as an eleven year-old now evened out into features photographers would weep over. Narrow, sculpted shoulders and the smooth slope of his back, hitting a quidditch player's arse and thighs, toned and pale. Certainly the prettiest person Harry had ever seen.

But he drooled in his sleep, and despite all his excessive skincare rituals — or perhaps because Harry kept making him forget about his excessive skincare rituals — there was a smattering of acne flaring on the right side of his chin. His nose was a little crooked, where it had broken by his father's hand as a child. He was eighty percent limbs, all of which seemed to find a way to jab into Harry while they slept. He kicked the covers to the bottom of the bed every damn night, except when it was cold and then he stole them all for himself. There were marks on his skin now, war wounds he hadn't had the time to heal properly, silvery scars only noticeable if you got up close.

He wasn't flawless. He wasn't perfect. But Harry loved every last bit of him.

Normality was this, perhaps. Watching Draco sleep beside him, relishing in the quiet calm. Getting up and going downstairs where Ceri would have breakfast ready. Going for a fly, perhaps. God, he hadn't been on his broom in what felt like forever.

He had tryouts for the England national team in a few weeks. Was that normality? Either way he should probably get some practice in. Oliver would kill him if he didn't show his best.

All of those things — quidditch and friends and family — those were all normality. Going back to school would be normality.

Now, going to Wizengamot meetings was normality.

He had a life. And with Dumbledore gone, he could finally stop worrying about the ghosts from his past and actually *live* it.

Grinning, he skimmed a hand over Draco's back, gently shaking the Slytherin's shoulder. A rush of fondness flooded him as that perfect pink mouth screwed up in a frown, eyes blinking open in disgruntlement that immediately softened at the sight of Harry. "You're smiling," he murmured, reaching a hand up to run his thumbs over Harry's lips. "That's... not what I expected."

Harry chuckled, kissing him quickly. "I feel okay, I think," he said. "I think— it's going to be a good day."

Draco rolled onto his back, arching up in a stretch that made his spine click horrendously but also made his t-shirt ride up and expose the V of his hipbone. "Well, if the *saviour* has decreed it, it shall be so," he declared magnanimously. "What are we doing, on this good day of ours?"

"Breakfast, first," Harry told him, "then quidditch. Then... we'll see how it goes." He leered, and Draco smirked up at him rakishly.

"I like the sound of all of those things. Guess we'd better get up."

Downstairs, Harry's good mood was almost dented by the *Prophet* headline declaring Dumbledore's death, promising a full account of the story within. But the second, smaller headline perked him up.

The Ministerial vote would be happening on the 30th of August.

He leaned in a bit to get a better look, and Snape eyed him over the top of the paper. "Amelia will win," he said confidently. "The only person running against her is that idiot Hawthorne from the Order."

Harry vaguely remembered the man; he was one of Dumbledore's lackeys, one who had gone with Alastor Moody after the attack on Hogsmeade.

He didn't stand a chance against Amelia Bones.

Bolstered by that knowledge, he sat down, immediately presented with a stack of pancakes and a cup of tea. "Master Harry is not getting pancakes on his birthday," Ceri said. "But it is better late than never!"

Her huge eyes were hopeful, waiting for Harry's response. He beamed at her. "Brilliant, thanks Ceri. I've missed your cooking."

It seemed that was the perfect thing to say, as the elf quietly wriggled with delight before hurrying back to the stove.

They chatted over breakfast, about inconsequential things. Harry was inordinately grateful that they weren't looking at him like he was about to crack.

He had devoted enough pain and grief to Albus Dumbledore in his life. The man didn't deserve any more now he was dead.

“What’s everyone up to today, then?” he asked, peering around the table.

“Actually, pup, I wanted to ask you about that,” Sirius began. His voice wavered with nerves, and he reached across to take Charlie’s hand. Both of them looked worryingly serious, and Harry straightened up. “We, ah, got confirmation yesterday that Mr and Mrs Forrester were killed in what was probably a raid — muggles had it down as a gas leak.”

That was usually the cover-up. Sirius exchanged a weighted look with Charlie, then turned back to his godson. “We... Charlie and I...”

“We’re going to put in the paperwork to adopt the kids,” Charlie finished for him. “They’re confirmed Prewetts by Gringotts, so that’ll smooth things along.” Harry already knew that; the tests had been days ago, sixteen kids in all, and every one of them traced back to a wizarding family somewhere down the line. It turned out Charlie’s Great Aunt Muriel had a squib sister no one had spoken about, put up for quiet adoption as a child.

“They aren’t ready to leave the Pottery yet,” Sirius added quickly. “I don’t think Nash wants to until Frankie has somewhere to go. Which, honestly, might take a while.” The boy was a Yaxley, they had discovered, and there wasn’t a single scrap of that family left elsewhere. As a mouthy little Slytherin with a chip on his shoulder, he didn’t exactly have any friends with families willing to take him in. “But Charlie and I thought we’d go over this afternoon and ask the three of them if they’d like to be family. And then we thought we might go to Grimmauld, for a family dinner. Not the extended, just us lot. The house is empty now, and it’s somewhere familiar to them. A good place for you all to get to know each other better.”

He looked so tentative, the hope on his face so fragile, like Harry might throw a screaming fit and refuse. As if Harry hadn’t been rooting for this since the day Sirius had called him on the mirror and told him about the three kids with curly red hair and familiar blue eyes.

“That sounds like a brilliant idea,” he enthused, watching Sirius light up. “Why don’t you invite Frankie along, too? They won’t want to leave him behind, and we’ve got enough snakes in the family he won’t be overrun. Maybe he’ll warm up to Draco,” he suggested, grinning.

The pair looked surprised. “We hadn’t thought of that. But yeah, why not; the more the merrier, eh? Pretty sure Nashira and Frankie are attached at the hip anyway, by this point. We’ll have to acclimatise him to the family eventually,” Charlie said, snorting.

“Definitely a good idea to start with the Black side of the family,” Remus piped up. “The Weasley side will send them all running for sure.”

Charlie mock-glared. “They happen to think the twins are brilliant, thank you very much.”

“They would,” Severus said with a roll of his eyes. “I dread to think what kind of hellions you two will turn those twins into, even without Fred and George to assist. Perhaps I should plan to retire from teaching by then.”

“Come on, Uncle Sev,” Draco cajoled. “You survived teaching us, how much worse can it get?”

The Potions Master levelled the most dry, deadpan stare he could muster at his godson. “You have not graduated yet.”

At the other end of the table, Narcissa hid a giggle behind her napkin. “Well, I think that all sounds like a marvellous idea,” she agreed. “Just let me know what time to be home — I’m having tea with Miss Ashford this morning, to discuss her further education.”

“That’s the new Rosier heir, right?” Draco checked.

“Indeed. Poor dear has no idea what to expect from such things, raised as a muggleborn. Hogwarts teaches nothing about pureblood culture, it’s disgraceful.”

“Yeah, we’re working on that,” Harry assured. “It’s on Susan’s list.”

Narcissa’s lips quirked in amusement. “Lady Bones has quite the list indeed.”

That was an understatement if Harry had ever heard one.

“Well, Mother, I’m sure you’ll enjoy having a young lady to teach about etiquette and comportment and all the family gossip and what not,” Draco sighed, eyes flashing in jest. “You always did wish for a daughter.”

“I wished for a child that might sit still long enough to listen,” Narcissa chided playfully. “Instead I got a boy who spent all his lessons staring at the fireplace waiting for Uncle Severus to come teach him Potions.”

Both Draco and Snape went pink across the cheeks, though a pleased smile flickered across the Potions Master’s face.

“That’s adorable,” Harry declared, grinning at the pair of them. “Draco and I are going to play quidditch this morning, if that’s alright?”

“We’ll be around,” Remus confirmed. “Though with the way Draco’s healing magic is coming along, perhaps you don’t need us in case of emergency.”

“We will if the emergency is Draco crashing into the ground,” Harry reasoned wryly.

“Such faith in my flying skills.”

“I have faith in your flying. I have less faith in your ability to recognise that you’re not going to outlast me in a dive.”

Draco jabbed him in the side, then stole his last bite of pancake. “You’re going to regret that comment, Potter.”

“Oh, Merlin,” Sirius muttered, “out come the last names. Quit flirting and bugger off outside, I’ve had enough of watching the pair of you make eyes at each other.”

Harry laughed, refraining from pointing out what a hypocrite his godfather was, as he and Charlie were the biggest flirts of them all.

“Masters’ quidditch things is being in the shed,” Ceri piped up. “Dobby is putting them there last night.”

“Perfect, thanks.” Harry thought for a moment. “My practice snitch is still in my trunk, I think. I’m gonna run up and grab it; I’ll meet you outside?”

Draco nodded, brushing a kiss across Harry’s cheek before the Gryffindor could sprint up to his room. So focused on finding the snitch so he could get out in the sunshine and up in the air, Harry almost didn’t notice the things on the bed. Then he skidded to a halt, eyes going wide.

The bed was made — a habit after years of having to make Dudley’s — and there, in the centre, was a folded up cloak. His invisibility cloak.

He took a step closer, realising the cloak was not alone. On top of it lay the Elder Wand and the resurrection stone in its new ring, both items that had been in his pocket the night before that he’d completely forgotten about in his grief.

But how the hell did they get *there*?

With a hesitant hand, Harry reached out, brushing his fingers over the silky fabric. He had truly thought he would never see it again, thought it was lost to Dumbledore forever.

This Hallow can only be freely given. Never stolen .

He jumped at the voice that echoed through his head. His eyes went wide. Was that...

The truth that all the legends forgot, is that the Hallows combined mean nothing in the hands of one who fears Death. A true master does not fear their subject, after all.

Yup; Death itself was speaking to him, in his head. Or he’d gone mad.

Not madness, little Master.

I don’t want to be your Master; Harry thought at the entity. *I never asked for any of this.*

Exactly. I knew, when I created these Hallows, that they would drive mortals mad. That they would send souls to my domain, in their greed and lust for power. And I knew, when I offered these Hallows to three young men, that their family would be the perfect vessel for the magic I offered. It takes more than just ownership of the Hallows, little Master. It takes Peverell blood, and a soul that has seen Death up close yet does not shy away, does not seek to delay it. A soul I have been waiting for for a very long time.

Harry stared at the bedspread, at the cloak and stone and wand lying innocently on top. *You knew it would be me, when you made them? How... how is that possible?*

Time means little in Death, little Master. The voice sounded almost amused. ***Now, you have the Hallows. The strength of the Deathstick, the power of the Resurrection Stone, the protection of the Invisibility Cloak. I am at your command. What will you do?***

Harry had no idea what that even *entailed*, but he knew the very idea of some other mystical *destiny*, some important power that was only his to control, just sounded too fucking exhausting to even contemplate.

“I’m going to go play quidditch with my boyfriend,” he said aloud, gathering up the wand and the cloak and the stone and chucking them all in the bottom of his wardrobe. “And I’m going to deal with all that later.”

As he hunted for his snitch, he heard Death chuckle in the back of his mind. *A wise choice, little Master.*

He grabbed his snitch, and didn’t look back at the wardrobe once on his way out.

Harry didn’t need time to think about it, truly. He knew exactly what he was going to do with those three items, the power they entailed.

He was going to keep it a secret, eventually pass the cloak on to his eldest child as tradition dictated, and die peacefully of old age without anyone knowing a single thing about the whole affair. That was not a kind of power he wanted to reintroduce to the world; Death had had its fun, letting the Hallows circulate. It was time to end that, now.

He sprinted across the grounds, seeing Draco waiting by the broom shed, both their brooms in hand. “You took your time! Forgotten what it’s like to use stairs like us common folk?” he teased. Harry kissed him with enough force to make him take a steady step backwards, pulling back to a look of surprise. “What was that for?”

“I just love you,” Harry replied, smiling widely. “Now let’s fly.”

He grabbed his broom, kicking off into the air with a whoop of joy.

Normality.

.-. .

As a child, Harry had often wondered what it would be like to have siblings.

When he was vey young indeed he had thought Dudley would be like a sibling, though that hope had quickly died. Then when he met the Weasleys, spent time in their house and listened to all Ron’s stories about his older brothers, the jealousy had settled in him once more.

Of course, these days he had more honorary siblings than he could shake a stick at, but it wasn’t quite the same.

Not like playing with Nashira and the twins.

Amita — Amy for short — and Tahan, both eight years old and coming out of their shells after the hellish year they had been through, were absolutely destroying Harry at the board game they’d picked out. And he was loving every second of it.

“I’m starting to regret having you on my team,” Nashira told him plainly, and he ran a hand through his hair.

“Look, I don’t play many board games, alright?” he defended. “Been a bit busy with other things.” Nashira raised an eyebrow at him, as if to say ‘that’s not an excuse’.

“Harry, they’re *eight*. And they’re winning.”

“Maybe we’ll do better in the next round.”

Over on the sofa, Sirius let out a bark of laughter. He was curled up against Charlie’s side, watching the four play their game with shining eyes, like he’d never seen anything better in his life. The family dinner had gone as easy as breathing, the four kids slotting into the whole affair like they’d been part of it from day one. The adoption papers hadn’t been signed yet, but Harry expected it wouldn’t be long.

“We would do better if you would stop being so *nice* to them!” Nashira complained, moving her game piece along. “You’ve had so many opportunities to knock them back and you never do!”

“I don’t want to make them cry!” As if on cue, the twins looked at him with identical wobbling lower lips and wide, sad eyes. Nashira scoffed.

“God, you’re useless,” she huffed, then grinned. “You’re gonna have to learn to stand up to them if you really want to do this whole sibling thing. They’ll walk all over you otherwise.”

“She’s not wrong, kid,” Charlie agreed, smirking at the Potter lord. “The little ones are always cute and adorable and then they turn out to be terrifying once they realise you’re weak to them. Look at me and Ginny.”

Harry snorted — it was true, Charlie couldn’t ever say no to Ginny, and the youngest Weasley knew it.

“Draco, help!” he begged pathetically, turning hopeful eyes on his boyfriend.

“Sorry, love; only child, quite like it that way,” came the blond’s even response.

Nashira put a hand on Harry’s arm, a tentative smile on her face. “How about next round we do me and Tahan against you and Amy. It’s always easier if we split them up.” The smile turned a little guilty. “I might’ve been throwing you in at the deep end with this round.”

Harry shook his head, looking to the twins, who had innocence in their smiles but mischief in their eyes. “I’m not sure I want siblings anymore,” he declared archly. “Not if you’re going to gang up on me all the time.”

Amy giggled, throwing herself into his lap and hugging him around the neck. “We’re sorry,” she said, not sounding remotely apologetic. “Nash said you were a Slytherin even though you’re a Gryffindor so we thought you’d be all mean like Frankie is.”

“Oi!” Frankie exclaimed, looking over with offence written across his face. He was sat with Remus, Severus and Draco — and had been practically shadowing his housemaster all evening. “Wanting to win isn’t being *mean*, you little brat. I won’t go easy just because you’re eight.”

Nashira gave Harry a pointed look, a clear ‘*that is how it should be*’, and Harry sighed, looping his arm around Amy’s waist.

“Okay, then. I can be mean. But if anyone cries, I’m blaming Nash,” he warned, then grinned down at his new teammate. “Let’s kick their arses, yeah?”

It might be a steep learning curve, but Harry was more than willing to figure it out.

.-. .

Diagon Alley was a place Harry hadn’t been in over a year, and he knew he had to face up to it. The idea of going to a place with so many people — people who would likely not be as polite regarding his boundaries as those at the Ministry — made his skin crawl, but he’d have to go there eventually. And he didn’t want to wait until booklists arrived, or the alley would be even more swarmed than usual.

So he made his plans, roped Sirius in so he couldn’t chicken out of it, kissed Draco goodbye, and apparated to London.

The sheer volume of the wizarding shopping area made his pulse pick up. Sirius squeezed his shoulder, eyes darkened with concern. “You alright, kiddo?”

“Yeah. Fine. Just,” he grimaced, looking ahead at the throng of people, “if you spend half this visit carrying a fox in your arms, I apologise in advance.”

Sirius laughed, ruffling his hair. “No judgement from me, after the amount of times I became Padfoot to avoid people.” Then he put his arm round Harry’s shoulders, and led him into the crowd.

Bringing Sirius had another advantage — the man actually had some shopping to do, so Harry wouldn’t just be wandering aimlessly and getting steadily more panicked. Sirius wanted to buy some presents for the kids to help them feel a bit more welcome when they eventually moved out of the Pottery, and it was Harry’s job to stop him going overboard.

“Do you know if Nash likes flying at all, pup?” Sirius asked, eyes landing on Quality Quidditch Supplies. “Because I thought about getting the twins some kid brooms and I’d like to get her one too, but I don’t know if she’d even like it.”

His fretting was adorable, and Harry grinned. “She hasn’t flown much since first year lessons, but I think she’d like to do more. Just — not a Firebolt, yeah?” They didn’t need to be buying a fourteen year-old with very little flying experience the fastest broom on the market.

“Right, yeah, of course,” Sirius agreed, nodding absently, his mind already on the prospect of buying quidditch supplies for the kids.

“And you should get something for Frankie, too.” Harry smirked. “Or maybe Moony and Sev can get him something.”

Sirius finally looked away from the shop, turning to Harry with a knowing sparkle in his eyes. “You noticed that too, then?”

The entire family dinner, Frankie had been utterly enraptured by the Slytherin half of the family, but more specifically Snape — and Remus along with him. And far from being as stand-offish as he usually was with students, Snape had quite happily talked Potions with the boy most of the night, meeting all of Frankie’s snide remarks with equally cutting quips of his own.

Harry had a sneaking suspicion it would not be as difficult to find a foster family for the boy as they had feared. Nor would Nashira have to worry about losing her best friend.

“Remus had that look on his face, and you know Severus is a total pushover for him,” he added, amused. No one would ever believe such a thing, but it was true, no matter how much the Potions Master denied it. Remus Lupin was his sun, moon and stars, and he would do whatever it took to make him happy. Even adopt a cynical, fourteen year-old Slytherin orphan.

Harry suspected, having seen the pair interact, that Snape wouldn’t need all that much convincing.

They were starting to get noticed for sure, now; whispers of both their names trickling through the crowd. Sirius was almost as famous as Harry these days — the Pureblood Lord, the last bastion of the oldest family in magical Britain, abandoned by the justice system for so long and finally reintroduced to the world. Sirius had been free for a year now, but it hadn’t exactly been a year for shopping sprees and social outings.

The pair of them together were quite the sight. Maybe Harry should’ve brought Charlie, instead.

But Sirius was remarkably good at letting all the mutters and exclamations slide right off his back, chatting to Harry about the pros and cons of the Cleansweep 9 as a good starter broom for Nashira, trying to persuade him that they absolutely needed tiny adorable matching quidditch uniforms for the twins.

“No house colours until they’re Sorted,” Harry insisted firmly, shaking his head at the child-sized Gryffindor uniforms. “You don’t want to pressure them.” Then he smirked. “Besides, you know Ollie will have Puddlemere kit for the lot of them sent over the moment Charlie tells him the good news. That man is just *waiting* for a load of kids to spoil rotten. He’s already sent a bunch of quidditch-themed onesies to Tonks.” Oliver Wood, despite his intimidating stature and professional quidditch career, was the textbook definition of *broody* these days, and Harry wondered how long Cassius would hold him off before seeking out a surrogate.

“Fair point,” Sirius relented, before darting across the shop to look at junior quidditch ball sets.

Harry didn’t argue that one. He quite liked the idea of helping teach the kids to play. They’d certainly have lots of instructors in the family, for any position they chose.

After Quality Quidditch Supplies, they went to Flourish and Blotts, though Harry wasn’t sure why when they had both an owl-order catalogue and also a bigger library than Hogwarts itself. With Harry’s own personal book collection, which he was happy to share, the kids weren’t likely to want for reading material.

Then, because it was truly inevitable with a Marauder and the son of a Marauder, they ended up at Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes.

Harry hadn’t seen the twins or their usual entourage lately, as they’d all been so busy with the shop. Sure enough, the place was packed to the rafters, adults and kids alike all oohing and ahing over the twins’ creations.

“There he is!” Fred exclaimed, popping up on Harry’s left.

“Our favouritest little brother!” George appeared on Sirius’ right.

“And our newest favouritest big brother!” Fred teased with a wink at the dog animagus. “We heard you were about. Worried for a minute you might not come visit.”

“As if I’d do that.” Harry rolled his eyes. “Have you got time to chat?”

“Lee and Lissy are on it, and Blaise is around here somewhere,” George assured dismissively. “All the time in the world for you, Harrikins.”

“And we’ve got some presents for you to take home with you,” Fred added. “For the new recruits.”

Harry snorted at the description — indeed, sometimes it did feel a bit like the family was something you got recruited into, rather than the traditional method of acquiring new members. A bunch of waifs and strays, picking up more of the same.

They browsed the shop as they walked, and for the first time Harry hardly even got noticed — the shoppers were far too engrossed in the products to notice Harry Potter among them. They chatted with the twins, promising to sort out a big family dinner once things were quieter, catching up on the extended Weasley family gossip. Bill and Fleur had bought a cottage off the coast of Norfolk, and apparently Mr Weasley was looking at a promotion to the head of the whole Misuse of Muggle Artefacts department.

“That’s brilliant!” Harry enthused, beaming. Arthur Weasley more than deserved it.

“It’s not confirmed yet, they’re still shifting things about over at the Ministry — as I’m sure you know, *Lord Potter*,” George teased, ruffling Harry’s hair. “But Percy says it’s a sure bet, and he would know.”

Percy was, according to Amelia Bones, the most valuable asset the entire Ministry had. Something that made him turn beet red every time she said it within his earshot. In the days since Dumbledore's death, the pair of them had been working with Mrs Frobisher and a reporter at the *Prophet* to systematically point out all of the Ministry's corruption, as well as Dumbledore's crimes, and the involvement of those connected to him. Cornelius Fudge was getting a reputation as the worst Minister they'd ever had, making Harry wonder if the man would ever dare show his face in public again.

He couldn't say he minded if he didn't.

But Percy was absolutely thriving in his position as Amelia's Senior Undersecretary, handling all her organisational needs with relish and not once faltering at the sight of an enormous and extremely boring pile of parchment to read through in detail. And he had all his siblings back, too, which Harry knew he must appreciate.

They stopped to chat to Lee and Alicia too, though the pair were at the till and didn't have much time to talk. And Blaise popped up only briefly, kissing George, declaring he was going out for a bit, and telling Harry that he and Draco had made plans to gather the Slytherin cohort before school went back and Harry was very much expected to be there.

But at last, they had to let everyone get back to work, and after hugs and promises to catch up somewhere quieter soon, Harry and Sirius left the shop.

And bumped right into three people they did not want to see.

Ron, Hermione and Mrs Weasley were stood looking through the window of the twins' shop with conflicted expressions, and the blood drained from their faces at the pair that exited.

"Harry," Hermione gasped, brown eyes widening.

"Hermione," he returned evenly, inclining his head. "Good to see you're fully healed."

"I— yeah. Thanks."

An awkward silence fell between the group, and Harry was just about to start walking when Mrs Weasley reached out. "Harry, dear, we wanted to apologise," she started, eyes welling with tears. "I feel so awful about everything — Albus convinced me it was all for the best, and like the fool I was, I believed him!"

"We're really sorry, Harry," Hermione added sadly.

"Yeah, mate. We shouldn't have treated you like that," Ron said gruffly, looking distinctly uncomfortable at the show of emotion.

Harry folded his arms over his chest, trying to ignore the way his heart was racing. "I accept your apologies," he said, watching them all deflate with relief, "but I can't forgive you."

The trio tensed. Hermione bit her lip. "Harry, I—"

“I was just a kid,” he cut her off. “A scared, lonely kid who had never had friends before, never had proper family, and had no idea what any of that was supposed to look like. And yeah, maybe you two were kids as well, but you still should have known better than to fake friendship with someone just because an old man tells you it’s for the good of the wizarding world.”

“We weren’t faking! Not really!” Hermione protested. Harry just arched an eyebrow.

“I’m supposed to believe that, am I? Along with all the other lies you’ve fed me over the years? You called me a blood purist, Hermione.” She flinched, squeezing Ron’s hand. Even now, Harry couldn’t quiet the voice in the back of his mind that insisted they were only trying to befriend him now because he’d *won*, because he was *famous* — because Hermione had realised she’d burned bridges with just about every future influential member of the Wizengamot, and if she didn’t get back in his good graces she could kiss goodbye to her dream of taking the Ministry by storm.

He looked up at the Weasley matriarch, his heart clenching with an entirely different betrayal.

“And you, Mrs Weasley — you were an adult. You were a *mother*, and you looked at me, half-starved and terrified to do something wrong in your house because I didn’t know what the punishment would be, and you *pretended* to welcome me into your family. I’m lucky your husband and the rest of your kids were genuine — if all of it had been a lie, I don’t think I would have survived.”

He swallowed thickly, feeling the gentle press of Sirius at his shoulder, quietly supportive. “You let me go back to the Dursleys every summer when you *knew* I wasn’t happy there, because Dumbledore told you. And you tried to control me, to keep me oblivious just like he wanted, to guilt me into thinking the whole world was my responsibility. Then you *believed* an old man that told you I was evil because of something in my scar, that I had to die for Voldemort to be destroyed. Without even thinking to talk to me about it. And that’s not even mentioning how awful you were to Sirius — *in his own house*, even!”

Mrs Weasley’s gaze flickered to the dog animagus, filling with guilt.

“I’m aware that our families are connected, in more ways than one,” Harry continued. “I won’t be able to avoid the three of you. I’m not going to make anyone choose between me and you. Which is more grace than you gave me,” he added sharply. “I can be civil. Friendly, even, at family gatherings. But you’re delusional if you think I’ll ever trust the three of you ever again. And if I were you, Mrs Weasley, I’d take a closer look at your relationship with the rest of your children, before you lose them forever.”

Trying not to let his breath shake, he exhaled slowly, glancing back at Sirius. “Let’s go home, yeah?” He was so very done with being out in public.

“Sure thing, pup,” Sirius assured quietly. He nodded politely to the trio, then steered Harry away towards the apparition point.

Harry’s heart didn’t stop racing until long after they’d walked away.

“Was I too harsh, Pads?” he asked, once they were strolling across the lawn of Seren Du in blissful quiet. Sirius scoffed.

“If anything, you were far more polite than they deserved,” he muttered, scowling. “Clearly there’s not quite enough Black in you to hold a proper grudge,” he teased with a wink.

“I don’t want to cause problems with the family,” Harry insisted. He knew it was going to be awkward, that it would take a long time before any of the Weasley kids were truly comfortable around their mum and youngest brother. But Harry wasn’t going to be the one to force them to cut out their own family, not for his sake.

He could be polite, and put up with them at family gatherings. He’d prefer if he never had to waste a single thought on them again, but... that was family, he supposed. There were always a few you wished you didn’t have to deal with.

“It’s not gonna be easy,” Sirius agreed, loosening his ponytail and shaking out his hair. “Charlie... he doesn’t know how to feel about his mum, really. She still doesn’t like me. Doesn’t like us together. Not sure she ever will,” he said, shrugging. “But that’s her problem, not ours. She’s the one who needs to decide if her hurt feelings are worth losing her son over.”

Sirius pulled him into a rough half-hug, kissing his temple. “We’ll figure it out, in time. Maybe they’ll get their heads out of their arses, maybe they won’t. Either way, there’s plenty of other people around who love you, kiddo. You don’t need them.”

He was right. Harry had so much family; *real*, honest family. And it was growing bigger and bigger even still. He didn’t need to latch on to the first people to show him any sort of attention or affection, anymore.

“Hey, Sirius,” he said, slowing to a halt. Sirius cocked his head, looking much like his canine counterpart. “I don’t know if I ever said it, but... thank you, so much. For bringing me here after third year, for giving me somewhere safe, somewhere I could figure out who I really was. Giving me a home. Giving me *everything*.” If he hadn’t had Seren Du, he very likely would not have lasted this long.

Sirius’ face softened, his hands resting on Harry’s shoulders. “Oh, kiddo. You never need to thank me, not for that.” He wrapped his arms around Harry, embracing him tightly. “That’s what godfathers are for, you silly fox.”

There were tears welling up in Harry’s eyes. Merlin, he’d been crying so much lately. He hoped that stopped soon. “I love you, Padfoot. *Dad*.” He felt the hitch in the taller man’s breath. “You’re gonna be an amazing parent to those kids. *Any* kids.” Harry knew he and Charlie would have at least one baby, eventually.

Sirius sniffled, looking Harry in the eye. “And they couldn’t ask for a better big brother,” he replied, pressing their foreheads together. “Now come on, how about you and I put all this away and go for a fly, yeah? If I’m gonna be teaching my kids to play quidditch, I’ll have to dust off my skills a bit!”

Harry grinned at him. “Sounds good.”

He couldn’t wait to see the twins react to their new brooms.

.-. .

With all his friendships out in the open, all his family freely able to show they cared for each other, Harry’s social calendar had never been more full.

They’d finally organised that party he and Neville talked about, right before the battle. It wasn’t at the Pottery — there were still far too many kids living there, waiting for foster families — but at Longbottom Manor, with presents and cake and fireworks and everything the two boys could have dreamed of. But even aside from that, Harry was constantly out of the house; working on Ministry and Wizengamot stuff with the usual crowd and Justin Finch-Fletchley; meeting up for lunch or dinner or drinks with HA members, past and present alike; family dinners and Weasley gatherings and pick-up quidditch matches and sibling outings. It would have been exhausting had it not been the best weeks of his entire life.

So it wasn’t unusual when an owl flew through the window of Seren Du, bearing mail. What *was* unusual was the number of envelopes — one for each of them, in heavy, high-quality parchment. The owl dropped the stack and flew away, no need for replies.

Harry frowned, reaching for the one with his name on. “This isn’t a Hogwarts thing, is it?” he asked, looking up at Snape.

“Not as far as I’m aware.”

Wondering if it was perhaps a Ministry thing — some Order of Merlin or other such rot — Harry was wary as he thumbed open the envelope, pulling out the thick, pale gold cardstock inside.

Lord Cassius Warrington and Oliver Wood

Cordially invite you to join them in celebrating their nuptials,

On the afternoon of Tuesday, the 29th of August,

Ceremony to begin at 1pm.

“Oh,” Harry breathed, a slow smile creeping across his face. There was a second piece of cardstock behind the first, giving the details of the venue’s apparition and floo access, as well as requesting an RSVP at their earliest convenience — although on Harry’s the ‘not attending’ option had been scribbled out, a note in Oliver’s cramped handwriting declaring that ‘*you’re coming whether you like it or not, Potter*’.

“How wonderful,” Narcissa exclaimed, face lighting up. “I had wondered if they would have time before you all go back to school.”

“Ollie will want to have his honeymoon before the season starts up,” Harry pointed out, grinning. “This is brilliant. Has anyone got a quill?”

Sirius summoned one from the next room over, and as each of them in turn ticked the ‘attending’ boxes on their RSVP slips, the papers glowed and the green ink turned a bright gold colour, confirming it.

“We’ll have to look for a wedding present,” Draco said, catching Harry’s hand. “And get some new dress robes.”

Harry groaned quietly. “I suppose I can’t just stick with the ones I’ve got?”

“Absolutely not. You wore those to Bill and Fleur’s wedding.”

“There were like thirty people and Bill and Fleur’s wedding!” Harry protested, but Draco didn’t budge.

“Yes, and every single one of them will be at this one, too. Not to mention, there were *pictures*. I refuse to be seen with you in the same dress robes at two weddings in the same social circle.” There was that haughty aristocratic snobbery that Harry would never truly understand, but nor would Draco ever shed entirely.

“I think all of us could do with some new dress robes,” Narcissa cut in, smiling with steel-grey eyes that just dared any of them to argue with her. “We’ll make a family outing of it. I’ll make an appointment with our tailor.”

Harry looked across the table at Remus, the only person likely to give him any sympathy on the matter. But Remus was too busy looking down at Snape’s confirmed attendance on the RSVP, no doubt lost in fantasies of attending such a public event together. Gross.

Harry looked down at his own invite contemplatively, smiling at the tiny golden quidditch hoops in the bottom corners. That reminded him — he had a plan to put into motion.

.-.-.-.

With a little help from Ginny and Neville, a recommendation from Narcissa and an autographed copy of the *Prophet* article of his defeat of Voldemort, Harry managed to organise a somewhat last-minute date.

“What are you up to, Potter?” Draco asked suspiciously, the morning when Harry told him they were going out for dinner, so to be wearing nice robes and ready to leave by quarter past six. Harry just grinned impishly, kissing his boyfriend and patting him on the backside, before heading to apparate over to the Ministry.

Harry made sure he was home in plenty of time to shower and change and wrestle his hair into submission, and it was clearly worth it — Draco inhaled sharply when he opened his bedroom door at Harry’s knock, his eyes darkening with arousal as he studied his Gryffindor boyfriend. Harry wore forest green robes open over a crisp white shirt, green tie knotted neatly at his throat. “What do you think?” he asked, holding his arms wide for inspection, grinning. “Can you stand to be seen with me in public?”

Draco pursed his lips, as if considering it. “I suppose,” he sighed, stepping close to press a kiss to Harry’s cheek. “Will you tell me where you’re taking me, now?”

“You’ll find out when we get there,” Harry insisted, offering his arm with a gallant bow. “You look stunning, by the way. I’m going to be the envy of everyone in the room.” Draco’s ice blue robes were tailored to perfection, his darker blue shirt in contrast to a pale grey tie that made his eyes stand out even more. Truly the Ice Prince of Slytherin.

They walked downstairs arm in arm, and Harry groaned at the duo that awaited them. Sirius and Narcissa, stood by the door ready to send them off as if it was their very first date.

Which, technically, Harry supposed it was. They’d gone about everything a little backwards, really.

“Don’t stay out too late,” Sirius mock-warned, wagging his finger. “And you look after my son, Malfoy, or I’ll have your head.”

“Have him back by midnight, Harry, darling,” Narcissa told him, smirk tugging at her lips. “My boy is a gentleman and I shan’t have you ruining his reputation.”

Harry snorted. “We all know that ship has sailed,” he joked, ignoring Draco’s indignant expression. “You two are the worst, and we love you, and we’ll be going now.” He tugged on Draco’s arm, heading for the door and ignoring the two waving dramatically at them on their way down the drive.

“Sometimes I think it was a bad idea bringing those two cousins back together,” Draco said drily. Harry hummed in agreement.

“At least they didn’t bring Andi into it.” The three Blacks together were a force to be reckoned with.

Holding Draco close under the guise of needing to side-along him to their destination, Harry apparated, smiling as Draco peered around curiously. “We’re in Diagon,” he realised, and Harry nodded.

“Yup. Come on.”

In those wonderful three weeks before his third year, in around having his entire life flipped on his head, Harry had gotten quite familiar with a lot of the offshoot alleys of Diagon. Before then, he’d thought the main high street was all there was to it.

This little section of the alley was full of restaurants and cafes and even a dance club — something Harry definitely wanted to investigate when the furore around him had died down some. He and Draco were still too young for muggle clubs; the fake IDs he’d conjured to get them into the sex shop beside Infinite earlier in the week probably wouldn’t slide with a club bouncer. Mostly because Harry only had vague ideas of what a muggle ID was supposed to look like.

Maybe Farlig would be able to help him out. Gringotts did muggle documents, too.

It was a narrow street, the buildings looming tall on either side, with only a few people out and about, all enjoying their evenings — other couples on dates, some families, some groups of friends. Many of them nodded in greeting to the pair, some giggled and eyed them appreciatively, but none of them bothered them, for which Harry was extremely grateful.

Draco actually gaped when Harry turned them towards the door of their destination for the night. “The Golden Harp,” he exclaimed quietly. “How the hell did you get us a table at the Golden Harp, this place is booked out *months* in advance!”

“Harry Potter,” Harry pointed out, shrugging. He wasn’t afraid to use his fame *sometimes* — namely, in the efforts of spoiling his boyfriend rotten.

The host straightened up at the sight of them, offering a sharp bow. “Lord Potter, Lord Malfoy,” he greeted demurely. “Right this way, please.”

One of the reasons Harry had chosen this place, other than Narcissa raving about the menu, was that they had low-level privacy wards on every table. Not enough for people not to recognise who was sat there — what was the point in going to a fancy restaurant if you weren’t *seen* at the fancy restaurant — but enough to discourage any sort of approach, or eavesdropping.

Harry and Draco could have a nice dinner to themselves, without worrying about the press or fans or anything.

“You really have pulled out all the stops, haven’t you?” Draco remarked, pale brows rising at the sight of a bottle of his favourite white wine chilling at the table already. “Are you trying to romance, me, Potter?” A wicked grin tugged at his lips.

“Well, I figured after nearly three years, it’s about time I put some effort in,” Harry joked in reply, smiling briefly at the waitress who came and poured their wine and water. “Consider this an apology for all those dates we haven’t been able to have in public.”

Draco’s face softened, a rosy blush rising in his cheeks. “You don’t need to apologise for that,” he insisted. “It was as much my doing as yours.”

“Then consider it the start of me showering you with love and devotion and expensive things as you so deserve,” Harry replied with a wink. “I always did say I’d spoil you rotten once I got the chance.”

The blond had a tiny, pleased smile he couldn’t quite hide behind his humour. “Dangerous thing to say to a Malfoy,” he warned. “We have expensive tastes.”

“Fairly sure I can handle the cost.” Harry had more money than either of them could spend in a hundred lifetimes, even if Draco demanded meals like this every single night.

As he perused the menu, Harry tried not to let on how nervous he was. Not because of the date, or even his plans for later in the evening — he had never actually been to a wizarding restaurant before, not really. Certainly not one as posh as this. And he’d only been to a

handful of muggle restaurants, in that summer before his fourth year when Sirius and Remus tried to introduce him to all the things he'd missed out on.

It was a big step up from the Three Broomsticks, that was for sure.

But whether or not Draco suspected his unease, the blond's calm demeanour went a long way to helping Harry relax. Draco ordered first, so Harry could just do what he did; tapping his desired order with his wand and having it appear on the plate in front of him. After that it was perfectly natural to slip into conversation — so much so that Harry almost forgot where they were until their waitress stopped by to ask if everything was to their liking.

The sweet wine slowly trickled warmth through his system, twining with the happy flutter in his belly that came with being out with Draco like this. "We should do this more often," he said as they were choosing their desserts. "Maybe not, like, *this*," he gestured to the very fancy restaurant around them, "but going out together. Sometimes it feels like the only time I get to be truly alone with you is when we're in bed." He blushed at saying something like that in public, glancing around, but no one could hear them through the spells.

Draco reached across the table, taking his hand with a fond smile. "I know what you mean. I love our family, but they're rather... a lot." He gave a lopsided grimace, chuckling. "I grew up an only child with mostly Crabbe and Goyle for company, or the house elves. I'm still not used to having so many people around."

"Think how I feel; I grew up in a bloody cupboard," Harry returned wryly.

It was wonderful, having a family as large and welcoming as theirs, having friends they could finally hang out with without masks or pretence or some sort of emergency to figure out.

But part of Harry missed the days of sneaking into classrooms to meet with Draco, playing Bluff and pretending they were the only two people in the world.

"It'll be harder at Hogwarts," Draco mused, running his thumb over Harry's knuckles. "But there's always the Chamber for privacy. And the wards certainly work in our favour," he added, eyes alight with amusement. "A lack of privacy is to be expected at school, though." His smile turned boyish, almost tentative. "I like the idea of doing more things just for us, when we can."

Harry grinned back, heart hammering in his chest. "That's settled, then."

They stared at each other, love in their eyes and dopey smiles on their faces, for longer than either would be willing to admit. Then a loud laugh from elsewhere in the restaurant broke their trance, and the two boys blushed, turning back to the dessert menus.

The sun was setting by the time they left, Harry not even blinking at the exorbitant price on the bill on his way out — it was worth every single knut, to see Draco smile like that.

"Our parents are going to be unbearable when we get in," Draco sighed, unable to hide the fondness in his voice. "I don't want this evening to end just yet."

"I've got an idea," Harry told him, grinning as if it was a spontaneous thing — as if he hadn't spent the last few days agonising over every little detail. "Come here." He slid his arms around Draco's waist, catching his lips in a soft kiss, then apparated them away.

They appeared in the middle of the Hogwarts quidditch pitch, the stands bathed in a vibrant orange-gold light over the horizon. Draco gaped at him. "Walking through walls, apparating into Hogwarts — anything else you can do?" he asked mildly, and Harry laughed.

"Possibly. Haven't figured it out yet." He squeezed Draco once, then stepped away. "Dobby," the house elf appeared in an instant, "would you go get mine and Draco's brooms, please?"

The elf nodded energetically, disappearing and reappearing in only a few moments.

"Harry, we're not dressed for quidditch," Draco complained as he was handed his Nimbus 2001. Harry undid his tie and the top button of his shirt, stuffing the silk into his robe pocket.

"We're not playing a full match, love," he teased, nimble fingers making quick work of Draco's own tie. Unable to help himself, he leaned in to suck a kiss against the pale column of Draco's throat once his shirt collar was loosened, the blond's resulting gasp quickening his blood. "Come on. Fly with me."

Draco let out a shaky breath. "If you insist." He had a competitive glint in his eyes when he pulled away. "Catch me, then." Then he swung a leg over his broom and kicked off.

Harry laughed loudly as he shot into the sky moments behind his boyfriend, the exhilaration of the wind in his hair mixing with the wine in his stomach and the anticipation in his blood as he did a quick lap, easily matching Draco's pace. "Want to make this interesting?" he called, pulling a snitch from his pocket, holding it up tauntingly.

"Where did you get that?" Draco shook his head in bewilderment. "Never mind. You're on, Potter. Usual wager?" He licked his lips pointedly.

Having an erection while on a broomstick was not the most comfortable thing in the world, but it was something Harry was an expert in dealing with by now, after years of flying with Draco Malfoy. He shifted to ease the pressure, grin widening. "Usual wager." Winner got to decide on bedroom activities that night.

He released the snitch, counted to fifteen with his eyes locked on Draco's, and then both of them sped off.

It was a little harder, looking for a snitch in the light of the setting sun — especially a sunset as beautiful as this one, a glorious riot of colour in the sky so incredible Harry couldn't have planned it if he'd tried. But both of them were excellent seekers.

And the snitch was maybe a little bit enchanted.

Harry turned sharply as Draco went into a dive, haring after his boyfriend. He drew closer, the pair of them neck and neck — but he didn't put on that little extra burst of speed that

would have had him beating Draco to the fluttering gold ball, instead watching pale fingers clamp around it, pulling up from the dive.

Draco grinned to himself, then turned to look suspiciously at Harry, both of them coming down to land. “You let me win that one,” he accused. “Come on, Harry. It’s no fun if you let me win.”

“Yeah, well,” Harry said, just a little shaky, his stomach full of butterflies and his heart in his throat. “I sort-of needed you to catch that snitch.”

Confused, Draco looked down at the snitch in his palm. There was a quiet click, and it split in the middle, opening to reveal something nestled inside.

A ring sat in a little velvet indent; silver band made of three interwoven strands, swirling up around a flawless emerald with a smaller, perfect white diamond on each side. Masculine, but beautiful. Like Draco.

When Draco looked back up, Harry was in front of him, on one knee, eyes shining with hope.

Harry watched the rapid cycle of emotions play over his love’s face — confusion, shock, joy, his jaw dropping ever so slightly, his hands beginning to tremble as he held the snitch steady.

Harry swallowed his nerves, and cleared his throat. “You are the best thing that’s ever happened to me, Draco Malfoy,” he declared earnestly, voice wavering with emotion. “Magic, Hogwarts, all the rest of it — none of it compares to the moment I looked at you across an empty classroom at one in the morning and realised I couldn’t live without you in my life. I know we had a bit of a rocky start, to say the least,” he chuckled weakly, and Draco’s lips twitched, “but we’ve come a long way since we were eleven. We’ve seen far more than anyone our age should ever see, done things we never should have had to do. Through it all — all the drama and the danger and the *ridiculous shit* that seems to follow me around — you were right there, by my side, calling me an idiot Gryffindor and telling me you loved me in the same breath, making all my problems seem so easy to manage, as long as I had you. And I know, without a doubt, that I want you right there for the rest of our lives. I fought a war so I could have a future, Draco, and I want you to be that future. So... will you marry me?”

Draco stared at him. Harry couldn’t breathe. His pulse thudded in his ears, fears suddenly gripping him; it was too soon, they were too young, Draco wanted to wait—

That thought was cut off abruptly as he was tackled to the ground, pressed against the grass by Draco’s weight, the blond beaming down at him with tears shining in his gorgeous silver eyes. “You foolish Gryffindor,” he rasped, and Harry’s heart jolted. “Yes. Of course I’ll marry you.”

“Oh,” Harry breathed, the words echoing in his head. *Yes. Draco said yes.* “That’s good, then.”

Draco laughed through more tears, leaning down, pressing their foreheads together. “Disaster of a wizard,” he murmured affectionately, the same words he’d said years ago, right before he’d kissed Harry for the first time. “You couldn’t possibly think I’d say no, did you?”

Harry shrugged sheepishly. “I mean — you might have?” He hadn’t wanted to assume.

Snorting, Draco pulled back, kneeling on the grass next to Harry’s reclined form. There were grass stains on both their robes, but neither of them cared.

“You’ve had me ruined for anyone but you since I was fourteen years old, you prat,” Draco whispered, gaze turning back down to the ring, still safely inside the snitch. “It’s absolutely beautiful, Harry. Is it an heirloom?”

Harry nodded, too dazed to speak. Draco ran a gentle finger over the ring. Then he looked at Harry imperiously. “Are you going to put this on me, or what?”

Harry scrambled to sit up, taking the ring out with shaking hands and fumbling with it until it slid onto Draco’s left ring finger, resizing perfectly.

And there it was. His engagement ring, on Draco Malfoy’s finger. His claim for the whole world to see — this perfect, amazing man was going to be his forever.

Harry hooked a hand round the back of his neck and pulled him into a hard kiss, pouring all of his love and relief into the embrace, hoping Draco knew just how *happy* he was at that moment.

Suddenly, there was a loud whistling noise, and a firework exploded over their heads in a shower of golden sparks, forming a heart in the sky. Cheers and whistles filled the air, and the two boys startled apart, whipping around to see a crowd of people up in the lowest stands. Their parents and godparents, but also Ginny and Neville, and all the older Weasley boys with their partners, and the Gryffindor quidditch team. Susan and Theo and Luna and Daphne and Pansy and Millie, all their other Hogwarts friends. The Tonks family and Kingsley, his hand on the barely-there swell of Tonks’ stomach while she whooped and cheered, her hair cycling through the whole rainbow in her joy. Even McGonagall was there, applauding with a smile on her face and if Harry wasn’t mistaken, tears in her eyes.

“Did you—“ Draco started, but Harry shook his head.

“I didn’t plan that!” he insisted, blushing bright red. “I thought it was just us!” Having an audience was *not* part of his grand idea!

Harry and Draco scrambled to their feet, trying to make themselves a little more presentable. “How long have you lot been there?” Harry called up, wondering how the hell he hadn’t noticed. He held the damn school wards!

But then, so did Neville, and Luna, and McGonagall. And Harry would bet anything Hannah was up in the castle, watching through the magic, doing her bit to keep the family hidden from him.

“Long enough!” Sirius shouted back cheerfully. “Nice speech, kiddo!”

Harry’s face burned. “How did you even know about this?” He’d hardly told *anyone*! He hadn’t even mentioned it to Narcissa, just telling her he wanted to take Draco on a date.

Charlie’s laugh was loudest of all, and Harry saw him reach out and ruffle the long side of Ginny’s hair. “Our little sister can’t keep a secret for shit, Potter! You should know that by now!”

Ginny waved, unrepentant, and Harry groaned. At his side, Draco laughed, letting the Gryffindor bury his face in his neck. “Think of it this way,” he consoled, running a hand through Harry’s hair, his huge smile pressing into Harry’s temple, “at least now we don’t have to send a notice out.”

Harry snorted, inhaling the scent of wood polish and spice and the faint hint of sweat — the scent of his Amortentia. The smell of the person he loved most in the world.

He couldn’t be mad at the unexpected audience, not really.

He was too damn happy that Draco had said yes.

Chapter 108

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

From that point onwards, Harry was on cloud nine for the entire rest of the summer. Every morning he woke up and caught sight of that glint of silver and green on Draco's hand, and his heart did gymnastics inside his chest. Draco had started teasing him for it, mocking the ridiculous smile that greeted him every morning, but he was just as bad.

The teasing when Harry went down to breakfast every morning was far worse, anyway.

At least Harry wasn't the only one being a big old sap all over the place; Sirius and Charlie had officially begun proceedings to adopt the three Forrester children. Harry suspected their own engagement would come soon — hopefully a better proposal than Sirius' drunken declaration after the war ended.

Everyone was certainly kept busy over the next week or so, as school drew nearer and everything had to be put in place for that. The Department of Education managed to arrange for examiners to come to the school for a week, to oversee any OWLs or NEWTs the students wished to take — most of the just-graduated seventh years preferred to come to Hogwarts in their summer holidays than to drag out their education any further. A few would be repeating at least part of seventh year, Harry knew, but for the most part they all just wanted out of the castle and into the world. He didn't blame them; he himself was desperate to be done with education, as much as he loved Hogwarts.

Cho Chang was one of the students who wanted to get her NEWTs out of the way, and Harry just happened to be in the castle on the day she took her DADA exam. When she saw him in the corridor on her way out of the practical exam, she took one look at him and burst into tears.

"Did it go that bad?" he asked, and she whacked him on the arm, laughing even as she cried. Then her arms wrapped around his waist, squeezing him firmly.

"I probably got an O, and I never would have done it without you," she told him. Her dark eyes were shiny when she looked up at him. "I wish he was here to see it. To see everything we've done."

Harry swallowed tightly, feeling that phantom ache around the raw edges of the hole in his chest that had begun with the death of Cedric Diggory. It would never go away, not truly. "He'd be so proud of you," he told her, chin on her head, letting her sniffle into his shirt. From what he'd heard of the battle, Cho had been a true force of nature, taking on three Death Eaters by herself and Disarming the lot of them. "What's next for you, then?" he asked, releasing her. She wiped at her eyes, smiling.

"A Charms Mastery, if I get my O," she told him. "There's a Charms Mistress in Seoul that I really want to study under; the magic on that side of the world is totally different to the kind

we use here. I want to see how well the two combine.” She shrugged, bashful. “Until then... just life, y’know? I’ve moved in with Cedric’s boys — Mum *hates* it, but I’m an adult now so she can’t say no.” Her grin turned cheeky. “Unmarried young woman living with three single men, it’s her worst nightmare.”

Harry laughed. “And that didn’t affect your decision at all, I’m sure,” he said wryly, snickering at her innocent look.

“What are you doing here, anyway?” Cho asked, looking at him.

“Visiting Hannah. Also, McGonagall asked to see me, though I’m not sure what for. When I heard exams were happening, I thought I’d swing by. Oh, hi, Katie!” he greeted brightly as his ex-teammate slipped out of the exam room. “How’d it go?”

To her credit, Katie didn’t blink at Cho’s puffy red eyes. “Aced it,” she said proudly, beaming. “Thanks, Harry. See you at the wedding?” He nodded. “Fab. Bye, Cho!”

Cho waved, and the pair of them watched Katie walk away. “I’d best get moving, then,” Cho mused, letting out a long breath. “You’ll keep in touch, won’t you?”

“Of course,” he assured. “Though I don’t know if Hedwig would appreciate me sending her to Seoul.” They’d have to figure out the international postal service. “Give the boys my love. I’ll see you around.”

One last smile, and then they parted ways, Harry putting his hands in his pockets as he wandered in the direction of what had once been Dumbledore’s office. McGonagall had finally braved the gargoyle and what lay behind it, taking Snape with her in case of traps. Harry hadn’t seen the office yet, and was excited to get up there.

He’d promised not to walk through her walls unless it was an emergency. Besides, it was nice taking the long way sometimes.

But McGonagall was still meeting with Snape and Remus — Harry had a very strong suspicion regarding the whole matter — so he took a detour towards the Hospital Wing. To his surprise, he didn’t need to go back to the private room to find Hannah. She was in the main ward, sat up in a wheelchair. “Hannah!” he exclaimed, surprised. “You’re out of bed, that’s brilliant!”

Her grin was vibrant, even if there was the shadow of pain in her eyes. “Just today,” she confirmed. “Not for too long — I have to re-train my muscles and everything, so sitting up is a bit exhausting. But... baby steps. I’m hoping to be able to do at least some of my classes when school starts up.”

“I’m so happy for you,” Harry told her, squeezing her hand. “I bet Ernie’s happy, too.”

Something in Hannah’s smile changed. “I’m sure he will be, but— Harry... Ernie and I broke up.”

The bottom dropped out of his stomach. “What?” An awful thought hit him. “It wasn’t because of...?” He gestured vaguely to her wheelchair, wondering if he had vastly misjudged Ernie Macmillan’s character.

Hannah shook her head insistently. “No, no, not at all!” she assured. “We, ah, actually technically broke up before this even happened. Sort of.” He eyed her in bewilderment. “We got talking one night, about the future — what we wanted to do if we both lived through the battle. And we realised, well... both of us had very different ideas of what we wanted our lives to look like.” She fiddled with the end of her honey-blonde braid at her shoulder. “Ernie wants to travel; he’s looking at a career with Gringotts, like Bill Weasley, only not staying at one single branch. And I— even before the whole Heir of Hufflepuff thing, I knew I wouldn’t go far from Hogwarts.” She shrugged. “I’ve always been a homebody. I don’t need to see the world — which is good, because that would be a little bit harder these days,” she added ruefully. “I’ve been learning a lot from Madam Pomfrey, living in here. I don’t know if I want to be a healer necessarily, and it’s going to be a long time before I’m up to any sort of serious training. But I like the idea of being her... assistant of sorts. Helping with the standard school shenanigans, making sure the students are alright. Helping Hogwarts feel like their home away from home.”

Harry could absolutely see it; Hannah working in the Hospital Wing, her sunny smiles brightening up the day of any poor student with a bludger-related injury or a hex gone wrong. Always available with a kind word and a listening ear for the homesick and the bullied and the troubled.

And he could understand not wanting to leave the castle, either.

“Feels like a part of you, doesn’t it?” he mused knowingly. She nodded.

“Does that go away? When you’re not here?”

Harry shrugged, contemplating his answer. “Not really. It’s quieter, for sure — I can’t feel everyone like I can when I’m inside the wards.” If he was back at Seren Du, he couldn’t pinpoint McGonagall or Pomfrey or anyone at the school. “But it’s always there. Waiting for me to come back.” If there was ever an emergency at the school, he would know about it, no matter how far he travelled. He was linked to Hogwarts on a soul-deep level, now.

“Makes sense.”

The silence that stretched between them was comfortable, an acknowledgment of this bond they shared that only two others could begin to comprehend.

“It’ll be good, to have at least one of us in the castle full-time,” he said.

“Yeah. Though I’ll eat my wand if Nev doesn’t take over when Sprout retires.”

“Oh, that’s a given,” Harry agreed easily.

Hannah shifted slightly, grimacing in pain, and Harry realised how long they’d been talking. “I’ll let you get on,” he said, patting her hand, “but it’s really great to see you up and about.

And I'm sorry about you and Ernie.”

“It's fine, really. We're still friends. Maybe we'll get back together one day, once he's done travelling. But maybe we won't.” She shot him a teasing grin. “We can't all find our soulmates as fourth years, y'know.”

He laughed, smile coming unbidden to his lips as he thought of his boyfriend — *fiancé*. “I suppose. Now go take a pain potion and lie down, for Merlin's sake.” His playful fussing made her laugh, but she obediently wheeled herself back to her room, the magical chair responding to her thoughts.

Harry checked the wards, confirming that Snape and Remus had left McGonagall's office — they were headed down to the Potions classroom. Interesting.

He grinned to himself on his way up, wondering whether the pair would try and keep secrets. When he reached the gargoyle, his stomach twisted instinctively; he'd had so much pain, in this office.

Things would be better now.

“Perseverance,” he declared, and the gargoyle hopped aside, revealing the revolving staircase.

The first thing he noticed was the distinct colour change — no longer did stepping into the office give you a headache. The carpet was a deep charcoal grey, and what little wallspace wasn't covered in bookshelves had a cheerful red and green tartan wallpaper. Most of the office, however, was books. Books on all sorts of magic, not just Transfiguration, the shelves interspersed with little trinkets and interesting statues, no doubt each one with a story behind it.

And then he noticed the perch in the corner, occupied once more. “Fawkes!”

The phoenix trilled happily, fluttering his wings.

“It seems Fawkes has decided to remain with the school,” McGonagall explained, smiling slightly from behind her desk. It was the same one from her old office — nothing of Dumbledore's had stayed, it seemed. A fresh start entirely. “I don't know where he was this past year, but he came back shortly after I reclaimed the office. In quite a state, too. I dread to think what Albus might have done to the poor creature.”

Now Harry looked closer, he could see Fawkes looked a little worse for wear, like he was overdue a burning day.

“I'm sure he'll perk up.” Harry turned to the headmistress, seeing a cup of tea and that tartan biscuit tin waiting for him on the side table next to the chair. “What did you want to see me about, Professor?”

McGonagall let him get situated, studying him over the rim of her glasses. “Firstly, booklists will be sent out tomorrow morning, and I thought I'd save an owl the journey,” she said,

passing over a roll of parchment. Harry smirked.

“You’ve figured out staffing, then?” he asked, trying and failing to sound innocent. He already knew she’d found a Transfiguration professor to take over now she was full-time Headmistress, but that wasn’t the only open position.

“Professor Slughorn has returned to retirement,” she told him, “and Professor Snape has agreed to return to his position as Potions professor.” Harry raised an eyebrow, a slow grin forming. “And Remus Lupin has agreed to return as Defence Against the Dark Arts professor. Also, the new Head of Gryffindor House.”

“Knew it,” Harry hissed in triumph, beaming. “That’s brilliant.” Remus had been an amazing teacher, and he knew many students would be glad to see him return. “No issues with his furry little problem?”

“Thanks to the quick work of you and your friends, and the determination of the young Lady Bones, any complaints do not have a leg to stand on,” McGonagall informed him, looking deeply satisfied by that. “He has an excellent track record, and will be on Wolfsbane for the duration. Any classes on days he needs to take off will either become self-study, be covered by another member of staff, or have a guest instructor brought in.”

Already, Harry couldn’t wait for the inevitable chaos of Guest Professor Sirius Black.

“And... Astronomy?” he dared ask, vividly remembering Professer Sinistra laid out on the Great Hall floor. McGonagall pursed her lips.

“I have contacted an ex-pupil of the school who has a Mastery in the subject, and she has agreed to at least the first year of teaching.”

“That’s good.” Harry sipped at his tea, tucking the booklist into his pocket. “So what else is there? I know you didn’t call me here just for a piece of parchment.”

McGonagall’s cheek twitched as she tried to restrain her smile. “Quite right. There is one more thing I didn’t feel right sending by post.”

And then she leaned forward, and placed the Head Boy badge on the desk.

Harry stared. “I... what?” Green eyes widened incredulously. “But I—I’m me! I spent most of the last six years in detention, and sneaking about after curfew, and getting into all sorts of trouble!” Was she mad??

The smile broke through, just a little. “You also spent those years saving lives, foiling Albus Dumbledore’s plans, preparing your fellow students for a war everyone denied was coming, and keeping up straight Os throughout. Not to mention success on the quidditch pitch, and the incredible respect both your peers and your professors have for you.” Her dark green eyes danced as he gaped like a fish. “You certainly earned some of your detentions,” she said, giving him a pointed look, “but we are both aware that many of those were given under ulterior motives.”

Instinctually, Harry rubbed at the back of his hand, where the Blood Quill scars still glared up at him.

“At first I thought you might not want the badge,” she admitted. “That giving you such responsibility after you have just managed to shed such a large burden off your shoulders may hinder your enjoyment of your final year. And then,” she said, gaze narrowing knowingly, “I thought about how much trouble you might get into if I did not give you *some* kind of responsibility to keep you entertained.”

Harry put on his best offended expression. “Professor! I’m hurt that you think I would ever cause trouble out of *boredom*!”

McGonagall just stared at him, the flat stare of someone who had survived both the Marauders and the Weasley twins. “That look did not work for your father *or* your mother, and it certainly will not work for you.”

Harry laughed, letting the pout drop. He reached for a biscuit, and when he looked back up McGonagall was surprisingly earnest. “You have talent, Harry,” she said softly. “You have more magical power than any of us know what to do with, and now that you’re willing to use it, a brain that will have no problems with the NEWT curriculum. There is little Hogwarts can offer you to stretch that talent aside from your own self-study projects, and I get the feeling that will not be enough to keep you out of mischief. But you have a love for this school and ideas for how we can make it better — ideas that I would very much like to hear. I’m making Miss Bones Head Girl, and between the three of us I like to think we can begin to make Hogwarts the shining institution of magical education it deserves to be once more.”

To hear his head of house speak so plainly of him — so *highly* of him — made a knot form in Harry’s chest. He had always assumed he was somewhat of a difficult student, always off on his shenanigans and ending up in the Hospital Wing. That McGonagall, famously stern and unmoved, had such positive opinions... it meant a lot.

“If you would rather not,” she continued, “if you would rather enjoy your final year with little more than quidditch and exams to trouble your mind, I would understand completely. If anyone has earned respite, it is you. That is why I asked to speak to you today; you have a choice, Harry. You always have a choice, in this school. I’m sorry that has not been the case in the past.”

The knot tightened, knocking the breath from him. His hands shook around his teacup. “I... you really think I’ll make a good Head Boy?” he asked, voice small. McGonagall smiled at him.

“I think you would make a fine Head Boy indeed. You have a good head on your shoulders, and the younger students look up to you.”

“But— that’s just because of the whole Boy-Who-Lived thing,” he dismissed, feeling the heat rise in his cheeks. One of McGonagall’s eyebrows rose skeptically.

“Indeed? So it’s not because of the way you have always believed in the students of this school, when no one else has. Or the way you have not let house rivalries and stereotypes

colour your views. Or the way you have become known for always helping your fellow students, no matter who they are.” With each word Harry got redder and redder, and McGonagall grew more smug. “No, I’m sure it’s got nothing to do with any of that.”

“Alright, alright, you’ve made your point,” he muttered, ducking his head. He almost reached out to take the badge, then paused, a thought coming to him. “Professor. I… on the subject of responsibilities. There’s something you should know— something that might change your decision.”

“If you’re worried about your Wizengamot duties, I remind you that many of your fellow students share the same burden. That won’t be a problem.”

“No, it’s not that, I—“ Harry hadn’t told anyone, not yet. But he could tell McGonagall. This was the woman who had bought him his very first broomstick, even if she had never admitted to it. “I… it might not even happen yet. And only like three people in the world even know about this, so don’t go spreading it around.” The curiosity was plain on her face, her brow furrowed. “I, ah, have a tryout, in a few days. For seeker.” He swallowed. “For the English national team.”

Harry was then treated to a sight that very few had seen — the sight of Minerva McGonagall, genuinely and utterly *surprised*.

“Viktor organised it, when he was over for the wedding and— and stuff.” An incredulous snort from the woman at his summation of the entire final battle. “They’re probably just giving me a chance because I’m the saviour and all and Viktor said I’m good, I doubt I’ll make it, but— but if I do, I’ll need to leave school sometimes for training and things. I don’t know what the schedule will be like. But if that’s going to be a problem, not having me around all the time, then you should give the Head Boy badge to someone else.”

Lips pursed, shock still in her eyes, McGonagall reached for a biscuit. “I would not count yourself out yet, Potter,” she remarked. “Indeed, I would consider Mr Krum an authority on such matters — if he says you have a chance, then you certainly have a chance. I cannot see that being a problem with your Head Boy duties; there are prefects and the Head Girl, after all, should you be unavailable.” With a twitch of her fingers, she nudged the badge closer to him. “It’s yours if you want it, Harry.”

He took a deep breath, and picked up the badge, staring at it for a moment before tucking it safely away in his pocket. “I won’t let you down, Professor,” he promised, nodding defiantly. Her eyes crinkled at the corners, her smile hidden by her teacup.

“I know you won’t, Mr Potter.” Then she coughed delicately. “And I know that as Headmistress, it is unseemly of me to profess any bias for one Hogwarts house over another. But English national team or no, I fully expect that trophy to reside in Remus Lupin’s office come the end of the year.” She looked at him expectantly, and Harry laughed.

“I’ll try my best.”

“See that you do.”

Assuming that was the end of the meeting, Harry made as if to stand, but McGonagall cleared her throat. “One more thing, Potter.” She rummaged through her desk, pulling out a small stack of paperwork. “I expect to see this properly dealt with before the beginning of the school year. From *both* of you.”

She handed it over; across the top of the parchment were the words ***Animagus Registration Forms***. Sure enough, there were two sets. Harry laughed, tucking them into his pocket.

“We will,” he vowed. There was no need to keep it secret now, after all.

“Good lad.” This time she didn’t stop him when he stood, Vanishing biscuit crumbs from his jeans. “I know better than to expect a complete absence of mischief from you, Mr Potter,” McGonagall said with a hint of exasperation. “But *please*, do try not to make me want to retire after my first year in office.”

Harry grinned, offering an elaborate salute. “Aye-aye, Headmistress.”

Then, just to be a brat, he walked straight through the wall and out of her office.

.-.-.-.

With booklists came book shopping, and Harry and Draco knew they couldn’t avoid it. It was almost a rite of passage, at this point, to go to Diagon Alley the day the lists arrived and wrestle through the crowds to get their supplies for another school year. Truly, they didn’t need much — once again Snape had seen to their Potions supplies, and all of the books Remus had set were ones they owned anyway. But Harry needed a copy of Snape’s approved NEWT level Potions text — the man still eyed *Advanced Potion Making* with contempt — and they both had a few extra books to pick up for their final year of Ancient Runes.

But, they insisted, they were old enough to go by themselves. Sirius, Remus and Charlie were taking Nashira and Frankie later in the afternoon, and Harry didn’t want to intrude on that. The pair apparated to London, planning to get in and out of the alley in good time, so Harry could take Draco clothes shopping in the muggle world. The blond was quite excited by the prospect, and Harry couldn’t argue with the need to update his own wardrobe.

It was as busy as expected, and Harry tangled his fingers with Draco’s so they didn’t get lost in the crowd. There were several familiar faces about, and Harry waved cheerfully to the friends he would soon see back at school.

He wondered if they found it as strange as he did, to be readying their school robes and their house ties as if they hadn’t fought a war less than a month ago in the very castle they were to return to.

They would get used to it, in time.

With books acquired, Draco begged to go into Slug and Jigger’s for non-class-related supplies, and while Harry was happy to let him he also very much did not want to join him there. “I’ll go sit at Fortescue’s, wait for you there. We can have an ice cream before we leave.” Harry still had a soft spot for Florian Fortescue, after the weeks spent doing his

History of Magic homework with the ice cream maker's help. And he did have excellent ice cream.

So they parted ways, and Harry headed over to the ice cream shop, running over the possible flavour ideas in his head. "Harry!" He turned, groaning quietly, ready to tell whichever eager reporter had spotted him that he would very much like to be left alone.

But it wasn't a reporter. It was Dennis Creevey.

Harry froze at the sight of the soon-to-be fourth year — Dennis had grown a little bit, in the last few weeks. He was skinnier, though, and still looked a little hollow in the eyes.

He looked so much like his brother, it made Harry's throat go dry. "Harry," Dennis said, a little breathlessly. "I was hoping I'd see you today!"

"Hi, Dennis. How— how are you?"

The boy's face crumpled, just for a moment, before he pulled it back together. "I'm... getting by. It's hard. But, y'know," he gave a self-deprecating shrug, "we all have to keep going."

"Dennis, I'm so sorry, I—"

"Don't, Harry," Dennis insisted. "We both knew what we were doing. Colin... he wanted to fight because of you, yes, but also because of me, and because of our parents, and all the other muggles and muggleborns that were being killed. It wasn't your fault." His lips quirked bitterly. "Sometimes I think that if I'd just stayed in the castle like everyone told me, if I hadn't been there for Colin to want to protect... but you can't go down that road. Colin made his choices, and we've got to accept them. Even if... even if it's hard." He swallowed, lip wobbling slightly. Harry reached out to squeeze the boy's shoulder.

"That's..."

"More mature than you'd expect?" Dennis half-joked. "Dad's had me seeing a therapist. A squib woman, so I don't have to lie. It... it helps."

"I'm glad, Dennis. Really." He was so very young, and Harry hated how much he had already seen. It would do him good to talk it out.

God, Harry realised; he was *the same age* as Nashira. Just a kid. But never a kid again, not really, after all he'd been through.

"Thanks. Listen, Harry, I have something for you. These last few weeks... Colin had all these pictures he'd taken, and he never got the chance to develop them. The ones from Bill Weasley's wedding, but also just a whole bunch from around the castle before... before everything. I've got a load for everyone at school, but... would you make sure these get to the right people?" Out of his satchel, he pulled a translucent blue plastic folder like the kind Harry used to use in muggle school, full to bursting with photographs. "Colin would want everyone to have them. He... seeing people liked his photos always made him so happy."

Harry had honestly forgotten about Bill and Fleur's wedding photos. In the aftermath, it seemed like such a silly thing to care about.

But the couple would be very glad to have them. He said as much to Dennis, who grinned. "I hope they like them. I— Colin was always better at developing magical photos than me, but I hope I did alright."

"I'm sure they're brilliant, Dennis." The crowd cleared a little, and over the boy's shoulder, Harry could see two people who could only be Mr and Mrs Creevey, watching them with sad, knowing faces.

Would they blame Harry, for the loss of their son?

He couldn't bring himself to ask.

"I've got to go," Dennis said, glancing back at his parents. "I'm glad I saw you, though. See you at school?"

Clapping the boy on the shoulder, Harry nodded. "Yeah, sure. See you then."

Dennis vanished into the crowd, and Harry looked down at the folder. Through the blue tint of the plastic, he could see the first photo on the stack — it was a picture of Bill and Fleur, a candid of them enjoying their reception, smiling at each other and sharing a look like the rest of the world didn't exist. Every few seconds, Bill would peck Fleur on the cheek, and she would giggle.

Harry tucked the folder away, swallowing hard. There would be even more ghosts to face, come September. He hoped he was ready.

.

By August 23rd, Harry still hadn't told anyone but McGonagall about his tryout. He'd hidden the letter from Viktor with the full details, and when the day arrived Harry just told his family he had '*things to do*', kissing his pouting boyfriend and leaving the house, his quidditch gear and Firebolt shrunken in his pocket.

He followed the apparition co-ordinates, ending up in a plain white room with a photograph of the last England team to win the cup hung proudly on the wall — from 1922.

It had certainly been a while.

The door opened, and Harry was relieved to see Oliver Wood peek his head through, beaming widely. "You didn't bring your boy with you?" Oliver queried.

"I can do things without Draco! ... Sometimes!" Harry insisted feebly, making Oliver laugh. "What are you doing here?" They hugged, Harry up on his toes a little, and Oliver ruffled his hair.

"Got to come scout out the competition, haven't I?" he teased, making Harry's eyes widen.

“You signed, then?”

“You, Mr Potter, are looking at the brand new starting keeper for the Scottish national team,” Oliver confirmed proudly. Harry had to hug him again for that.

“Ollie, that’s amazing!” Oliver blushed a little, but slung an arm around Harry’s shoulder, leading him down a carpeted corridor.

“The rest of the team might give me some lip for supporting the enemy, but I thought a friendly face might ease the way a bit,” he said. Harry felt a rush of affection for his ex-captain; he was still incredibly nervous, but having Oliver there definitely helped.

When they emerged through a wide tunnel out onto the pitch, Harry was in awe — the stands were set up to look like castle battlements, flags flying from every turret. Even the tunnel on the other side of the pitch had a portcullis.

“Mr Potter!” He whipped around, seeing a tall man who looked to be in his mid-fifties or so, salt and pepper hair and a beard to match. He was broad-shouldered — a beater, most likely, by the looks of him. “I’m Andrew Morris, call me Andy. I’m the team manager. Over there is Claudia Harper, she’s our coach, and up in the stands are a few of our investors. Don’t worry about them.”

Harry swallowed, desperately wishing Andy had not pointed them out — now all Harry would do *was* worry about them.

“We’ve kept this pretty hushed up, for obvious reasons,” Andy continued, “so I haven’t mentioned anything to the rest of the team yet. As a seeker, there’s less of a need to test your cohesion with the team as a whole — if today goes well, we can introduce you, see how you all fly together.” He smiled, relaxed and friendly. “But, of course, no seeker can properly show off their stuff without having another seeker to face off against, so someone will be coming by soon to give you a bit of a challenge. Until then we’re just going to send you up with Claudia, run some drills, see how you fly. Sound good?”

Harry nodded — that sounded much easier than he’d anticipated. Before now, he’d been fearing that these tryouts would be like school tryouts; dozens of other hopefuls, all having to fly in front of each other.

Claudia shook his hand, grinning cheerfully. She reminded him of Tonks, a bit, with bright dyed-red hair in a pixie cut and several piercings in her ears. “Hiya, Harry. Really great to meet you, we’ve heard loads about you. Oliver hasn’t shut up about you since I told him this had been set up,” she said, shooting a look at the Scotsman who just gave Harry a thumbs up. “And since he’s turned traitor and gone to the Scots even though *legally* he’s half and half and could’ve gone either way,” this was said with a pointed glare, “hopefully having you join us will make up for it. You ready to fly?”

Harry resized his broom, put on his goggles and guards, and then they were off.

He knew, of course, that professional quidditch was much faster than school quidditch. He’d seen the world cup final; the quaffle had been little more than a blur. But he hadn’t realised

how incredible it would feel to fly at that level.

They started out easy — laps, with Claudia calling out instructions; names of moves, changes in direction, seeing how quickly he reacted to things. Things got progressively harder, but Harry kept up the pace, grinning to himself as sweat began to stick his t-shirt to his back. To his relief, ignoring the few people in the stands was easy once he was in the air, just like ignoring the crowds at school matches.

Once Claudia was satisfied with that, she brought out a beater's bat and a single bludger, and despite her fairly petite form she could certainly give it a whack. But Harry had dealt with *multiple* occasions of cursed bludgers trying to kill him in his time, so that didn't bother him either.

They tossed the quaffle around for a bit, as a cool-down according to Claudia, then the pair of them landed and Harry got a good look at the hook-nosed figure chatting to Andy and Ollie at the edge of the pitch. "Viktor!"

The Bulgarian turned, grinning. "Hello, Harry. You are off to a good start, it seems." He clasped Harry's arm, patting him solidly in the back.

"What are you doing in the country?"

"I had some other business here, and I could not miss this chance," Viktor explained. "I'm glad; you are all warmed up for me." His dark eyes glittered in challenge, and Harry gaped.

"You're who I'm going to fly against?" He had expected perhaps an ex-team seeker, or another member of training staff.

"I have waited a long time for a chance to reclaim my pride," Viktor joked. "When Andy offered, I could not say no."

Their seekers' match in fourth year felt so long ago, now. Harry grinned. "Just don't cry if I beat you a second time."

Viktor let out a short, loud laugh.

"You two ready, then?" Andy asked, rocking on the balls of his feet like an excited child. Harry wondered how much he'd been told about the last face-off between the pair of them.

Viktor pulled out his own Firebolt — four years, and it was still the fastest broom on the market. "Give me a minute to warm up," he requested, kicking off into the sky. Harry watched him, folding his arms over his chest.

"I see how it is," he mock-complained, "I get put through my paces until I feel like I've already played a full match, and he comes in all fresh-faced and ready to go."

At his side, Claudia laughed. "We have to know you've got the stamina for it," she teased. "You're no good to us if you can't last long enough to catch the snitch when it shows up."

She raised a good point, but it still didn't seem fair. Harry wasn't going to argue, though.

After a few minutes, Viktor finished his warm-up, and Harry shouldered his broom.

It was much the same as the last time, just without the enormous crowd of students around them. One snitch, two seekers, a fifteen second wait and then a start. Harry hadn't asked how many rounds they were flying — he wasn't sure he wanted to know.

When Claudia's whistle went, he sped into the air, immediately on the hunt for the little golden ball. Viktor followed him, drawing level, and Harry grinned. He wasn't sure when he'd next get the chance to fly with his friend; they could still have a little fun with it.

He spiralled around Viktor, drawing him into a game of follow the leader, which the Bulgarian took to quite happily. They jostled for leader position, forcing the other into more adventurous dives and twists, all the while both keeping an eye out for their prize.

Harry saw it first. He veered around, bolting across the sky towards it — Viktor realised immediately what he had seen, haring after him, leaning flat on his broom to catch up. The snitch dove, and the two seekers dove with it, heading towards the ground at phenomenal speed. Harry hadn't flown against someone else with a Firebolt, not since the last time he faced Viktor, and it was exhilarating having to actually push his broom to the limit just to stay level.

He didn't flinch as the ground grew closer, didn't pull away even when most others would. The snitch was determined to get them as low as possible — barely five feet off the ground, it stopped descending and took a sharp left. Harry immediately did the same, but so did Viktor, and he had the advantage of being on the left side already. Still reeling from the G-force of pulling out of the sharp dive, Harry could only stretch forward on his broom and reach his arm out, but it wasn't quite enough. Viktor grabbed the snitch from the air, mere centimetres from Harry's fingertips.

The pair of them slowed, doing a wide loop to steady their brooms, and Harry tried not to let his shoulders slump too obviously. He'd blown his chance, for sure!

Viktor, however, had other ideas. "I thought we were going to die," he declared, shoving his goggles around his neck to reveal shocked brown eyes. "You did not leave the dive, and for a moment, I thought we were both going to die."

Their eyes met, and both of them laughed breathlessly.

"Good game, Viktor," Harry said, swallowing back the disappointed lump in his throat. "I guess you finally got your pride back."

"Perhaps, but you sure as hell made me work for it!"

Andy, Claudia and Oliver were stood at the side of the pitch when they landed — Oliver was beaming like a proud parent, while the other two looked utterly stunned.

"Kid," Andy began, and Harry braced himself for the polite let-down. "If you can fly like that in a real match, you're hired."

He blinked.

“What?”

“That was incredible! The speed of those turns, and that dive! Ollie said you were fearless but I didn’t realise he meant like *that!* To think, you fly with that kind of skill with only a school-level playing experience... a year of training with the team under your belt, and we might actually stand a chance at the cup.” Claudia was at his side, nodding along with every word, seemingly speechless.

“But... but Viktor caught the snitch,” Harry protested. Viktor clapped his shoulder.

“Only barely. Had it flown the other way, I am sure you would have made it.” Then he grimaced, stretching his back a little. “Flying with you reminds me I am no longer eighteen. Blessed Morgana.” This was followed by a string of mumbled Bulgarian.

Bewildered, Harry looked up at Oliver. “I think my new team may burn my contract for encouraging this to happen,” he commented, rubbing at his stubbled cheek. “I knew you were good, but bloody hell, Potter!”

Slowly, tentatively, Harry allowed himself to smile. “You... you really want me on the team?” he asked, looking back at Andy and Claudia.

“Absolutely,” Claudia enthused. “We’ll have to run it by the rest of the team, and all the management lot, but after a play like that I can’t imagine them having any problems with it!”

Excitement swelled in Harry’s chest, but he held it back, suddenly doubtful. “And you’re not just saying this because of the whole Harry Potter thing?”

Andy snorted. “I don’t give a fuck how many Dark Lords you’ve killed, as long as you keep flying like that.” His lips twisted slightly. “Of course, we’ll have to make your contract pretty iron-clad — I don’t want the investors deciding you’re our new poster boy and harassing you into a bunch of media parades and sponsorship stuff that’s barely got anything to do with quidditch, you’ll never get a moment’s peace.” Harry made a face — yes, he definitely didn’t want that. “But you’ve clearly got the talent. So, if you’re up for it, we’d love to have you.”

He held out a hand, and after a moment’s pause, Harry shook it.

Oliver couldn’t hold in his excitement any longer, whooping with joy and picking Harry up off the ground with the force of his hug. “I knew you’d do it!” he exclaimed. “They’d be mad not to have you, kid.” He set Harry down, beaming at him, ruffling his hair. “I knew from the first time I saw you on a broom that you’d be something special.” He winked. “Once you’ve graduated, you’ll give Puddlemere a call, aye? I’d hate to have to play against you in the National league as well.”

“You are a dear, dear friend, Harry Potter, but please do not join the European league when you graduate,” Viktor told him, “I would like to reach retirement with my reputation in tact.”

Harry didn't know what to do with all the praise, blushing like a tomato with Oliver's arm still heavy over his shoulders. "Let me just finish school, first, yeah?" he said eventually. "One thing at a time."

Oliver chuckled, ruffled his hair once more, then let him go. "Right, I'm going to leave you lot to talk contracts and things, and go start thinking up ways to apologise to the Scottish team," he joked. "And I've got one last kilt fitting to get to." He practically vibrated with joy at the thought of his upcoming wedding. "As soon as you're allowed to start telling people, Potter, you owl me, because we are *celebrating*, alright?" He smacked a kiss to Harry's cheek. "I'll see you in a few days. Andy, Claud, always a pleasure," he shook both their hands, then turned to Viktor. "And *you*, let us know if you can stick around for a few days more, we'd love to have you at the wedding."

Viktor looked surprised, but nodded, shaking Oliver's hand. "I will rearrange my schedule. I will be there," he promised.

"Perfect, we'll owl you the details." Waving to them all, Oliver headed back into the tunnel, whistling cheerfully to himself.

"As much as I would love to get you to sign a contract before you leave, Harry, I'm not the only one involved in the decision. But quite frankly if the board don't agree, I'm resigning," Andy joked. At least, Harry thought he was joking. "I'll have the legal team draw something up and get it over to you once everything's sorted. And I look forward to working with you."

"I— you know I still have school and everything, right?" Harry checked. "I *really* want this position but I'm not going to mess up my NEWTs for it."

Andy chuckled. "Not to worry; we can work around it, see how schedules line up. And the Cup won't start until after you graduate, so we don't have to worry about that." He leaned in with a conspiratorial grin. "I'll have you know, Harry, that I'm too smart a man to anger Minerva McGonagall by damaging her student's chance at good grades." He gave a theatrical shudder. "Swear I still have nightmares of her yelling for catching me out after curfew."

Harry snorted — yes, McGonagall had that affect on people.

With the tryout seemingly over, Harry looked to Viktor. "What are you up to for the rest of the day? Did you want to go get lunch or something?" He was too full of adrenaline to eat, but once that wore off he knew he'd be starving.

"Thank you, but I have a meeting soon," Viktor demurred. "I will owl you, though, since it seems I am in the country until the wedding. We should get dinner." He shook Harry's hand. "Well done today. I look forward to playing against you in the Cup." With the snitch still in his other hand, he winked. "Next time I may not be so lucky."

Harry said his goodbyes, shrank and pocketed his flying gear, and strode through the tunnel to head to the apparition room. Once he was there, he had to bite his lip to stop himself from screaming in joy.

He was going to play quidditch for England!

Thinking of home, Harry turned on his heel, landing right outside Seren Du. He desperately hoped people were home — he had to tell *someone* his good news.

“We’re out back!” Sirius called, and Harry ran around the side of the house to find the whole household in the garden, enjoying the beautiful afternoon. Even Buckbeak was out there, sprawled in a patch of sunlight, fast asleep.

“You look happy. And sweaty,” Draco added, eyeing him over. “Should I be concerned?”

Harry had to snort at the ridiculousness of the implication. “As if.”

“Do we finally get to hear about whatever it is you’ve been keeping under your hat all week?” Remus asked, raising his eyebrows at the teen. “Don’t try and fool me, you’ve been bleeding anxiety since last Tuesday.” He tapped his nose in emphasis. Harry bit his lip; he should have known he wouldn’t be able to keep it entirely secret.

“Well,” he began slowly, unsure how to best word it. “I had… a meeting, of sorts, today. And things aren’t *officially* official. But… I just made seeker for the England team.” He had to blurt it all out, unable to hold it in a second longer.

Draco jumped to his feet in shock. “What?”

“Viktor arranged a tryout, back before the battle and all. He’s friends with the team manager, I guess. And apparently Oliver spent ages talking me up, so I went and I flew and Viktor caught the snitch but I guess they thought I was good enough anyway. So they offered me the spot. And I said yes.” He grinned at the blond. “So it looks like we’re going to Greece next summer after all.”

The next thing he knew he was having the life kissed out of him by an armful of exuberant blond. “You’re fucking amazing,” Draco declared. Then, in a more boastful tone, “I’m going to marry an international quidditch star.”

Harry laughed. “You can’t tell anyone yet,” he said, looking around to include the others. “Not until it’s all signed and everything. But… yeah. I did that. Sorry I didn’t say sooner.” He hadn’t wanted to deal with their disappointment if he stuffed it up.

“There’s only one thing we can do about this,” Sirius declared, rising gracefully to his feet. Harry eyed him warily, wondering if his godfather was going to give him an earful about choosing quidditch over his studies.

Sirius’ face split in a wide grin. “Ceri!” he called, “we’re gonna need a cake! A big one!”

.-.-.-

The wedding of Oliver Wood and Lord Cassius Warrington was perhaps the biggest social event of the year.

Considering the Ministry was refusing to put on any sort of celebratory ball or dinner until the country was running smoothly and they had a proper Minister elected once more, there

hadn't been much of a social calendar before now. But even so, Harry was sure anything in future would be hard pressed to top this.

He hadn't realised it was possible for something to be *tastefully* quidditch themed, but somehow Cassius and Oliver had managed it. Puddlemere's stadium was decked out to the nines, the pitch laid out for the whole wedding, sun shining down on them all.

There had to be at least two hundred people in attendance — friends from Hogwarts, Oliver's quidditch friends, some of Cassius' work colleagues. All the people whose social standing led them to expect an invitation to Lord Warrington's wedding. And of course, those friends made in the month spent turning Hogwarts into a stronghold.

But despite the huge crowd, and the multiple photographers, it still felt like an intimate, family affair. Harry and Draco were seated near the front, with the rest of their friends, so they had the perfect view of Oliver and Cassius meeting at the altar with awe in their eyes, joining hands and preparing to pledge their lives to one another.

Throughout the ceremony — which was definitely longer than Bill and Fleur's — Harry kept looking down at Draco's hand in his, his engagement ring sat on his finger. Every time Draco caught him, he would roll his eyes and smile and kiss Harry's cheek, directing his attention back towards the happy couple.

The pair were unfairly handsome in their wedding attire, Oliver in the full formal tartan of his family clan, Cassius in shimmering gold dress robes that fit him like a glove; Harry didn't doubt all the gossip magazines — and some of the quidditch magazines — would have them on the front page of their next issue.

When the magical binding around their hands turned into identical wedding rings, the cheer that went up around the stadium felt louder than any quidditch match.

Harry caught Oliver's eye as the newly wedded couple made their return journey down the aisle together — his ex-captain had never looked so happy, not even when Gryffindor had won the quidditch cup. Which, for Oliver Wood, was saying *a lot*.

With no war to get to and no reason not to celebrate fully, there was a sit-down dinner, complete with speeches. Harry and Draco were on a table with the rest of the original Gryffindor team and their plus-ones, Draco very glad for Blaise's presence in the crowd of lions.

Oliver's dad gave a hilarious speech, embarrassing the hell out of both his son and his new son-in-law, teasing Oliver about how he thought his son would never love anything more than he loved quidditch, and then he'd been introduced to Cassius. It was sweet, and heartfelt, and everything Harry had imagined weddings to be.

He wanted his own to be like that. Even if the idea of Sirius Black giving a Father-of-the-Groom speech did give him palpitations.

Hopefully Neville's Best Man speech would make up for it. If his friend agreed to the position, of course.

But after an excellent dinner full of laughter and happy conversation — and not a single Weasley twins prank, on threat of Blaise and Angelina running off to Italy without them for a week — the space was transformed into a dance floor, with the six-tiered quidditch-themed cake in pride of place at the table nearby.

Draco's arm wound around Harry's waist as they watched Oliver and Cassius dance, both men with their foreheads pressed together. "One more year," the blond whispered in his ear, his smile audible. Harry stroked over his engagement ring, leaning back against him — one more year, and they could begin planning their own.

Or, rather, they could give Sirius, Narcissa and Andromeda permission to start planning it. There was no holding those three back.

When the floor opened to the rest of the guests, Harry and Draco were some of the first out there, swaying together as the band played a slow song. Harry was pleased and surprised to see Remus and Snape, in a shadowed corner of the dance floor but dancing together nonetheless, in public and everything.

It didn't stay that serene, of course. Once the cake had been cut and all the ceremonial stuff was over, the journalists got politely escorted out and the *real* party began. Alcohol flowed freely, and as it was the first time the whole crowd had gotten together since the battle, they were all more than ready to celebrate both Oliver and Cassius' marriage, and also the absolute joy of the freedom they had fought so hard to win.

Oliver was one of the fastest to get drunk, despite his insistence that a proper Scotsman could handle his alcohol. He danced with reckless abandon, grabbing his quidditch teammates both past and present up to join him, even at one point cajoling McGonagall into a dance. Harry had to stop him from spilling the beans about Harry's position on the England team on multiple occasions, though he was sure at least a few people had to be suspicious from the way Oliver 'just happened' to introduce him to certain quidditch players, all of whom happened to be on the England team, and all of whom greeted Harry with incredible enthusiasm and secretive smiles.

There were fireworks, as there always were at an event containing Fred and George Weasley. There were multiple Ceilidh dances, one of which Oliver dragged Harry into despite being three sheets to the wind and barely able to stand up, while Harry was equally as uncoordinated but not nearly as drunk. Oliver had stripped half of his formalwear off by that point — jacket and shoulder plaid abandoned in the heat, sporran lost because it disrupted his dancing, and sgian-dubh confiscated by an exasperated Cassius before someone could get hurt.

Not that Cassius was much better than his husband. He kept sneaking up behind Oliver, trying to slip a hand under his kilt, grinning wolfishly every time he was caught.

To Harry, it felt like the first time they had all had the chance to just be themselves; young, carefree, in love. Normal young adults celebrating the first of their group to get married — surely the first in a slew of many, once the bulk of them graduated.

Oliver and the twins were busy doing some kind of jig-slash-war-dance situation in the middle of the dance floor, while Cassius, Blaise and Angelina looked on in a mix of despair and amusement. Harry just hoped that someone, somewhere in the room had a camera, because moments like these deserved to be captured.

He rocked up on his toes, hands on Draco's shoulders for balance, looking around to see if any of his friends had a camera out. He was sure he'd seen Sullivan with one earlier... Harry peered around the pitch, rolling his eyes at the number of couples out snogging in the shadows, trying to spot his Ravenclaw friend.

Then he did a double-take, zeroing in on one of the snogging couples. One of the pair was definitely Sully — the other, if Harry wasn't mistaken, was Justin Finch-Fletchley.

Very interesting.

Hoping he remembered seeing the pair come morning, Harry gave up his camera search and decided to just enjoy the moment, allowing Pansy and Millie to drag him and Draco out onto the dance floor now they weren't in danger of being hit by a flailing Weasley. Millie's fiancé, Otto — who had bravely decided this wedding should be his first proper introduction to Millie's entire friend group — was sat at a table with Theo and Susan, looking quite overwhelmed, but happy about it nonetheless.

They were all going to be horrendously hungover in the morning, and Harry doubted Snape would be quite so generous with the Hangover potion this time.

But it was more than worth it, to be this happy.

Chapter End Notes

Just one more left to wrap things up, friends~ see you Friday!

Chapter 109

Chapter Notes

Here we are. The final chapter. Before we go in, I want to say a HUGE thanks to everyone who's left comments, kudos, and been so patient on this LONG journey we have taken. Y'all are awesome <3 Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Election Day had arrived in Magical Britain, and the whole country was buzzing with anticipation.

Harry and his family went to the Ministry early to cast their votes, sending sympathetic glances to the team of harassed-looking Ministry clerks who were dealing with all the votes coming in by owl and floo.

It was as simple as pressing his wand to Amelia's name on the ballot card, and watching it vanish in a flash of gold light.

They stuck around for a bit afterwards, helping Susan with her last-minute campaigning for her aunt — not that the Hufflepuff needed their help, as terrifyingly competent as she was — and then afterwards went over to Longbottom Manor in anticipation of the victory party. Sirius and Charlie swung by the Pottery to pick up the Forrester kids — just one last check away from being *their* kids. The couple had been frantically getting Grimmauld Place ready for the last week, planning on moving over there with Amy and Tahan after they'd seen all the other kids off to school.

They brought Frankie with them too, of course, and Harry was not remotely surprised when the Slytherin boy made a beeline for Remus and Snape.

If that boy wasn't officially their ward by the end of the school year, Harry would streak through the whole of Hogwarts.

Neville was in fine hosting form, much to his grandmother's pride. More and more people were coming through the floo as the day passed — all the usual crowd, the ones who had worked so hard to make this day happen.

Harry left his boyfriend chatting with Tonks, wandering through to squeeze in beside Ginny on an oversized armchair in the much quieter conservatory. "Hey, you," he greeted, slinging an arm around her shoulders. "How's it feeling, today?"

The day before, they had snuck out — or rather, Ginny had snuck out, and Harry had left the house with enthusiastic encouragement from his godfather — to meet Charlie's tattoo artist friend for their promised date. Ginny had gained a gold ring through the brand new cartilage

of her magically regrown ear, which had earned her mother's ire but was a great decoy to draw away from the bar through her left nipple, which Mrs Weasley definitely did not know about.

"Not too bad; healing spells are a marvel." Ginny grinned at him, wiggling her eyebrows.
"How about you?"

"Hardly even feel it." His new tattoo, a golden snitch fluttering just at the base of the right side of his ribs, was fully healed and moving already.

"And how does *Draco* like it?" Ginny leered, wiggling her eyebrows.

"Wouldn't you like to know," he joked in the same tone. Draco was definitely a big fan of the tattoo, even if he did roll his eyes at the seeker puns Harry made. "How does Nev like yours? Has he seen it yet?" He still remembered the shade of red Neville had turned when they discussed it.

"Not yet. I mean, he knows it's there, obviously," Ginny said, running a finger gently over her new earring. "But he hasn't seen it." Then she smirked wolfishly. "But I'm staying the night here, so..."

Harry laughed, rubbing the fuzz on the side of her head. She wasn't growing it out, even though there were potions that would do it in an instant. Harry was glad; he liked this new look on her. She looked older, and with another Weasley growth spurt and her muscles from playing quidditch, she looked like a girl you didn't want to mess with.

"Y'know, I'm gonna kind of miss our little dorm arrangement from the summer," he confessed. "Though I won't miss hearing you and Neville when you forget your Silencing charms."

Ginny cackled, unrepentant. "I know what you mean," she agreed, curling into him slightly. "It was nice. Our little escape from the world. Miles better than my usual dorm mates." She made a disgruntled face; due to her solid friendships with most of the year above, Ginny wasn't very close to the other Gryffindor girls in her year. They were jealous of her friendship with Harry, for one.

"Tell me about it." Dean and Seamus hadn't been *too* bad, but Ron had been a nightmare to live with before he'd figured out Silencing charms, his snores vibrating the whole room.

Harry wouldn't have to deal with that anymore, though. "Between you and me," he said, dropping his voice, "I'm not gonna have that problem this year."

Ginny raised a suspicious brow. "You're not moving down to the Chamber, are you?"

Harry snorted. "Not quite. Though I might have, if not for this." Since he could walk through the castle walls, it wouldn't even be an inconvenience. "Think about it." He'd kept it secret since McGonagall had given him the badge, but so close to returning to school he didn't mind if Ginny let it slip.

He watched her think for several seconds, before the penny dropped. “No way!” she breathed, wide-eyed. “You...?” She tapped her chest, about where a badge would sit on a Hogwarts robe, and he nodded. Immediately, he was tackled in a tight hug, Ginny squealing into his ear. “Harry, that’s amazing!” Then she pulled back, and scoffed. “You fucking nerd. *Mr Eight Os.*”

He just rolled his eyes — they were back to this again. He probably wouldn’t be rid of that nickname until after he got his NEWT results.

“I didn’t think she’d give it to me,” he confessed. “Thought I was too much trouble, to be honest.”

Ginny grinned at him. “You’re the good kind of trouble, though,” she told him, winking.

“Oi, you two!” The call startled both of them, turning to see Draco in the doorway. “The count’s almost over, they should be announcing it soon.”

Harry and Ginny scrambled to their feet, following Draco into the main parlour. The whole room was clustered around a Wizarding Wireless with the volume turned up, tension thick enough to cut with a knife. Susan sat closest to the Wireless, on Theo’s lap with a white-knuckle grip on his hands. Today’s eyepatch was bright orange with the words ‘Vote Minister Bones’ printed in black.

Harry squeezed into a seat next to Tonks, trying not to elbow her in the stomach as he situated himself. In the metamorphmagus’ tight t-shirt, the bump of the four-month pregnancy was unmistakeable, and Tonks couldn’t stop grinning about it.

Draco perched on the arm of the sofa beside him, hand coming to Harry’s shoulder, and Harry reached up to squeeze it anxiously.

“You know she’s going to win, right?” Tonks murmured, watching him in amusement. “Hawthorne is a clotpole. No one’s going to vote for him.”

“You never know,” Harry pointed out warily, “they voted for Fudge, after all.”

Then Draco hushed him, as Susan turned the volume up even louder.

“It seems we have the final count coming in!” the announcer declared. *“And... with a staggering ninety-six percent of the votes, Interim Minister Amelia Bones is now our confirmed new Minister for Magic! Congratulations, Minister Bones, and commiserations to Mr Hawthorne.”*

Harry was on his feet with excitement, Tonks right beside him as the whole room erupted in cheers. Susan burst out sobbing in Theo’s arms, and Mrs Longbottom didn’t even get mad when the twins let off some indoor fireworks. But they were quickly extinguished, as Amelia’s victory speech began on the broadcast.

“Thank you all for putting your faith in me — I know it isn’t easy, after such a difficult few years. But the dark times have passed, and I will do everything in my power to help this

country step into the light and be the best magical community it can be. For all our magical brethren, all over Britain. This summer has been a summer of change, and while as Interim Minister I have, with the help of my excellent staff and the dedicated Wizengamot, started to implement some long-overdue changes; I truly hope that now I have been elected, I will be able to continue that change for the better. All of you, all of us; we flourished in the face of adversity, and now it is time to reap our rewards and enjoy our peace. Thank you again, and I look forward to heralding in a better, brighter Magical Britain.”

“Oh, she is *good*,” Narcissa mused quietly. “Making it seem like a community effort to put this country to rights, rather than the swarm of teenagers who secretly took over our government.” She was clearly teasing, her grey eyes amused, and Susan laughed.

“Look, if the adults are gonna leave a mess, sometimes the kids have to clean it up,” she joked.

Hetty the house elf appeared with several bottles of champagne, and soon everyone had a glass — except Tonks and the kids, who drank sparkling grape juice. “To Minister Bones,” Kingsley declared, raising his glass. “And her secret teenage militia.”

“Minister Bones!” everyone chorused happily.

“You’re moving up in the world, Theo,” Draco drawled playfully. “Dating the Minister’s niece.”

Theo smirked, green eyes cast fondly at Susan, who had stopped crying by this point. “Don’t you see, Draco? That was my plan all along.”

Susan laughed the loudest at that, raising an eyebrow. “And here I thought your plan was to date the future Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot.”

“There’s multiple stages to my plan, darling,” Theo assured her. “I’m playing the long game.”

Susan snorted, tugging him by the shirt collar into a kiss that had all of them whistling.

“I just can’t believe we have to go back to school on Thursday,” the Hufflepuff girl complained, once she had detached from her boyfriend. “Pretending to be *normal* students, ugh.”

“Oh, shut up, like you aren’t going to love every second of being Head Girl,” Hannah teased her best friend. She was healing in leaps and bounds now she had her chair, and seemed to be quite excited to tackle seventh year.

“That will be nice,” Susan agreed, “and it’ll look great on my resume. I just wish I knew who McGonagall picked as Head Boy. I hope it’s not someone awful. Merlin, what if it’s Ron?”

None of the Weasleys in the room were offended by the slight to their brother, and Harry sat there quietly smirking. Susan had been so quick to assume that since none of them had immediately owned up to it, it was someone outside their social circle.

He looked across the room at Ginny, whose eyes were already bright with glee. “It’s the *worst* person, I’m really sorry, Susan,” she said sympathetically. “It’s going to be such a chore dealing with him.”

Susan’s eye landed on her in shock. “You know who it is?” Her face filled with dismay. “Oh, does that mean it *is* Ron?”

Ginny’s solemn expression cracked at the corners. “Worse than Ron,” she said with a sad shake of her head. “You’re going to have to put up with Harry.”

All eyes were on the Gryffindor boy, who grinned sheepishly. “Uh. Surprise?”

“*HARRY!*” Susan practically threw herself at him, Tonks only barely managing to dive out of the way in time. “Why didn’t you tell me, you git! Oh, this is going to be brilliant! I was so worried it would be someone shit, but it’s *you*, that’s great!”

He laughed, steadying her before she could fall off his lap. She was still working on the depth perception thing.

“If it makes you feel better, Sooz, I didn’t tell anyone. Until Ginny, like, ten minutes ago.”

“He didn’t even tell *me*,” Draco cut in, glaring lightly at his fiancé. Harry winced, and both sets of twins ‘ooh’ed in the background.

“Honestly I sort of forgot,” he admitted, giving the blond a pointed look. In the face of his other news, his Head Boy badge had rather slipped his mind.

Draco softened slightly, but still didn’t look impressed.

“You’re going to have to make it up to me, Potter,” he muttered, once Susan had left Harry’s lap and decided a dance party was in order while they waited for Amelia and Percy to get home and celebrate with them.

Harry looked up, eyes smouldering. “Head Boy gets a private room,” he pointed out in a sultry murmur, tugging Draco half over the back of the sofa. “I’m sure that can be arranged.”

Draco’s eyes darkened, and as Harry yanked him the rest of the way into his lap, no one really cared that the two of them were snogging like there was no tomorrow, left alone on the sofa in the corner.

They were all used to it by now, after all.

.-.-.-.

Packing up for school was decidedly weird, this time around.

Not only was Harry viscerally aware that this was the last time he would ever pack his trunk for a year at Hogwarts, but he was also having to pack up the majority of his bedroom at Seren Du, as well.

With no need for an Unplottable house to keep Harry safe, the family would be moving out and returning the manor to its summer home status. Grimmauld was ready, the paperwork on the Forrester kids had been signed, and it was time for them all to go home.

“Remind me why I’m the only one packing?” Harry asked, glancing over his shoulder at Draco, who was sprawled on the bed eating apple slices and watching Harry magically pack books into an expanded trunk.

“Because it’s your room?” Draco retorted.

“Yeah, which you’ve been basically living in for the last two summers,” Harry said without missing a beat. “Half this stuff is yours, I swear.” The bedroom that was *actually* Draco’s room had taken all of ten minutes to pack, and five of those were spent double checking that they hadn’t left any vials of lube or sex toys or anything weird hidden somewhere, which then might be found at a later date and used to embarrass the hell out of them.

“But it’ll all go to your room at Grimmauld, which is where I’m likely to spend most of my time when not at school anyway.”

“Won’t you go with your mum?” Harry asked, finishing up with the books and deciding to take a break, flopping down next to Draco on the bed. The Slytherin shrugged.

“Potentially. But I’ll still come over to see you most days.” He smiled helplessly. “As many of our friends have pointed out to us, we’re really quite co-dependent, darling.” He didn’t sound upset about it; he almost sounded *proud*.

Harry snorted, leaning in to kiss him. “We’re not *that* co-dependent,” he insisted. “We’re just making up for all that time we had to pretend we hated each other.”

“Whatever helps you sleep at night, love.”

“*You* help me sleep at night.” Harry’s hand slid down Draco’s stomach, and the blond smirked.

“Exactly. Co-dependent.” He raised up on his elbows, kissing Harry softly, parting his lips and easing him into a deeper kiss.

“For fuck’s sake, can you two stop for five minutes?”

Charlie stood in the doorway, a box tucked under one arm.

“Actually, we just got started, so if you could shut the door...”

Charlie laughed, tossing a light Tickling charm at Draco in retort. “Cissa needs to borrow you for a bit,” he said. “Malfoy ward stuff.” In his defence, he looked slightly apologetic.

Draco gave a dramatic groan, tearing himself reluctantly away from Harry and rolling off the bed onto his feet. It was unfair how he managed to look graceful doing so — Harry would just look like a drunk giraffe.

“Maybe you’ll actually get some packing done while I’m gone,” Draco joked.

“Sorry, Harry’s needed too. Grunt work in the potions lab,” Charlie informed him. It was Harry’s turn to sigh dramatically.

“Wonderful.” Remus was moving into Snape’s quarters at Hogwarts, but Snape didn’t want to leave potions ingredients at Seren Du for an unspecified amount of time, so everything had to be moved from his lab here to the school. And unfortunately, due to the sensitive nature of the ingredients, that all had to be done by hand.

They worked in companionable silence, Snape occasionally giving Harry instructions on things, but for the most part the almost-seventh year knew what to do with each ingredient. Harry was still getting used to seeing Snape in short sleeves; something the man did often, now that there was no brand on his arm.

“Now that you are no longer in need of training,” Snape began, startling Harry, “that means you are also no longer in need of repeated detentions under my care.” He levelled a stern look at Harry; the kind of look that had students crying into their cauldrons, but only left Harry mildly amused. “If you do get a detention, it will be because you have earned it, and the punishment will reflect that.”

“No more mouthing off in class, then,” Harry surmised, smirking as he put a box of shrivelfigs in the trunk. “Yes, sir.”

Snape snorted, muttering something that sounded an awful lot like ‘I’ll believe that when I see it’.

“I also expect you to put the appropriate amount of effort into my class. Horace did nothing but sing your praises last year, and I expect you to put in that same level of dedication.”

Harry realised what the man was getting at, and looked up at him knowingly. “No more masks,” he promised. “For either of us. You’re the same cranky bastard, and I’m the same insufferable Gryffindor, but... none of the rest.” No pretending he was worse at subjects than he was. No acting like he couldn’t stand to be in Snape’s presence. No lying to his friends about his time spent with the man. And no more of Snape pretending he hated everything about Harry James Potter.

“None of the rest,” Snape agreed quietly. He strode over to Harry, under the pretence of checking on the powdered erumpent horn, but put a hand on the Gryffindor’s shoulder. “I am proud of you, you know,” he murmured, so soft Harry almost didn’t hear it. His breath caught, heart stuttering at the words. He’d heard them a hundred times since the battle, from all kinds of people, but... never from Snape.

“I... d’you think Mum would be?” he asked, biting his lip, watching the man’s expression. Snape’s gaze cast over Harry in that way that made him feel so very exposed.

“Lily would be bragging about her son from here to the moon, were she alive,” he said, smiling ever so slightly. “Not because of your achievements, though she’d be proud of those too. But because of the man you have become.”

Harry's eyes stung at the corners, and he resolutely ignored it. "I... thanks, Severus." He paused, thinking on the words he didn't think he'd ever said, not to the Potions Master's face. "I wouldn't be alive if not for you." Not just the training. His help within the castle, the one adult Harry could count on even when everything was going to shit. Constant and solemn-eyed and always pushing Harry to be *better*, to stand taller, to learn his worth and demand others do the same.

"You probably wouldn't," Severus agreed wryly. "But my life would not be worth living had I let you die."

Unable to stand it any longer, Harry turned, hugging the lanky Slytherin hard around the waist, letting a few tears escape into the man's black t-shirt. Slowly, Snape's arms closed around him, his head tilting down to rest against Harry's.

It was a while before they got back to categorising ingredients.

.-. .

They ate dinner together in the kitchen, one last time as a family.

Of course, it wasn't *actually* one last time — they would be back for visits, definitely. At least two weeks every summer, Sirius had promised. No matter how far-flung the family got, how many kids they ended up with, whatever was going on in their lives; two weeks, every summer, for the entire Black family.

"All settled at the Manor, then, Cissa?" Sirius asked, passing his cousin the bottle of wine to pour.

"Just about," she confirmed. "I daresay it's going to be rather quiet, rattling around that old manor by myself." A touch of sadness tinged her voice. "I'll have to find a hobby."

"I thought you already had a hobby?" Snape remarked, "meddling in everyone else's business." The tone was snide, but it just made Narcissa laugh.

"If you did not want me to *meddle*, Severus Snape, you would not have asked me to come with you."

"Come with you where?" Remus asked, frowning in confusion. "Is this about that errand you ran the other day?"

To Harry's astonishment, Snape *blushed*.

Under the table, Draco gripped Harry's knee tightly, and when Harry glanced at him the blond looked like he'd come to some incredible realisation. Harry was just about to ask him to share, but then Snape spoke again.

"I was *going* to do this on Palace Pier," Snape bit out archly, glaring at Narcissa. "But then someone reminded me that such things may cause a fuss amongst the small-minded muggles. And is now insisting that it would be best done before we return to Hogwarts. In case I *lose my nerve*."

Draco's grip grew tighter, almost painful, but Harry was still very confused about what was going on. Snape pushed his chair back a little, facing Remus properly. The werewolf looked just as bewildered as Harry felt.

"I am not a man prone to dramatic gestures," Snape said, his voice full of emotion in a way that Harry had never heard before. Remus went tense, dropping his fork, scooting his chair back as well. "Nor am I one for excessive words — unless those words are in the destruction of someone's character." He smirked, and so did Remus, sharing some kind of in-joke. "But I am lucky, because despite my flaws you have never hesitated to accept me as I am, every part of me. You have seen me at my worst, and I sincerely hope my best is yet to come."

Things were rapidly piecing together in Harry's brain now, and he didn't seem to be the only one, as Sirius murmured a quiet 'oh, fuck me' before Charlie could shush him.

Snape got out of his chair, dropping to one knee in front of Remus. Remus made a soft choking noise in response, eyes bugging out of his head. "Since we were foolish teenagers with no idea what the world had in store, I have promised you a life together, Remus Lupin. It has taken a while to get here, but... I would very much like it if you would begin that life, with me. As my husband."

Then, from the pocket of his jeans, came a ring. A simple gold band, set all the way around with small amber gemstones. He held it up to Remus, his face appearing impassive at first glance — but Harry could see the naked hope in those ink-dark eyes.

"*Severus*," Remus breathed shakily. "I have waited twenty years to hear those words, and my answer still hasn't changed. Yes, I'll marry you."

For the second time in his life, Harry saw Remus Lupin and Severus Snape kiss each other, Remus' hands cupping Snape's cheeks.

No one spoke as Snape slid the ring onto Remus' finger, kissing it once it was there and then rising to reclaim his chair. Then Remus turned, looking ten years younger as he beamed at them all.

"So," he said, shifting his chair back up to the table. "Who's for dessert?"

.-.-.-.

The morning of September first was a warm one, the summer lingering unseasonably late, as if it was aware the students of Hogwarts had not truly been able to enjoy the start of it. Harry's bedroom window was open, but even so the duvet had been kicked down to the bottom of the bed, Draco's feet tangled up in the edge of it. His bare chest was pressed to Harry's back, spooning up behind him, and Harry would have happily stayed there forever.

"Don't wanna get up," he murmured petulantly, Draco's warm breath tickling the back of his neck.

"It's early yet," Draco told him, hand sliding languidly up his side. "We don't have to."

They lay there for a while, Draco pressing fluttering kisses to Harry's shoulder, still skimming that hand up and down his side, just light enough to make the skin prickle pleasantly. Harry stretched out a little further, which had the side effect of pressing his arse back against Draco's quickly-hardening cock. The Slytherin hummed happily, fingers skirting up and over Harry's nipple, though he still didn't move otherwise. He scraped his teeth gently across the sensitive skin of Harry's neck, drawing a sigh from the Gryffindor.

This continued for a while longer; tiny movements, teasing touches, a slow and lazy journey into wakefulness. But there was intent to it, a heat building in that aching slowness, and Harry wasn't surprised when eventually that hand stroking his chest went down, down, right beneath the waistband of his boxers. He gasped, arching back against Draco, the blond's fingers curling firmly around his length.

Draco continued to press against him, hips bucking in bigger movements now, his leg sliding between Harry's and his other arm creeping around the Gryffindor's shoulders, bowing his back so their lips could meet in a messy kiss. A breathless whine escaped Harry as fingers tightened in his hair, kisses dotting along the shadowed line of his unshaven jaw until a tongue started to drag across his throat. Draco bucked his hips harder, hand around Harry dry but just the right side of sweet friction, thumb flicking over his leaking head and making Harry whimper slightly. Teeth nipped at his Adam's apple, the tingling pressure of his arousal building gradually within him.

Harry reached back blindly, scrabbling a hand down Draco's side, his back, grabbing a handful of his silk-clad backside, urging him to move harder, faster, *more*. The rhythm between the hand on his own erection and the hard length jutting into the swell of his arse was *almost* perfect, Draco's quiet moans singing in his ear like a prayer, a plea. Harry closed his eyes, straining to reach his release, hoping that each pump of Draco's hand around his cock would be the perfect angle, the sizzle in his veins almost *painful* as he remained on the brink but not quite, thighs tensing, toes curling, *so close*—

BANG! BANG! BANG!

"Boys, come on, we've got to pick up the kids at the Pottery and I don't want to be late!" Sirius, on the other side of the door, cheerful and probably entirely too aware of what he'd just interrupted, the heat he'd as good as tossed a freezing bucket of water over.

Harry groaned, feeling his arousal die even with Draco's hand still around him, his partner rolling onto his back with an irritated huff.

"Every *fucking* time," Harry groused, trying to fight through his addled brain, trying to comprehend such delicious torture with such an abrupt, unsatisfying end. "It's like he waits, right until the worst moment."

"That requires your godfather having more knowledge of our sex life than I *ever* want to contemplate," Draco told him, shuddering. "Sodding Salazar, I'm going to murder him one day."

"I'll help you hide the body," Harry promised. He cast a wandless tempus, his clock having been moved to his room at Grimmauld Place. "Are you kidding me, it's not even nine yet!"

Don't want to be late, I swear to fucking Merlin I am going to leave behind a prank that will make Charlie not want to touch him for weeks." He was already thinking about it, running through his mental list of spells, wondering what would be appropriate — what didn't have an immediate counter to it.

"You could do that," Draco drawled, sitting up and giving him a pointed look. "Or you could come and join me in the shower and we'll finish what we started."

On second thought, that was a much better idea than Harry's.

.-. .

Sirius was a ball of energy at breakfast, talking a mile a minute, asking the boys if they had everything and reminding Harry to send Hedwig off with his signed England contract before he left, babbling as he worried a napkin between his fingers. Harry couldn't even be mad at him about the interruption; his godfather was a little bit of a wreck, and it tugged at Harry's heart.

He was a bit of a wreck, too, inside. They were leaving this house, his home, his sanctuary, and they were going to board the Hogwarts Express for the very last time.

He kept telling himself he was being ridiculous — he could go back and visit Hogwarts whenever he liked, they *literally* couldn't keep him out even if they wanted to. And for the first time ever there was nothing to fear from the castle; no manipulative headmasters or murderous Dark Lords or tricks and traps lurking round dark corners for Harry to fall into.

Just classes, and friends, and quidditch.

McGonagall was right — without the Head Boy position, he would go *spare* with boredom.

Assuring Sirius for the hundredth time that yes, he had everything, and even if he didn't he could ask Ceri to get it or just apparate home and get it himself, Harry finished off his breakfast and stood. And paused.

He'd left this place for a whole school year before. Multiple times. So why did it feel so much worse, now?

Sirius slung an arm over his shoulders, snapping him out of his reverie. "Time to rejoin the big wide world, now, kiddo," he murmured. "No more hiding out here and pretending the rest of it all doesn't exist."

Oh. That was why.

Harry resolutely swallowed against the tears that threatened to come, nodding sharply. "I'm gonna go send Hedwig off." He had signed the contract with the England team, after having Mrs Frobisher read through the whole thing and check that he wasn't going to be stuck with some unreasonable publicity bullshit. It was great, and once Andy received it Harry would officially be seeker for England.

Big wide world, indeed.

Sirius nudged him into movement, so Harry did as he said, scratching Hedwig on the head before sending her off with the tightly rolled parchment. Then he gave one last look around his room, and wiped surreptitiously at his eyes.

“You soppy little lion.”

He wasn’t sure when Draco had come in, but there he was, his face so terribly fond Harry’s heart cracked a little further. “I promise one of these days I’ll stop crying,” Harry joked, and Draco crossed the distance between them, holding him close.

“You cry as much as you like, my love,” he whispered, swaying them slightly as Harry buried his face in the blond’s shoulder.

“We’ll be back,” Draco continued softly. “Your room will always be your room. No one’s going to take it away from you.”

What was it with his loved ones and reading the inner depths of his soul like it was written plain on his face?? He wasn’t *that* transparent, surely?

“I know,” he murmured, though it felt better to say it out loud. “And I have my room at Grimmauld, too. I know it’s better this way — we need to have a home we can invite people over to. The kids need that. But...”

“But this place is home, too,” Draco finished for him. A kiss pressed to Harry’s hair, a soft inhale of his shampoo. “You can have more than one home, Harry. It’s fine.”

For a boy who once had no home at all, it seemed an entirely foreign concept.

Eventually, he straightened up, clearing his throat and wiping his eyes. He didn’t want to get the train to Hogwarts looking like he’d been bawling his eyes out like a homesick first year. He was Head Boy; he was supposed to be setting an example.

“You go wash your face,” Draco suggested. “I’ll get our trunks downstairs. Oh, and I’ve been meaning to ask — when did you get your cloak back?”

Harry blinked, his mild emotional spiral derailed by the strange question. “My what?”

“Your invisibility cloak. I saw you put it in your trunk last night and I was going to ask but then I got distracted.”

He froze, thinking of the folded piece of fabric within his trunk — always handy to have, just in case — but also thinking of the stone set in a ring and the wand brimming with power, both now tucked away inside little box in a hidden drawer in his desk at Grimmauld Place.

Thinking of a voice, in the back of his mind, that never truly went away.

“Oh, that.” He forced a smile on his face. “It just showed up, after Dumbledore died. Guess it was the family magic bringing it back.” Not technically a lie.

Draco's brow furrowed. "How odd," he mused, then shrugged. "Well, I'm glad you have it back. I know how much it means to you." He leaned in, pecking Harry's cheek. "Go on, go take a minute to clean up. Sirius will have an aneurism if we don't leave soon." They were trusting Essie and Tinker to make sure that all four of the children were packed and ready to go in time. Once they left, the Pottery would be empty again.

For now.

Sure enough, Sirius was bouncing up and down when Harry made it downstairs. Snape looked only mildly murderous — but then he'd been in a good mood since the night before, understandably.

The students were going to *shit themselves* if Snape dared smile at the Welcoming Feast.

"Let's go, let's go!" Sirius hassled, making Harry roll his eyes and jump the last three stairs.

"I'm coming! Keep your hair on!"

Ceri hurried in from the kitchen, holding a stack of metal sandwich boxes. "Ceri has made lunches for young masters and mistress' train journey!" She handed one each to Harry and Draco, and the last two to Charlie.

Harry grinned. "Brilliant, thanks Ceri. We'll see you at Christmas." Ceri would, of course, be moving to Grimmauld with the family. At this point Harry wasn't sure any of them could find their own arses with two hands and a map without the little house elf.

Ceri bobbed her head in thanks, then fixed the two boys with a stern look. "Young masters is staying out of trouble this year," she declared — a statement, not a question. Sirius let out a cough that sounded an awful lot like a laugh.

"We'll try our best, Ceri," Harry promised sincerely. She eyed him a little longer, then nodded, satisfied.

"Ceri is going to the other house to wait for masters and little master and mistress." She was overjoyed at the idea of having a couple of younger kids to take care of.

"Perfect, we'll see you there," Charlie said. "Let's get moving."

All together, the seven of them left the house, Harry taking one last look at the first place he had ever experienced true freedom, and they headed for the edge of the wards.

"What's happening with Buckbeak?" Harry asked suddenly, glancing back at the hippogriff sunning himself in the grass. Surely they weren't leaving him there all alone, for the whole year?

"Oh, I'm gonna take him back to Hagrid once I get the chance," Sirius assured. "Think it's been enough time that he's no longer a fugitive."

Harry snorted. "Even if he is, I have an in with the Minister," he joked.

They apparated to the Pottery, and the gates opened automatically at Harry's presence.

"So this is your house, is it?" Draco asked as they strode up the driveway, his brows raised.

"Oh, yeah, I forgot you haven't been here before." There had never been any need. "Yup, this is it. The Potter family home." *Our home*, he didn't say, though it was clear in the look he gave Draco.

The Slytherin looked up at the house, then nodded, a faint smile on his face. "It'll do," he said, and Harry's heart stuttered.

Thankfully, the house elves had indeed managed to wrangle the four children into readiness. Amy and Tahan were crying already, heartbroken at the prospect of not seeing their big sister until Christmas. Even the excitement of finally moving in with Sirius and Charlie couldn't cheer them up.

"Come on, loves," Charlie soothed, letting them both hug his legs. "We'll send everyone to school and then we'll go home and you can decorate your new rooms, and then we'll play a bit of quidditch, how's that sound?"

Thanks to some very creative spellwork and a little nudging of the Wardstone, Sirius had turned the roof of Grimmauld Place into a garden, big enough at least for junior quidditch. Which had quickly become a favourite pastime of the two children, so that finally stopped the sniffles.

"Everyone ready?" Sirius checked, doing a final headcount. While he was running through Nashira's check list, Harry sidled over to his two house elves.

"Thank you, both, for everything. You've gone above and beyond, this last year." Caring for so many people without a single peep of complaint. The world truly did not deserve house elves. "If there's anything I can do to thank you..."

The two elves shared a look, unused to being thanked by their masters. "We is doing what we is asked to do, Master Harry," Tinker said simply.

"It is nice having the house in use again," Essie agreed, even if she looked quite like she would happily curl up to sleep for the next three weeks. "Is... will Master Harry be back?" Her eyes widened cautiously. Harry's heart ached for them — they had been alone for so long, before he showed up.

"I'm spending Christmas with the Black family," he said, watching the pair deflate slightly, "but after graduation Draco and I plan to move in here. Quidditch depending." They had thought about getting a flat, like they had once dreamed of, but honestly with the number of houses between them and the amount of time they were likely to be out of the house, there seemed little point.

Both elves beamed at the news, bowing to Harry and then disappearing when he bid them goodbye.

They would probably enjoy the ten months of respite, after the year they'd had.

As the group began to walk out to apparate away, Harry jogged a little to catch up, just behind Frankie and Remus. He didn't *mean* to eavesdrop, but when he heard them talking...

"Severus and I are getting married," Remus said, looking incredibly pleased by the concept. Frankie blinked, and his jaw set in that impassive Slytherin way of bottling up your emotions.

"Oh," he replied. "...Are you going to have a baby soon, then?"

A cough spluttered out of Remus, his eyes widening. "I— well, we, ah— that's a bit more of a complicated process with two men, you know. We— it's something we're certainly considering."

"Oh," Frankie said again.

"But," Remus continued tentatively, "any theoretical future babies we do have... they could do with a big brother."

Frankie's jaw tightened further. "Harry's doing well so far."

Harry's heart jolted happily.

"He is," the werewolf agreed. "But we were also thinking that you seem rather good at it, yourself."

Frankie's only reaction was a sharp intake of breath, the slightest widening of his eyes, a half-step of hesitation.

"You've got the whole school year to decide," Remus told him evenly. "And you can come talk to us whenever you like. You can spend Yule at the castle, or come spend it with Nash and the rest. And by summer, if you'd like, Severus and I can foster you."

"Foster?" Frankie asked warily, eyes guarded. "Not adopt?"

Now Remus was the one looking a touch surprised.

"We didn't know if you'd want adoption," he admitted. "But we'd certainly like to." An old hand at gently teasing emotions out of recalcitrant Slytherins, Remus patted him on the shoulder. "You don't need to decide now. Think about it."

As they reached the gates, Frankie was pensive and quiet.

"Hold on tight, kids," Sirius warned, making sure each child was securely latched to an adult. He had Amy, and she scrunched her face up tight in preparation for the uncomfortable feeling of apparition.

Harry grinned, snagging Draco around the waist and reeling him in close. "Hold on tight," he breathed into the blond's ear, and then apparated them away.

They reappeared in the designated spot on Platform 9 & 3/4, and Draco glared lightly at him. Harry just kissed him on the nose — just in time for Charlie and Tahan to appear, and the little boy to groan loudly at the gesture. “You two are gross,” Tahan told them matter-of-factly.

With a laugh, Harry stepped out of the way of oncoming apparition, keeping his arms wrapped tight around Draco’s waist, kissing him sloppily on the cheek. “Yup,” he agreed proudly. “So gross.”

“Don’t you two *ever* stop?”

That was Ginny, her hair freshly shaved and a new earring in that had a little gold chain connecting the top piercing with the lobe piercing. She led the way for the rest of the Weasley/Granger contingency — the whole clan had come out to see their youngest off to Hogwarts, Hermione’s parents bringing up the rear.

“You lived with us for a month, you know we don’t,” Harry joked, mostly just to watch the scandalised blush cross Mrs Weasley’s face.

The platform was a riot of noise and colour and energy — a far cry from how it had been this time last year. Harry was buoyed just by being there, his melancholy finally making way for excitement.

All down the platform he saw his friends, saying goodbye to their families and saying hello to each other, as if they hadn’t all been drinking and dancing together not two nights ago to celebrate Amelia’s win. The Minister herself was there, hugging Susan like she didn’t ever want to let her go. When she did, it was to grab a surprised Theo in an equally tight hug, holding it until the Slytherin relaxed enough to put a tentative arm around her back.

Harry grinned to himself, turning back to his own farewell party. His own family.

They were all here, every single one of them. Well, except the Tonks contingency, but someone had to hold down the fort at the Ministry so that Amelia and Percy could be part of the Hogwarts run.

Normally Remus and Snape would have gone ahead to the castle, but both men wanted to be there to see Harry and Draco off for the last time. Plus, Snape wanted to fool the students into thinking that because he was at the platform, the curse of the Defence position had struck again and he would no longer be teaching them.

“Come on,” Sirius announced. “Let’s start the hugs now, or you’ll never make the train on time.” He held his arms open to Nashira, who jumped into them eagerly.

Harry started with Charlie, mock-grimacing when the redhead ruffled his hair affectionately. “Enjoy yourself, kid,” he said. “And slow down for once, yeah? Swear to Merlin you’re always going a thousand miles a minute, all the plates you’re spinning. Just... slow it down. Make the most of it. Trust me, you’ll regret it if you don’t.” He looked at the train a little wistfully, and Harry wondered if he had regrets about his time at Hogwarts. “Also, keep an

eye on Nash for us.” Charlie’s dimples returned with his smile. “You’re a big brother now, don’t forget.”

As if Harry could, when his heart danced every time he thought of his new little siblings.

Snape didn’t *do* hugs, not in public, so from him Harry got a curt nod. Narcissa on the other hand absolutely *did* do hugs, and kissed him on both cheeks for good measure. “Look after each other,” was the only advice she gave him, smiling softly.

Remus hugged him too, even though they’d be seeing each other again in a few hours. “We’re so proud of you, cub,” he whispered, nuzzling Harry’s temple. “I’m glad I’ll be there in person to see you shine, your last year.”

That made Harry’s throat go tight, and he quickly distracted himself by heading over to the Weasley contingency to get mauled by Fred and Angelina all at once. George was too busy holding Blaise like he’d never see him again. “Make sure you leave a good team behind,” Angelina told him, eyes shining. “We have to keep this Gryffindor run going even after you’re out of there.”

Harry, who was fully planning on training an entire reserve team this year and then handing his captain’s badge to Ginny, promised her he’d make it happen.

Hugs from Bill and Fleur were brief but heartfelt, and finally George peeled himself off his boyfriend long enough to say goodbye to Harry. “Give ‘em hell, kid,” he said, grinning mischievously, slipping Merlin only knew what into Harry’s jacket pocket. “If you and Neville don’t use those powers of yours for mischief, we’re disowning both of you.”

“Good to know,” Harry said with a snort. He was sure the two of them and their shared ability to walk through walls would manage to come up with something or other, to pass the time. Keep McGonagall on her toes.

Percy preferred to send him off with a firm handshake and a reminder about the reading for the next Wizengamot meeting, which from Percy was practically a declaration of eternal kinship. Smoothly avoiding Mrs Weasley while she was busy fussing over Hermione, Harry stood before Mr Weasley, unsure.

“Oh, come here,” the man murmured, embracing Harry without hesitation. “I’ve told you before, you’ll always be one of my boys,” he promised. “Now be good, and study hard.” His eyes were twinkling when they parted.

“Yes, sir,” Harry chirped obediently, smiling.

Finally, he faced Sirius. There were no words between them, just a fierce, almost desperate hug. Harry refused to cry *again* that morning, so he held it in admirably, throat aching with the force of it. “You’ve come so far, kiddo,” Sirius whispered. “Just a little bit more to go.” His lips pressed to Harry’s cheek, and his eyes were suspiciously shiny when he loosened his grip. “If I don’t get a letter from McGonagall telling me you’re in trouble at least once per term, I’ll be very disappointed in you,” he mock-scolded, and Harry laughed, hugging him one last time.

“Up to no good, as always,” he assured. “Marauder’s honour.”

“That’s my boy!” Sirius squeezed his shoulders.

“I’ll see you at Yule, Dad.”

The animagus blinked rapidly, smile stretching across his face. “See you at Yule, son.” Then he paused. “But you’ve got the mirror if you need me. Or if you just want a chat. Save Hedwig for the rest of the family.”

“I’ll call once a week, at least, promise.”

Harry had to repeat that promise several times to the twins as they hugged his legs, and then it was onto the train with the warning whistle, steam already billowing from the chimney. Others were doing the same, calling their last goodbyes and hurrying onto the red steam engine, eager to find good compartments with their friends. Nashira and Frankie disappeared quickly, eager to find friends they hadn’t seen in over a year now.

Waving to his family one last time before the train rounded the corner, Harry squeezed Draco’s hand and turned away from the window.

“Here’s the real challenge,” Ginny declared, “trying to figure out how to fit all of us in the same bloody compartment.”

Harry looked around, snorting. Their group had certainly grown a bit. “We’ll figure something out,” he said confidently.

‘Figuring something out’ ended up being two compartments next to each other, crammed full to bursting with the occupants regularly hopping between the two. For the first time, Harry wasn’t spared the tedium of the Prefects’ meeting — he walked in beside Susan, their badges proudly pinned to their chest. Susan’s eye patch was yellow with the words ‘Head Girl’ in bold black letters, just in case someone didn’t get the memo.

Watching Hermione swallow her tongue at the sight of them was worth every second of the boring meeting.

With the new fifth year prefects assigned to train patrols, the seventh years and their one sixth year companion were free to return to their compartments. Harry made sure he was walking behind Sullivan, tapping the Ravenclaw on the shoulder.

“Hi, Harry!” they greeted cheerfully. “Ready for your last year?”

“Just about,” Harry replied, easily pushing down the reflexive wave of emotion. “Now I’ve got a question for you Sullivan Fawley,” he drawled softly, watching Sully’s eyebrow raise warily. Harry’s face became pure mischief. “Is Justin Finch-Fletchley as good a kisser as the rumour mill says?”

Sullivan paled dramatically, then went beet red. “What— no one was around, we checked!”

“What do you mean? You were right in the middle of everything!” The Ravenclaw’s gaze turned to panic.

“Wait. Which time are you talking about?” they asked, and Harry’s eyebrows shot up to his hairline.

“I meant at the wedding. How many times have there been?” he asked interestedly. Sully cursed under their breath.

“Enough,” they bit out succinctly.

“Enough to confirm the rumours?” Harry pressed salaciously. Sullivan let out a tiny ‘meep’, then anxiously tugged at their short ponytail.

“Maybe. Okay. Yes. There’s been many times. And—and hopefully will be many more times.” A beat, then they smirked, ever so slightly. “And if anything, the rumours were understating.”

Harry wolf-whistled quietly under his breath, clapping the Ravenclaw’s shoulder. “Get in, Sully,” he teased, earning a quiet groan.

“Don’t tell anyone?” they pleaded. “I—we’re still figuring things out.”

It sounded like they had *plenty* figured out, but Harry wasn’t going to butt his nose in, not that much.

“Secret’s safe with me,” he promised. Sully’s eyes flashed in relief.

By the time they reached the compartments, there was no sign of the conversation on either of their faces.

Harry hadn’t realised how many people in the lower years he was friends with, or his other friends were friends with, until they all started swinging by to say hello. Sure, it helped that they had Ginny and Luna and Sullivan with them, but plenty were there for other people.

A lot were HA members, who almost seemed *disappointed* that the end of the war meant no more need to train.

“We can still do a study group,” Harry assured everyone who asked. “But I know this year’s Defence professor, and honestly, you’re not going to need my help.”

When pressed further, he remained tight-lipped on the subject, even to his closest friends. He wasn’t going to spoil Remus’ fun.

Changing into their robes got a little awkward with so many of them shoved into a small space, but they managed it with magic. The seventh years all turned quiet after that, and their three sixth years did the same in sympathy.

“Cheer up,” Ginny said eventually, perched comfortably on Neville’s lap and looking around at all their solemn faces. “At least this time you can have a totally normal year at Hogwarts.”

They all looked at each other, and burst out laughing as one.

“What the fuck does that even look like?” Pansy exclaimed, shaking her head.

“I think you’re pushing your luck, there,” Hannah agreed. “We’ve still got the trouble-magnet over there, after all.”

“Hey!” Harry protested indignantly. “Not all of it has been my fault!”

“Just most of it,” Parvati piped up, quiet but managing a shaky smile. She and Lavender had disappeared for a while, taking some quiet time to mourn Padma on this final train journey, but now they were back and trying their best to keep their spirits up.

It would be hard, in so many different ways. But they’d manage.

When the train pulled into Hogsmeade station, none of them moved at first. Finally, Harry shifted from his position half-squishing Draco against the window, rising to his feet. “Let’s get going,” he declared, forcing a rakish grin. “McGonagall will kill us all if we’re late to the feast.”

That sparked them into motion, resizing their trunks for the elves to move and squeezing their way out of the train. As always, Hagrid towered over all of them with his lantern in hand, and he waved happily at Harry between his calls for first years. Susan and Harry hung back a while, making sure that all the students got off the train and into the carriages, that no poor firsties got left behind when Hagrid set off to the boats.

Stood patiently waiting for them by the last two carriages were Draco and Theo, along with Daphne, Ginny, Neville, Luna and Hannah.

Harry was torn, but he knew what he needed to do.

“Go with the others,” he told Draco, kissing him softly. “I need to do this with them.”

Draco, because he was the most wonderful person in the world, understood completely. “Come find me after the feast,” he requested, and Harry grinned.

“I can slip through the walls, my love,” he pointed out, “I can steal you away in the night.”

Draco’s eyes sparkled, and he couldn’t resist one more kiss. “I like the sound of that,” he agreed.

They parted ways; Draco heading with Theo and the three girls for one carriage, while Harry turned to his fellow heirs in the very last one. “Shall we?”

Hannah got situated first, levitating her wheelchair up and adjusting the carriage bench to suit. Then the other three piled in beside her. As the carriage began to roll, they joined hands, all four of them, waiting for the moment they crossed the wards.

They saw it before they felt it. Looming on the horizon, twinkling with the light from a hundred different windows, Hogwarts castle stood tall and proud and utterly unchanged by

the world around it. Harry had worried it would hurt, looking at it after some time away, remembering all the death and destruction that had happened there. And it did, a little bit.

But it felt good, too. Wonderful things had happened to him at Hogwarts. Wonderful things had happened to *everyone* at Hogwarts, and would continue happening long after Harry was gone. Hogwarts would outlast them all, a refuge for young people, somewhere they could be at peace with the magic coursing through their blood.

All four of them shuddered at the same exact moment; passing through the wards felt like sinking into a warm bath, like greeting a long-time friend, like *home*.

They kept holding hands, all the way up to the castle.

“A normal year,” Neville murmured, seeming baffled by the very concept. “What *does* that look like?”

“I’ve got no clue,” Harry replied, meeting his best friend’s hazel eyes, feeling Luna press warm against his side, catching Hannah’s forever sunny smile. “But I’m sure as hell keen to find out.

As Draco had said; he could have more than one home.

And Hogwarts would always be one of them.

Chapter End Notes

I know a lot of you were hoping to see more out of this fic, but to me, this felt like the right place to end it. It’s already long enough ;)

Seriously though, this fic has been a journey for me. It’s the longest piece of continuous fiction I’ve ever written. It has been the one thing I could write when writing anything else was too hard, the thing I could focus on when I was too unwell and the world was too stressful. It’s also been a catharsis, of sorts. I, like I’m sure many of you can relate to, have struggled with my relationship with Harry Potter a lot over the last couple years. As JKR has gotten more hateful and dangerous in her crusade against trans people, I have found it difficult to want to associate any part of myself with her creations. This fic in a lot of ways was me trying to fix the things that always bothered me about canon — as I’m sure you guessed especially from the earlier sections — but also to work things through with myself, write down some ideas and headcanons that I just wanted to get out, and... move on. I’m not here to question how anyone else deals with JKR’s actions and their consumption of her media, but I’m ready to fill that space in my life with other things. This is very likely my last Potter fic. I didn’t know that for sure when I started, but now, 750k down the line, I think I’ve said my goodbyes to this fandom. It got me through a lot in my life, and I will always appreciate it for that, but I personally cannot keep engaging with the works and words of someone who doesn’t believe I or my loved ones deserve human rights.

So thank you all, for walking this path with me. It's been amazing to have your support and your enjoyment of this fic that ended up far longer than I ever intended. I'm sorry if you're expecting more, but if I went down that road, I'd never be done with it.

I appreciate all of you for putting in the time to read this absolute behemoth. Seriously. You're the best <3

Works inspired by this one

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!