

## Harry Potter and the Greatest Show

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# Harry Potter and the Greatest Show

by [shadowscribe](#)

## Summary

The last real thing Harry remembers is standing across from Voldemort and watching the killing curse fly at his face.

Then he visited a fluffy white limbo that somewhat resembles King Cross Station and instead of choosing to move *on* or go *back* he does something else entirely.

And wakes up in his cupboard on the morning of Dudley's eleventh birthday.

Because that makes sense.

(No. No it doesn't.)

But Harry is going to roll with it anyway.

## Notes

Readers. Dear, lovely, wonderful, *gorgeous* readers... I literally have no idea what is happening here. This fic did not exist in any shape or form until...\*glances at clock\*... 2.5 hours ago. And then a note I'd made for my other fic Unbreakable collided with the playing of Neil Young's "Old Man" and... and... \*gestures helplessly at the resulting 3k words\*.

And, because I *only* have 3 other active fics, plus a series that I need to get around to finishing, plus an original work that has decided that YES. NOW IS THE TIME TO WRITE IT. which means that I'm up to my goddamn eyeballs in sticky notes and world building... I have decided to post this. Because clearly I have nothing left of my mind to lose.

Also, I think my muse wanted something a little more trope-y, a little more crack-y, and a little less serious?

Or maybe I'm just having some sort of mental episode in response to my in-laws imminent arrival.

Whatever the reason, though, here we go. As always:

Not JK Rowling. Not making any \$\$.

Not a finished work, expect irregular updates.

Literally no idea where I'm headed with this. Honestly, I kind of just set my muse loose and tidied up with tumbled out. I'm slapping a Tom x Harry tag on this baby because that just feels like the way we're headed but I'm not opposed to making other stops along the way, making this a polyamory fic, or including other POV's. So want a pairing or view point or...whatever? Give me a shout out in the comments. No guarentees but if I use I'm sure my muse will treat it with the happy irreverance that this fic wants.

Comments are life and you all are awesome.

# One

White.

Everything is white.

Utterly, completely, unescapably *white*.

And not white in that crisp white shirt fashion, oh no. Nor is it white like a unicorn's pelt or white like a patronus. White like... like...

*Like Dumbledore's beard.*

Kind of fluffy and wispy and if you stare at it long enough you become half convinced that there's a single thread of gray in there. Somewhere. Or maybe a niffler.

Harry Potter turns in a slow circle and tries to figure out what is going on because he's pretty damn sure he's dead but if this is the afterlife than death *sucks*.

Of course a sucky afterlife would *absolutely* be his luck.

Out of the fluffy white *whiteness* there comes a wretched, broken wail and Harry whirls around, empty hand held in front of him as if he were brandishing a wand.

Well.

That's kind of awkward.

Harry lowers his hand and takes a hesitant step forward. And then another. And with each step forward the whiteness around him solidifies into an enormous room with a high, glass domed ceiling. It's still white – all the same shades of white, in fact – but there's definition now. Walls. Ceilings. Unlit lamps that line the walls. Benches.

Ahead of him something shuffles and whimpers.

Harry stares.

There, underneath one of the benches, is a baby.

Or, at least, Harry *thinks* it is a baby. It's quite possibly the ugliest baby that he's ever seen – and he's seen Dudley's baby pictures. Hell, he's repotted mandrakes that were cuter than this baby. But it *is* a baby. Red and scrawny with too thin limbs and a too large head and skin that gleams, slick and wet as if it's been flayed but a baby nonetheless. Alone. Crying. With no blanket. No nappy. No nothing. Abandoned under a fluffy white bench in whatever *this* is.

Harry takes another step and then goes down on one knee, his hand reaching out to scoop the poor wretch up.

He might be uglier than a mandrake but he doesn't deserve to be left here, to be discarded like *trash*.

"You cannot help."

Harry freezes and looks over his shoulder.

There, sweeping towards him in robes of a brilliant midnight blue – which, quite frankly, are the only reason he doesn't disappear into the landscape because Harry was totally right and it *is* the same color as his beard – is Albus Dumbledore.

"Harry." The old man spreads his arms wide in welcome. "You wonderful boy. You brave, brave man. Let us walk."

Harry looks back at the child snuffling miserably beneath his outstretched hand. "I'd rather not, sir," he says, biting back the familiar rise of anger at the word *boy*. "What do you mean, I can't help?"

Dumbledore lowers his arms and stares past Harry to thrashing infant. "Some things," he says with an air of vague regret, "are beyond help. Leave it, Harry, and come talk with me."

Harry stares.

*Leave it*, he says, like it's not a baby alone and afraid, crying in this strange place.

"Aren't you dead?" he asks tightly.

"Oh yes. Quite so."

"Then... I'm dead too?"

"Ah," says Dumbledore, his eyes gleaming. "That is the question, isn't it? On a whole, dear boy" Harry cringes, "I think not."

Harry stares. "Not?"

"Not." Dumbledore sounds so damn smug that it makes Harry's stomach turn.

The tale – the fantastical, impossible fairy tale – that comes out of the dead Headmaster's mouth does not ease it. It's a tale of greed and power, of sacrifice, of young love and young ambitions, of death and stones, of wands and loyalty, of a broken man who tried to break the world, of a broken man who broke his soul, and a boy who - apparently – has succeeded where they both failed and conquered death.

Harry doesn't speak through the entire telling.

*Freak*, the voices of his aunt and uncle spit inside of his head. And well, they don't exactly seem to be wrong, do they? He can't even manage to die properly.

"So what happens now?" Harry asks, when Dumbledore is done.

The Headmaster looks down at him and smiles. “Why now, my boy, now you get to choose!”

“Choose,” Harry repeats and finds his eyes unerringly drawn to the baby. He has stopped wailing. Not because he wants to but because he has to, because his little throat has given out and his little chest can’t bring itself to make any more noise than the quiet, pathetic little whimpers that escape out of his mouth. Harry knows. Harry remembers that. He remembers what it was like to lay in his cupboard and cry quietly because he knew no one was coming but at the same time he couldn’t do anything but cry, the biology of his body forcing him to reach out, to search for caretakers that never answered.

“Choose,” Dumbledore says again with a magnanimous twinkle of his eyes. “Where does it look like we are, Harry?”

Caught off guard by the question Harry looks around. “Uh... Kings Cross?” he ventures after a moment. It kind of looks like the train station? Maybe?

“Yes, yes! And if you were to board a train it would take you... *on*.”

“On?”

“*On*,” Dumbledore confirms with a tap to the side of his nose. “Of course, you could also choose to go back.”

Harry blinks. “Back?”

Dumbledore hums. “Of course, with all the horcruxes now destroyed it is entirely likely that someone else can destroy the little that remains of Lord Voldemort. Though,” he adds after a second of hesitation, “Tom has always been an excellent duelist and with so many of the Order fallen already...”

Harry stares.

Dumbledore stares.

Dumbledore *smiles*.

“No,” Harry says flatly and watches with restrained glee as the smile falls right off Dumbledore’s face.

“No?” the old man echoes faintly.

“No,” Harry repeats firmly and then he does what he should have done from the very beginning.

He reaches out and he picks up the baby.

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*Bang! Bang! Bang!*

The sound of a fist hitting a wooden door jerks Harry awake. "...what?" he says after a moment as he stares into the darkness above his head and tries to figure out what the fuck is going on.

"Get up, boy! Don't be late getting breakfast!" his aunt's familiar screech cuts through his thoughts. Harry sits up so fast he bangs his head into the wall.

"... *what?*" he repeats, aghast.

"Breakfast!" Aunt Petunia shouts back. "Don't you dare ruin Duddikins special day!"

"...*WHAT?!?*" Harry says, one more time. Except this time no sound comes out, the shock of the whole thing driving his voice straight out of human hearing. Once he manages to find his glasses and shoe them on his face it is blatantly clear that *yes*, he *is* shoved in the dusty, spider filled cupboard under the stairs of Number Four Privet Drive.

He's still dead, isn't he? He has to be. He has to be dead and this is hell. Fuck, he doesn't even believe in hell but if he did, he's pretty sure that it would look like this.

Bloody, bugging *hell*.

After a few seconds, a minute tops, in which he hyperventilates to the point that he throws up in his mouth a little Harry opens the door and climbs out of the cupboard.

The inside of Number Four looks exactly how he remembers it. Well, no, that is not quite right. There's no boxing medals and trophies displayed in the living room but the lamp that Harry is pretty sure Dudley broke when they were thirteen is still sitting over on the table in the far corner.

"...*what?*" he mouths to himself again and, in a fit of desperation, turns and looks at the mirror hanging over the entry table.

Harry Potter stares back at him.

Correction.

Little tiny baby Harry, who can't be more than ten or eleven and is still short with a gaunt, pale face and overly messy hair, stares back at him.

Little tiny baby Harry yanks back his hair and stares.

There it is.

Still shaped like a lightning bolt. Still obvious.

He yanks up his shirt sleeve next. The flesh there is startling bare, the only scars the shiny burn on the inside of his wrist where he got splashed by hot bacon grease when Dudley shoved him into the stove. Missing are the angry, ropey scar that Pettigrew had left him with



the night of Voldemort's resurrection and puncture marks in his shoulder and upper arm from where the bloody basilisk had bit him.

"Move, you freak!" Dudley shoves him as he runs past and Harry does a header into the table, knocking Aunt Petunia's purse and the handful of tacky knick-knacks to the ground with a crash.

"Bugger," Harry mutters even as Dudley yells,

"MUM! Harry's wrecking your stuff!"

"What's this, then?" Vernon's voice makes Harry freeze where he's crouched over the mess, hip throbbing where it had hit against the corner of the table. "Thought you could ruin Dudley's birthday, did you? Thought you could act out and steal the attention away from him, did you?"

"...*what?*" it falls out before he can stop it but honestly, how stupid are they? Why the hell would he ever *want* their attention? They'd made it perfectly clear by the age of three that any attention from his family was... uncomfortable. Neglect and starvation was (is?) the pits but it's better than being smacked around because he won't stop crying. Or trying to play with Dudley. Or asking for a hug when he skins his knee.

Uncle Vernon turns a rather unpleasant shade of puce.

"YOU WILL NOT RUIN DUDLEY'S BIRTHDAY!" he roars and Harry winces against the bits of spittle that hit his face. "You will pick this up and go make breakfast and..."

"No."

For a moment Harry genuinely fears that his uncle's face is simply going to explode. Or hopes. The two sensations are all mixed up in a funny twisting ball located somewhere in the pit of his stomach.

"Boy..."

"No," Harry interrupts firmly, but calmly. Inside, he's shaking but if he can stand across from Voldemort and let the other wizard fire a Killing Curse at his face without flinching he absolutely refuses to cringe away from the look of absolute fury on his uncle's face. "My name is Harry. Harry. James. Potter. Not boy. Not freak. *Harry*. And... no. I refuse. I don't care if this is a dream or hell or just another world inside of Dumbledore's beard – *I refuse.*"

They're still staring at him, all three of him, when he turns on his heel and marches out the front door. He figures he has about five minutes to get away before Vernon and Petunia come to their senses and try to haul him home to punish him.

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Harry walks.

And walks.

And walks until he comes to some little park that he's never been to before where he promptly picks the remotest corner and plops down in a heap at the base of a tree. He needs to think. Not his natural state of being, he knows, but he needs to do it nonetheless.

So.

The last real thing, that he is aware of, is watching the Killing Curse speed towards him. So, he's dead then.

Except, there'd been the white place and that story that Dumbledore had told. It's ridiculous and horrifying and thus, with Harry's luck, is probably true, which means that he's the Master of Death – because *that* doesn't sound ominous at all, oh no – and thus can't die. Not unless he chooses too. Or that was the implication he got from Dumbledore's comments about choosing to get on the train and move on to the...whatever came next. Which he didn't. He didn't choose to do that. So, he's not dead then.

Right?

Maybe. Probably. He certainly feels alive. There's definitely a bruise on his hip from the corner of the hall table.

But he didn't choose to go back, either because what was there to go back to?

No, instead he had picked up the baby. The baby that he rather thought was the little broken remains of one Tom Marvolo Riddle. Because the man might have become an absolute monster but not even a monster deserves to be left naked and crying under a bench in some fluffy train station limbo.

So he had picked up the baby and woken up in his cupboard.

Because *that* makes sense.

Not.

Harry lets out a sigh and pulls his knobby little knees up to his chin and wraps his arms around his legs. "For the sake of what remains of my sanity I'm going to assume that I am actually live," he whispers to himself. "Just... in my younger body."

His almost-eleven-year-old body. He's pretty sure.

Frankly, this might not actually be the strangest thing that's ever happened to him. It's not even his whirl with time travel, though the whole seventeen year old mind in a ten year old body thing is definitely new. At least this time he doesn't have to worry about seeing himself and thinking he's his own dad.

So what is he going to do?

Keeping everything the same and preserving the timeline is already out. Because he definitely didn't tell off his relatives, steal the money that had fallen out of Aunt Petunia's purse, and run away on Dudley's eleventh birthday the first time he'd lived it. Though he rather thinks the Dursleys will enjoy this a great deal more than having to drag him to the zoo and then getting a boa constrictor accidentally set on them.

And fuck the blood wards, he is not going back to that house.

He could go to Dumbledore, he supposes. That would probably be the smart thing to do. He could tell him all about the horcruxes and the Deathly Hollows and that would be that. Voldemort would be dead and Harry... Huh. Well, is he still the Master of Death? Or has it reset since he's been sent back to before he had possession of all three hollows? If the latter, somehow he thinks that Dumbledore just letting Harry disarm him isn't going to cut it when it comes to winning the allegiance of the Elder Wand.

Plus, if Harry's being honest, he's more than a little pissed off at the Headmaster because of... well, *everything*.

*Some things are beyond help*, he had said in train station limbo.

Harry's not sure he believes him but he thinks that Dumbledore has believed it for a very long time. Probably starting with a whispered confession of "*I can talk to snakes*," from an excited dark haired, dark eyed boy some fifty-ish years ago in little room in an orphanage in London.

He's also not sure that it matters. If it saves the world...

Harry sighs.

This is getting him nowhere.

So, maybe if he approaches the problem from a different angle?

What does he want?

What does *he*, Harry Potter, *want*?

"To be normal," he whispers because that's all he's ever wanted: to be a normal, regular boy with parents and homework and normal everyday things. It's also the one thing he can never have. That train left the station when his parents died. Or before that, even, when the prophecy was given. Maybe even before that. Who knows? Maybe Harry Potter's chances of being normal were well and truly fucked the moment Merope Gaunt laid eyes on Tom Riddle Sr.

Regardless, he's kind of stuck as Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, the Chosen One, and the Savior of the Wizarding World etc, etc.

Which is kind of depressing.

So, what does the Savior of the Wizarding World want?

It takes a few minutes and some careful breathing to make himself set aside the dream of *normal* and try to picture something else but when he does...

He sees Sirius, alive, healthy, and walking the streets in broad daylight: a free man. A happy man.

He sees Remus, alive, healthy, gainfully employed, and understood without fear. A happy man.

He sees Pettigrew behind bars – or dead, dead is very attractive – for his role in the Potter's murders.

He sees Severus Snape, alive, healthy, and free from the shackles his masters have trapped him with. A happy man. Or at least one that isn't so bloody miserable.

He sees himself. He sees actually getting to *learn*. He sees attending Hogwarts and exploring the magical world and not constantly worrying about how Voldemort's going to try and kill him and who he has to protect. He sees himself with friends. Real friends. Ron and Hermione...

... his breath catches in his throat at the thought of them. They've been great friends, mostly, and he loves them but they haven't always been particularly good friends. He wants friends that aren't perpetually jealous of his ill-gotten fame or the fortune that sits in his vault at Gringotts. He wants friends that understand him and friends that don't get huffy whenever he actually makes an effort at his school work.

He wants a job. Something besides Auror. He's done enough Dark Wizard capturing for one life, thank you very much.

He wants a family. He wants a... spouse. He wants children. He wants a home.

He wants to help change the wizarding world. He wants to make it better while still respecting the culture that already exists. The culture that he knows he never actually got to learn or understand.

He wants a different ending to the story.

He wants to save everyone he can.

He wants for there to never be another war.

And he...

Harry lets out a long, shuddering sigh.

... he wants to give Tom Marvolo Riddle the chance that no one else ever gave him.

"Bloody hell, Harry," he mutters to himself, "you're insane. You're bloody mental. *You have lost the fucking plot.*"

The picture in his head, however, stays the same.

“Fine,” he announces to the air. “Just... fine.”

He can do this.

He can.

He will.

He'll be the Boy Who Lived but he is going to actually *live*.

He'll endure a life spent with grandiose titles stuck next to his name and his picture in the papers and every detail of his existence filling up the gossip column but it will be *his* life. It will belong to him. Not to Dumbledore. Not to the Wizarding World. To *him*.

They want to make his life into a one trick pony show? Fine. Then he'll give them the best damn show they've ever seen.

Feeling the familiar sensation of resolve settling into his chest Harry lets out another sigh and gets to his feet. No time like the present to get started and getting started in the wizarding world means one thing: a trip to Diagon Alley.

He rather hopes that the cash he's taken from Petunia's purse is enough to get him to London.

And buy him something to eat.

Merlin, he's starving.

# Two

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It's easier to get to London than he thought it would be. Frankly, it's probably far too easy for a small boy of nearly eleven – one who doesn't even look his bloody age at that – to make the journey without anyone expressing concern over him at all. Not for the first time Harry wonders if he has some sort of Notice Me Not charm attached to him. It would certainly explain more than a few things.

After carefully studying the bus schedule Harry determines he has just enough time and money to purchase his ticket and a lovely golden pastry from the café on the corner, the center of it filled with cheese and cherries. He wants to devour it on the spot, to shove the entire thing in his mouth and cram it down his throat before anyone can take it from him. He resists, barely. He's not at the Dursleys anymore, he reminds himself, and he's certainly not living out of a tent and scrounging fallen nuts from the forest floor. As soon as he gets to Gringotts he'll have more gold than he knows what to do with. He'll be able to buy himself real meals, real food on a regular basis.

He offers the barista a shy smile and accepts both the packaged pastry and bottle of water from her before dropping his change in the tip jar.

Through sheer force of will he doesn't touch his newly gained food until he is safely on the bus, hunkered down in a seat at the back, and they are pulling out of the bus stop. It takes a bit of skill but he makes the flakey pastry last the whole way to London.

Once in London he manages to find his way to the Leaky Cauldron without too much trouble. He only gets lost twice, which is bloody impressive considering he can count the number of times he's approached the alley from the muggle world on one hand and still have plenty of fingers left over. His relief at actually managing to find the place is enough that he almost runs straight for the door.

Almost.

Except for then his brain, which he does have, manages to kick itself on and sputter into working order.

Harry freezes, one leg extended mid-step over the curb of the street. The last time – or, rather, the last *first* time – that he'd gone into The Leaky Cauldron he had been recognized by every witch and wizard in the inn and promptly mobbed by them. Which just won't do. At least, not right now. Not why he's wearing nothing more than Dudley's ratty, oversized cut off and he looks rather like a half starved kitten that someone has dumped in the gutter. When the wizarding world realizes who he is he wants to be firmly settled behind the persona of the Boy Who Lived.

But he can't do that without getting into Diagon Alley. And he can't get into the Alley without going through the Leaky Cauldron.

Bollocks.

He probably should have thought this through a little more than he had.

"Story of my life," he mutters as he slinks back into the doorway of the shop across from the unseen magical inn. What he needs is a plan. An actual, detailed, thought out, does-not-involve-just-jumping-in-and-assuming-he-actually-knows-what's-going-on plan.

Of course, try as he might, he can't actually think of a plan.

His invisibility cloak is, at this time, in Dumbledore's possession – a thought that makes him angry for approximately half a second before he rockets right past that to something dangerously close to terror because at this point in time Albus Dumbledore *still possesses the Elder Wand*. Which means that currently he's only one cursed ring Horcrux away from being the Master of Death. And that realization feels like being dropped naked into the Black Lake. In January.

Bloody hell, he just have found a new form for his boggart to take.

Okay, maybe that's a bit of an exaggeration but after everything he learned from Bathilda Bagshot and then from Dumbledore himself the idea of the man being in possession of all three Deathly Hollows is enough to make his heart jerk around inside of his chest like a cursed bludger.

After losing a good five minutes to panic and grand ideas of storming Hogwarts and ripping the Cloak out of Dumbledore's grasp, Harry manages to shove the panic into a little box and lock it. He'll have to bloody well worry about that later because he still hasn't figured out how to get into Diagon Alley unnoticed.

A glamour is his next thought but there's two problems with that plan: a) he lacks a wand to perform it with and b) his knowledge of glamour spells is limited to the vague memory of copying Hermione's essay – or parts of it, anyway – as part of a homework assignment for Sixth Year Charms.

The wand problem dashes his idea of disillusionment.

He doesn't have polyjuice or any way to get his hands on it.

In fact, magical means of disguise are pretty much out of the question. Well, unless he has a burst of accidental magic and turns his hair a different color or something.

Wait.

Harry pauses on that thought. Could he... maybe... do accidental magic on purpose? Wandless magic is a thing, right? And he hasn't bought his wand yet so he doesn't have the Trace and he wouldn't be getting any warnings from the Ministry. Or at least he assumes so. He's pretty sure that if his aunt and uncle had gotten a notification via owl every time he'd

accidentally caused something to happen they would have done a whole lot more than lock him in his cupboard without anything to eat. He eyes his reflection in the grungy shop window with critical purpose. He doubts anything magical could actually cover up the scar, given what it is. Aunt Petunia's make up certainly never managed to keep the thing concealed, even if Harry actually approved of her attempts. But if he changed his appearance enough that people didn't look at him and think "*Oh, there goes a mini James Potter*" they wouldn't attempt to look for the scar...

Taking a deep breath, Harry closes his eyes and tries to change the way he looks.

It doesn't work.

Harry sighs.

Maybe...

He thinks for a moment of how it feels to cast a spell. Not the 'foolish wand waving' or his general fear that he's going to perform the wand movements incorrectly and accidentally blow someone's head off or something but the actual act of drawing on his magic. He thinks of the warmth he can feel singing through his veins and the way it bubbles up like a fizzy drink until it's humming in his chest and tingling at his extremities. He holds on to that feeling and focuses on his... hair.

Yeah. His hair. That should be easy enough to change. Make it a little longer to help hide his scar and change the color... He imagines a deep, glorious red like his mum's. That should change it enough without making him stand out.

He focuses and...

Well.

Harry stares at his reflection.

His hair is not red. It's also not black anymore either.

It's a bright, achingly familiar, bubblegum pink.

Well, that is depressing.

Of course, it's also effective because he definitely doesn't look like Harry Potter anymore. If anything he looks like he could be Tonks' brother – or Sirius' son.

*That* thought makes his bloody heart stop in a pained, hopeful sort of way. They're still alive, both of them, and he'll get to see them again *if he can ever get his bloody act together*.

"Get a hold of yourself, Potter," he mutters to his reflection as he attempts to flatten his hair some more. It doesn't really work – it never does – but at least the bright pink color makes it significantly harder to spot his scar. "Pretend you're trying to sneak past Snape and you've forgotten the cloak and everything will be fine."



Maybe.

Hopefully.

---

Everything is fine.

In fact, for all of the time he spent stressing over it, he is in and out of the Leaky Cauldron in less than five minutes. No one points or gapes at his scar. No one screams, “It’s Harry Potter!” and then tries to shake his hand off of his arm. No one draws attention to the little boy who simply wants to disappear. He doesn’t even have to speak to the barman, Tom.

He does little more than slink inside the dim space, look around, and then, when a trio of gossiping elderly witches rises from a table and makes their way towards the alley, he simply follows along behind them like some poor put upon kid left to go shopping with Great Aunt Mildred and all of her friends. It’s surprisingly effective and he can’t help but feel a little silly for actually worrying so much.

Of course, maybe it goes so smoothly because he thought of the risks and attempted to minimize them before diving on in.

Merlin, is this what it feels like to have a plan? Or something that’s at least within spitting distance of being a plan?

Huh. No wonder everyone is always going on about them.

---

“Name?”

“Harry Potter,” Harry murmurs back, as quietly as he can manage. Perched above him, the goblin actually pauses and looks up. Or down, rather.

“Key?”

Harry bites at his bottom lip. “I, uh, don’t actually have my key. No one’s ever given it to me. But I know I’ve got an account here. Can I, er, is there any way to...?”

Wow. Brilliant form of communication there, Harry. Top shelf stuff. Inwardly, he slaps himself and adds ‘*Learn how to speak without sounding like a fucking idiot*’ to the ever growing list of things he’d started compiling on the bus.

The goblin eyes him skeptically and Harry resists the urge to flatten his hair again. Or lift the fringe and show off the scar. It's kind of hard to tell, actually. "Three drops," the banker instructs and with a small pop and fizzles a small piece of parchment and a small iron dagger appear in front of Harry.

"Er..." Harry swallows back his distaste for letting any of his blood out of his body. Historically it hasn't been a great thing but he doesn't think the goblins are going to go running off to resurrect a dark lord. Also, he's not sure three drops would be enough. Wormtail had taken a bit more than that.

The knife is so sharp that the cut doesn't even sting until long after he's let three ruby red drops well up and drip down onto the parchment. The knife vanishes in a flash and the parchment flutters up into the goblins long fingers like a well-trained bird, were it eyed just as critically as Harry himself had been.

"You've never been given a vault key?" the goblin asks and Harry jerks his head.

"No. Never." And really, it's not even a lie. He's never actually gotten to keep his Gringotts key. It's always found its way back to Hagrid or Mrs. Weasley. Truthfully, it was something that hadn't even occurred to him as odd until sometime during his fifth year.

Harry bites back the urge to sigh.

Or slap himself.

"Very well," the goblin replies after another moment of carefully scrutiny. "Everything is in order. Please follow Griphook."

Harry swallows and, once it becomes obvious that he can't think of a single thing to say that doesn't give away the fact that the last time Harry had seen the goblin – seven years in the future – he had been so injured – *tortured* - that he couldn't get out of bed, simply nods his head.

"This way," Griphook announces and Harry follows.

He doesn't take him down to the vaults.

The moment that Harry realizes this he stumbles, tripping over his own feet as he stares, horrified, at the back of Griphook's head. Goblins can't read minds, can they? Because just days after he's broken into a high security vault, stolen a priceless treasure, and escaped on the back of a dragon while destroying a good portion of the bank in the process would be a *fucking horrible* time to make that discovery. Never mind that it hasn't actually happened this time, that the cup is still sitting safe and snug in Bellatrix's vault and the poor dragon is still chained up however many stories beneath their feet. Harry's pretty sure that the goblins would disappear him for crimes committed in a... different timeline? Different reality?

"In here." Griphook's voice draws Harry out of his panicked thoughts and he stares at the goblin for a long moment before he notices the open door next to him and the room beyond. It is a cozy, windowless room with paneled walls lined with built in drawers and bookshelves

and a desk that's nearly the size of the Weasley's dining table set to one side of the fireplace with a pair of elegant, dark wood chairs set on one side of it with a smaller, more comfortable looking velvet wingback on the opposing side.

After several pointed looks from Griphook Harry takes a seat on one of the wooden chairs.

"Your account manager will be with you shortly."

Harry blinks. "...what?"

But Griphook is already gone, the door clicking shut behind him. A second later a large silver tray, complete with a steaming pot of tea, delicate looking cups, and an array of biscuits and small sandwiches appears with a soft *pop* on the desk-table.

"I have no idea what's going on," Harry tells the empty room which, sadly, remains empty and answerless. After a moment of hesitation, Harry caves and pours himself a cup of tea and doctors it with nothing more than a small splash of milk. He ignores the biscuits, sandwiches, and even the small bowl of sugar cubes despite the fact that his stomach has perked up and started growling at the sight of them. He's probably pushed it enough with the pastry and really shouldn't tempt fate with any of the nibbles that have been presented to him. Knowing his luck he'd end up retching all over something important.

With a sigh, Harry settles into his chair, takes a sip of his tea, and waits.

And waits.

And waits.

And waits.

He waits long enough to finish one cup of tea and start on another.

He waits long enough that his leg starts jumping. Or it would have, were his leg actually long enough to reach. As is, he waits long enough that it starts swinging.

He waits long enough that he's sure that if he has to wait another bloody second he's going to jump up and start pacing the room like the tiger at the zoo.

The sound of the door opening is enough to make him jump and spill tea all over his hand. Bloody hell.

"Greetings, Heir Potter. I am Urggrat," the goblin announces as he moves further into the room, pointedly ignoring the way Harry is dabbing at his hand and the damp spot on the knee of his oversized lounge pants. "I am the Potter account manager."

"Ummm..." Harry says, rather unintelligently. The goblin stares at him from where he's settled himself in the wingback chair, an impressive stack of neat files stacked next to his elbow with a small box, like one might get from a jeweler, set on top. "I don't know what's happening," he finally admits because he can think of absolutely nothing to say. He's only ever visited the bank a few times – horcrux hunting included – and he certainly never

remembers meeting an account manager before. Of course, he can't exactly say *that*. So instead he adds, "I just needed to withdraw some money from my account so that I can get my school things."

"And we will be able to visit your vault in a moment but first we have some other matters to clear up..."

"*Other matters?*" Harry mouths to himself as his panic hits the bottom of his stomach like a rock. This is it. They know about the theft, about the dragon. They're just going to throw him in a vault somewhere and not check on him for ten years...

"...We have been trying to contact you for some time," Uggrat continues calmly, as if Harry isn't half a step away from a full blown panic attack in the chair across from him. "Since your last birthday in fact. There is the estate reports and the heirship ring. But first..." The goblin slides a small key across the table, the metal of it all shiny enough to do a snitch proud. "Your new key. Your vault was rekeyed and re-warded after the events of October 31, 1981 and are being done so again. Should someone attempt to use the old key it will be confiscated and destroyed. Would you like to press charges for attempted theft should someone attempt to access your account?"

"Err..." Harry pauses for a moment. *Does* he want to press charges? "...yes," he answers quietly and is surprised to find that he means it. Or maybe not. He knows who currently possesses it and the idea of Dumbledore being charged with attempted theft is probably more delightful than it should be. Given the past few days – or *his entire bloody life* – Harry feels he's entitled to occasional bouts of being a horrible person where the headmaster is concerned.

He'll feel a bit bad if Hagrid shows up and tries to use it on Dumbledore's orders. But not, he realizes, enough to rescind his agreement.

The guilt at *that*, at not letting it pass, is almost enough to make him open his mouth. Almost.

But then he remembers.

He already gave this world everything once. His family. His childhood. His life.

They don't get to have it again.

"Excellent." Uggrat notes something down in the file spread open in front of him before he closes it and takes the next file from the top of the stack. "Up next..."

---

What follows is perhaps the longest two hours of Harry Potter's life.

It takes less than five minutes of that for it to become blatantly obvious that he knows next to nothing about the world he lives in – about the world he died to save. This isn't exactly something new. He had been thinking it himself just hours ago as he sat huddled at the base

of a tree. Still, there's a huge fucking difference between knowing, rather vaguely, that you don't know as much as you'd like, that you're so busy surviving that you literally have no idea how the world around you works and *being bludgeoned in the bloody face with that knowledge*. Repeatedly. For *hours*.

Really, by the end of it, he's more than half convinced that he's the stupidest bastard to ever walk down Diagon Alley and that it's a bloody miracle he can tie his own shoes.

What really throws him when Urggrat pushes the three little boxes across the table, opening them with a brush of his finger. Inside each one is a ring. Harry stares at them and distantly, beyond the great wall of *I-don't-understand-what-is-happening-here* he feels something that just might be panic bubbling up.

"...what?"

"Your heir rings, Mr. Potter."

Harry makes a weak waving motion with one hand. "No. No, I get... I get that. I just, er...but there's three?" *Three*, he repeats to himself, a little hysterically.

"This one," Urggrat motions to the ring in the center, a chunky gold signet with a stylized 'P' interposed over a leaping stag, "is the Potter ring. This," the ring on the right is made out of a black material, its surface somehow matte and mirrored at the same time, "is the Peverell ring," and Harry shudders at the sign of the Deathly Hollows staring up at him, the lines of it bold and uninterrupted but done in such a dark pewter that they nearly disappear against the dark backdrop. "Finally, there is this," the goblin motions to the final ring and Harry's lungs freeze in his chest. It is the most ornate of the rings: thick and silver and where the other rings have simple bands, this one takes the form of an ouroboros with gleaming emeralds for eyes. "Slytherin," the goblin murmurs, almost reverently, as Harry stares at the familiar crest – an S and a serpent entwined – and wonders just how the bloody hell this is his life.

"...how?" he manages to get out after several moments of strangled silence. The Potter ring is his, obviously, and knowing what he does the Peverell makes sense but Slytherin?

*What do you know, the gossips were right*, he thinks hysterically as his entire torso shakes with the panicked laughter he's keeping locked behind his teeth. The whole of his second year seems even more of a farce in light of this – like some enormous cosmic joke.

The goblin shrugs. "The same way it usually happens, I imagine. We do not concern ourselves with the mating habits of wizards. We do, however, detest stagnant vaults and unclaimed treasures. Not only does it mess with the accounts but stagnant gold cannot be multiplied," and here Urggrat offers him a feral, pleased grin that no doubt has to do with the fact that Harry's spent much of the last hour figuring out how to update the investments of the enormous fortune available to him. "You willingly gave blood at the desk. We merely matched it to any open accounts we have on file." The goblin taps the side of his nose. "Blood never lies, Mr. Potter, no matter what secrets it holds."

And while that sounds uncomfortably close to all the pureblood nonsense he's heard spouted, he has the sense to realize that that is not at all how the goblin means it and clamps down on

his instinctive hotheaded response. “So... I just put them on?” he finally asks because he can’t think of a way to inquire if carrying a bit of another man’s soul around for more than a decade is enough to fool the bank.

*Except...*

That can’t be true, can it? Because if he’s simply Slytherin’s heir because of the horcrux sitting pretty in his scar than wouldn’t there be some mention of the Gaunts in all of this? Even if they were penniless he can’t imagine that they didn’t have a vault at Gringotts. It would be a point of pride, if nothing else.

*Except...*

Dumbledore had said, point blank, that he wasn’t Slytherin’s heir. Of course, knowing what he knows now that qualifier is probably a hint that he should take whatever followed with more than a grain of salt. It’s also highly possible that Dumbledore didn’t even *know*.

“Essentially, though there are some considerations.”

Harry blinks. “Such as?”

“The Potter ring is the... least influential. The Potters are an Ancient House and a wealthy one but they are not members of the nobility and do not hold a hereditary seat on the Wizengamot. However, if you wear the ring visibly, this will be the ring everyone expects to see. Peverell and Slytherin, on the other hand, are both prestigious Ancient and Noble Houses and were it not for the fact that both became extinct in the male line centuries ago *the Sacred Twenty-Eight* would have been *the Sacred Thirty*. More than that, both lines, while prestigious, are also infamous for delving into darker magics. The Peverells in particular were very talented necromancers. To see their rings on your fingers, in our current world, would...”

“...cause a bloody riot?”

Urggrat’s lips twitch amusedly. “I was going to say that it would be a shock. But your suggestion is not unlikely,” the goblin allows. “Furthermore, both houses possess a seat on the Wizengamot, though you would not be able to sit them unless given dispensation by the current Lord.” The goblin gives him a long, pointed look that makes absolutely no sense to Harry until he adds, softly. “We are a neutral party, always, Mr. Potter and we do not discuss the clients of this bank with anyone, even other clients. However, I can tell you that the Lordship rings for both the Peverell and Slytherin houses have been claimed and they have not returned to us as they would in case of their wearer’s death.”

Oh.

OH.

*OH.*

The implications hit him like a full on blow from the Hogwarts Express.

“Additionally,” the goblin goes on, as if he didn’t just announce that Lord Voldemort is not nearly as dead as people think, “both the Peverell and Slytherin rings are goblin forged and have a great deal of protective magic woven into them. Curse deflection and poison detection, mostly. There are also vaults that cannot be accessed until the ring is on your finger. It acts as a secondary key.”

“And if I wear them? Would... would everyone know? Would anyone be, er, notified?”

Urggrat smiles toothily. “The rings themselves are designed to be unobtrusive. There is a subtle variation of a Notice Me Not anchored to the ring itself plus any additional protections the houses themselves may have put on them. Customarily the Lords or Heads of houses be present when the rings are given but that is not possible in your scenario. As none of your guardians, to our knowledge, have any familial ties to the families represented here they will not be notified of your formal acceptance of your heirship status.”

Harry nods, accepting the goblin’s words and letting them sit in his mind while he stares at all three rings. The Potter one, for a certainty, will be leaving with him. This tangible piece of his family, his heritage, that he had no idea even existed. But the others...

Does he need them? Probably not.

Does he want them? That’s a trickier question and one he should probably take more time to think about but he can already feel the answer like some yearning beast sitting inside of his chest. What does he want? He wants options. He wants a life.

And, hell, he promised himself he would give the world a show. Might as well start now.

Merlin, he's going to regret this later. He's almost sure of it.

“So how do I do this?”

“Simply put them all on the little finger of your non dominant hand. I recommend the Potter one first because even though it is the least prestigious you have the strongest connection with it. You are, technically, already the Head of the Potter House but you are not legally eligible until your seventeenth birthday, barring early emancipation. Once they are all on the magic of the rings will reform them into something that is unique to you and your magic while still retaining the qualities of the rings themselves.”

Harry does as he instructs and slides the golden Potter ring onto his left pinky. “Ow!” he yelps as the ring seems to stab him and a bolt of electricity races up his arm.

“Oh, yes. There will be a little prick. And a bit of a shock,” the goblin tells him unrepentantly as he begins to gather up all the files and papers that they have gone over and – on Harry’s part in many cases – signed.

Harry scowls at the rings and mutters, “Brilliant,” under his breath as he reaches for the next one. The Peverell and the Slytherin rings go on in short order, each one seeming to stab at his skinny little finger before sending bolts racing up and down his arm. Once they are all on it looks a little ridiculous: three massive – even with their bands resized! – rings lined up on his

undersized finger with just the tip of his nail peeking out from beneath them. “Um. Weren’t they supposed to...?” Harry starts to ask because there is no way he’s walking around like this. Unobtrusive or not, he’d never be able to get a bloody thing done.

But then the rings convulse on his finger.

For a moment they just sit there, twitching and vibrating, bumping against each other until suddenly they’re twitching faster and faster and faster until the edges of them blur together and they grow very warm against the flesh of his finger.

And then they stop.

And there’s only one ring there.

“Bloody hell,” Harry breathes out. It is... it’s perfect. It’s absolutely bloody perfect. The ring has retained the black of the Peverell, so dark that it almost seems to suck in the light from around them. The band is the ouroboros of the Slytherin, with the small, perfect emeralds still gleaming up at him. A beautiful, golden ‘P’ adorns the center of the ring and behind it, still in a dark pewter is the symbol of the Hollows framed by the delicate gold branches of a stag’s horns.

Urggrat leans across the desk to get a closer look. “Very nice, Mr. Potter. I hope it serves you well.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“I do not need to be thanked for doing my job,” the goblin corrects gently but he tips his head to the side as if accepting Harry’s gratitude all the same. “Should you ever have need of something, do not hesitate to contact me or the bank in general. We pride ourselves on our security and neutrality.”

“Of course,” Harry nods his head. After the last two hours it’s a familiar line. Ignoring his own adventures involving polyjuice, an invisibility cloak, an Unforgiveable, and a dragon it’s also probably true.

“In the interest of that, this is yours. I suggest you burn it before we go down to the vaults.”

“...what?”

Urggrat pushes a small, familiar slip of paper across the table and Harry picks it up, unthinking and reads the lines of crimson text.

He stops.

He reads them again.

He swallows. Hard.



***Harry James Potter***

***Born: July 31, 1980***

***Died: May 2, 1998***

***Reincarnation via temporal displacement: July 23, 1991***

***Current Titles and Accounts:***

***Master of Death***

***Heir Potter (unclaimed) Vault 687***

***Head of House Potter (unclaimed; underage) Vault 686***

***Heir Peverell (unclaimed) Vault 842***

***Heir Slytherin (unclaimed) Vault 799***

***Boy Who Lived (popular opinion)***

“Also,” Urggrat adds as he stands up, “your hair is turning black.”

Harry sighs and gives in to the urge to let his hand slap across the front of his face.

## Chapter End Notes

Does anyone else get slightly terrified when they realize how close Dumbledore was having all three Hollows? No? Just me?

I feel like this chapter ends up being a lot of filler but I also couldn't bring myself to axe it either. And, as I realize that this fic is 1000% self indulgence for me (and a likely response to the fact that my 9 year old has now finished reading Order of the Phoenix and I have *feelings*, so many goddamn feelings), I can't bring myself to care? Also, in addition to my unabashed love for time travel/ do-over fics I really just want to read/write a fic where neutral!Harry tells everyone to fuck off and generally has a good time while doing so.

And, if Gringotts has a magic that allows them to identify bloodlines and link it to accounts then they also have the ability to... read your magical signature for "major"

events. Like dying. Or time travel. (In my head it works a bit like how antibodies show up in one's blood).

# Three

## Chapter Notes

I live! And so does this fic!

\*throws confetti\*

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Three and a half hours after he had walked into Gringotts Harry Potter walks out again. He's still wearing the same worn, overly large, dirty gray muggle clothes and is still sporting the same bubblegum pink hair. He is still small and easily mistaken for a young – well, younger than his body technically *is* – child as he slips quietly after full grown witches and wizards. In fact, he looks exactly the same as when he went in.

He feels different though.

He's not sure if that's the fault of the ring on his pinky or the charmed bag of galleons, sickles, knuts, and a bit of muggle money tucked into his pocket or if it is simply the result of all the new information whirling about his head like the entire stock of Weasley's Wizard Wheezes fireworks.

Or, it could be that suddenly finding his consciousness reborn into his practically eleven year old body is finally starting to sink through his thick skull.

Could be anything, really, but probably a bit of everything. Especially the last point.

Harry's very much afraid that if he stops to think about everything that he's either going to accidentally blow up half of Diagon Alley or he's going to sit down in the middle of the street and just laugh until he's nothing but a sobbing mess being gawked at by everyone that walks past. *That* would certainly be an interesting way to enter the wizarding world, he thinks with a wry shake of his head. He can see the headlines now: *Boy Who Cries!* Or something equally stupid.

He sighs.

Of course, if he doesn't think about things he's bound to do something irreversibly dumb and completely murder this chance of his before he actually gets started. He needs a plan, which means he needs to think.

Bollocks.

This is not his area of expertise.

Actually, the only thing that could be considered his area of expertise is not dying when he bloody well should have. A talent for which he is thankful for but hopes that he won't have to use nearly so much this time around.

He's too jaded to think that he'll never use it at all.

Still, he's managed to escape the Dursleys, sort out things at Gringotts – and Merlin, the Potter accounts had been a mess after ten years of neglect. Fortunately there hadn't been any funny business in the numbers and the only outgoing expense had been a stipend delivered to his lovely Aunt and Uncle every month, which he had absolutely put a stop to. In fact, he's almost disappointed that he's not going to be there to see the dismayed looks on their faces when they realize that they're suddenly lacking a thousand pounds a month. Almost. – and. Well. That's the question isn't it? What does he do now?

*Well*, he mutters to himself, *the first thing you ought to do is get rid of Dudley's clothes*. If nothing else it would make him feel... like himself, whoever that is. Like an actual person, at least, and not the Freak Who Lives in the Cupboard Under the Stairs.

Not the Boy Who Lived, either. Not quite yet. Not until he has had the time to actually sit and think properly instead of trying to do it on his feet. But he supposes he will need to get anything he think he might need for that as well. After all, it's a bloody miracle that no one has recognized him yet. It's not like the bubblegum pink hair is much of a disguise. In fact, as far as he can tell, the only reason that he hasn't been accosted in the street yet is that no one is actually looking for *Harry Potter* because no one expects him to be here.

He slows at the thought, ducking out of the crowd to stand unnoticed in the shadows at the corner of a building while his thoughts bounce around the inside of his skull like a pair of bludgers at a professional quidditch game.

Originally, his first Hogwarts letter had arrived the day after Dudley's birthday. Tomorrow. A week before his eleventh birthday. He wonders if that is significant. It's not something he's ever bothered to consider, really. Hogwarts mail always came around his birthday. *After* his birthday, actually. Except for this first year. That first year it had come exactly a week before. Because it was different. Because it wasn't just book lists or exam marks. It was *the* acceptance letter. The introduction to Hogwarts and for Harry – and many others – the introduction to the wizarding world.

He wonders if all the other first years had gotten their letters a week before their birthdays. Right now, he suspects so. Bloody hell, no wonder Hermione had managed to practically memorize a hundred books before ever stepping foot in Hogwarts. She'd had an entire year on the rest of them – because no doubt she'd gone out and acquired all the books and then some the moment she and her parents had gotten over the shock of it all.

And then there had been him. Poor little Harry Potter, chased all over bloody Britain by magical letters until a half giant finally caught up with him on a giant fucking rock and set flame to the tinder of his lonely childhood and aching need to belong.

He wants to curl his fist and snarl like an animal at that. At the *weakness* of it. Look what needing to belong had gotten him. Look what it had gotten Snape. Remus. Peter *fucking*

Pettigrew.

Look at what burning out that need had done to Tom Riddle.

Harry sighs and barely resists the urge to rub tiredly at his scar. At the horcrux. At Voldemort's soul piece sitting warm and heavy beneath his skin.

If his suppositions are true – and really, he rather thinks that they are, he's not *completely* stupid – then the entire wizarding world knows that tomorrow Harry Potter is going to receive his Hogwarts letter. It's not like his birthday is a secret. In fact, though he previously made a serious attempt to avoid reading anything written about himself, he suspects that he could march into Flourish & Blotts and find his date of birth written in at least a handful of biographies or modern history texts. Probably double that amount, really.

Which means that they'll be looking for him. They'll be *waiting* for him.

Just like last time.

Fucking vultures.

Which means that today is – likely – the last day that he can walk through Diagon Alley with the possibility of passing unnoticed and unmolested. Oh, he'll give them their Boy Who Lived but the Boy Who Lived would like to have some semblance of a plan first.

He is very, very tired of having no control over his own damn life.

Harry exhales sharply and pinches his nose in a vain effort to stave off the headache beginning to form behind his eyes.

So. Shopping.

At least this time, having seen the ledgers for his vaults, he knows he doesn't have to worry about using up all his gold before he graduates from Hogwarts.

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Madam Malkin's shop is empty of other customers, lines of pre-made and charmed clothing hanging in neat rows on hangers lining the shop walls with sleek mannequins showing off the latest fashions adorning the middle. He catches the hem of a set of flowing red dress robes between his fingers as he walks past and shivers as the fine strands of silk and wool catch against the calluses and scars on his fingers.

Merlin, he'd forgotten how soft new, clean fabric could be.

"Just a moment dear!" a cheery voice calls from the back of the shop and Harry can't help but smile as he watches the elderly witch shove a handful of pins into a rather ornate looking cloak with a swish of her wand. It's a bit of a relief to see someone familiar, someone kind

but who never paid him a lick of attention beyond the fact that he was her customer. “Headed off to Hogwarts?” she asks as she offers him a smile and waves him towards the fitting rooms in the back corner.

“Yes ma’am,” he replies respectfully, ducking his head.

“Well, hop on up then and I’ll get you measured. We’ll sort that uniform out for you quick as a wink!” Still fighting a small smile Harry climbs up onto the platform and obligingly holds still while she twitters about him like a bird, measuring this and that with a handful of measuring tapes that follow along behind her like a pack of faithful lapdogs. Harry does his best to stand still and not get accidentally strangled, making polite noises as twitters about in kind, meaningless conversation as well as the occasional comment about him needing to eat more.

Madam Malkin, bless her, never looks above his pointy collarbones.

One transaction, thirty minutes, and three different promises that *yes, he will eat more* later Harry finds himself standing in the loo at the back of the shop staring at his reflection in the mirror.

“You’re a very handsome young man,” the enchanted mirror chirps, “but *that* hair...”

“It’s not permanent,” Harry mumbles, still staring. He’s never particularly thought of himself as someone who is handsome – certainly not at a mere (almost) eleven years old. And yet... the mirror is not exactly wrong. He’s not sure that it’s *right* either but he definitely looks like a person now instead of an oddly shaped abandoned house elf.

In addition to the standard Hogwarts uniform (black) sitting in garment bags on the floor he has taken advantage of the rest of the store as well and is now the proud owner of something that might be actually called a normal wizarding wardrobe. Dudley’s oversized, elephant gray rags have been relocated to the waste bin and everything currently on his body is *new*.

And it *fits*.

This may, actually, be a brand new experience for Harry Potter.

Which is five thousand different types of embarrassing. No matter how much he had worried about running out of money or accidentally causing problems with Ron by somehow flaunting his wealth in the redhead’s face past him could have certainly afforded to purchase a package of basic cotton pants that actually fit.

Nervously, almost afraid that if he touches it it’ll disappear, Harry runs shaking hands down his chest and thighs. Over a pair of cotton and silk pants – one of the softest and richest feeling things he’s ever owned – he’s wearing charcoal gray trousers with a crisp black shirt, the top few buttons left unbuttoned so that the pale skin above his pulse point is visible. Matte black leather boots and a simple black over robe complete the look. It’s dignified but not extravagant. It’s nothing as rich as what Malfoy wanders around in but it’s not going to embarrass him – or his houses – if he gets found in it.

Harry inhales unsteadily and gives the stunned little boy in the mirror a firm nod.

He's Harry fucking Potter.

He can do this.

---

He manages to hold onto that certainty for the rest of his trip through Diagon Alley. At Slug & Jiggers he takes care to select his cauldron and various brewing tools as well as a couple of sets of the First Year Ingredient Kits. He'll need only one, technically, but he wants to be prepared. He wants to *know*. For all that he's always said that he's pants at potions he did manage to score an Exceeds Expectations on his potions OWL. Not too bad for a student who spends most of his classes either fighting with the professor or attempting to fend off attempts at sabotage by members of the opposing house. He owes it to himself to see what he can do when he's actually attempting to understand. He owes it to Snape too, to the version of the man who sacrificed everything for him.

Harry swallows roughly as he adds the auto-shrinking bags to his pocket.

Snape had been a bastard – a cruel, vicious bully. And Harry... in many ways Harry had ended up being exactly what Snape had accused him of. Oh, not his father, certainly. No matter how much he might have once wished to it is impossible for him to emulate a man he has never known. But rash, arrogant, and narrow minded all the same, so sure of his absolute rightness that he blinded himself to any other viewpoints.

Plus, there's nothing like living on the run, in a tent, while being hunted by some of the most deranged and powerful wizards in Britain for nearly a year with limited hope and even fewer supplies to teach him the value of a well brewed potion.

He spends a small fortune at Scribbulus', buying twice as much parchment as he thinks he might need, a veritable rainbow of inks, and handful of eagle feather quills in addition to a set of gorgeous fountain pens. He pauses at the selection of leather bound books, fingers brushing hesitantly over the binding of a particularly deep green one, the cover gleaming with a sheen that makes Harry pretty sure that it's not ordinary cowhide stretched around the pale cream pages. A journal, charmed to hold five thousand pages while appearing barely thick enough to account for the covers and a couple dozen pages and then warded to only open to those keyed into the magic. The warding itself is rudimentary and Harry rather suspects that any seventh or even an intelligent sixth year could break through the protections but the idea has merit.

And he's not quite stupid enough to think that he's going to be able to keep everything straight in his head. For Merlin's sake, he's lucky if he can remember his own name somedays...

...well, no. That's not quite true. It's not like anyone would let him bloody forget it.

But still, the point stands that his brain is a fucking mess. A point that is becoming painfully obvious with each passing second.

Harry has a chance to rewrite history. It would absolutely be his luck to fuck it all up more than Dumbledore and Voldemort combined because he *forgot something*.

He buys the journal.

If nothing else it's pretty and it's *his*.

Truthfully, he uses that excuse more times than he'd like to admit before the day is done.

After collecting a telescope, star charts, and a small selection of sweets from various shops he is very happy to find the shop that sells wizarding luggage, where he promptly spends more than he will at any other shop that day. It's the idea of wizarding space. The idea of having a flat inside of one of the compartments of his trunk – despite the fact that he has the ward keys to the three Potter properties in the British Isles sitting in the pouch from Gringotts – is simply too much to resist. The idea of having a place that is *his*, that will always be his and his alone makes his hands shake. Though he does manage to talk himself down to the single room studio style suite instead of the two bedroom layout he had been eyeing initially.

He's not Dudley, Harry tells himself sternly. He doesn't need two bedrooms.

The salesman, he can tell, is just a little disappointed in Harry's restraint.

Once the various charms have been applied Harry takes a moment to resize it in the sheltered corner of a side alley and carefully load his purchases into the main compartment before shrinking it and placing it back in his considerably emptier trouser pocket. He'll have plenty of time to organize everything later but he needs to finish with his shopping as soon as he can. The longer he's here the better chance he has of being recognized.

At Flourish & Blotts Harry finds himself grateful for the complete lack of faith the store and its owners has in the average parent – and student's – ability to remember their book list and tips the whole selection of the First Year books into the basket on his arm. Honestly, the only one he could remember with any surety is *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 1* and he's pretty sure that Crabbe and Goyle could probably manage to remember *that* so he finds such a feat to be a very hollow victory. Necessity satisfied, he wanders up and down the crowded, book stuffed aisles. Driven by curiosity and regret a large number of tomes make their way into his basket.

Even accounting for the feather light and expansion charms on the basket and the large number on the summaries of his vaults Harry limits himself to fifty additional books. The handful of best sellers from the children's section will be easy reads. On the other hand, the dusty volume on the history of the Wizengamot and the influence and stances of the various families which hold seats on it promises to be a long, tortuous slog of many months, if not years. It probably doesn't help that the bloody thing is thicker than his head. In addition to the children's books he picks up a number of wizarding novels as well as more practical things like books and treatises on potion making, advanced magical theory, magical history – including a few that no doubt feature a great deal of probably incorrect information about



himself – and a short little series of books that seem to have been designed with muggleborns or muggle raised in mind. They cover everything from the basic structure of the Ministry of Magic to how to properly write with a quill.

Merlin, but those would have been useful his first time around. Hermione had found them, no doubt, and it kind of pisses him off that she never thought to mention them to him. Especially after she discovered that he had been raised by muggle relatives.

Thinking of Hermione though...

Harry nods in satisfaction as he drops his very own copy of *Hogwarts: A History* on the top of the stack sitting in front of the cashier. The man's lips twitch. "Let me guess," he drawls wryly as he begins to ring up Harry's selections. "Muggleborn?"

Not wanting to outright lie to someone who might remember him and eventually put two and two together Harry simply blinks and tries to look politely confused.

It works.

"Ah... I mean... your family isn't magical?"

"Oh!" Harry gives a little laugh and shakes his head. "No, they're not magical *at all*," he adds, barely keeping himself from shuddering at the thought. The idea of Dudley with a wand is frankly terrifying. The bloated shit would probably have made an excellent Death Eater if he managed to survive his first day of classes without accidentally blowing himself into a thousand different pieces.

"Well it's good to see you take an interest in our world," the man nods knowingly. "So few do."

"Well that seems dumb," Harry mutters, ducking his head to hide the burning of his cheeks. "It's my world now too. I figure if I'm going to be part of it I better familiarize myself with it." And yet he hadn't. He'd run away to Hogwarts each year with relief, escaping the bitterness and abusive atmosphere of the Dursley residence with nothing but relief, but he had never bothered to learn anything of real substance about the world he was living in. About the world he had been expected to save.

Because quidditch teams and broom standings... they... they don't count.

But this time he's going to do it right. He hopes.

The clerk's smile broadens as he hands over Harry's bags. "A wise attitude to have. Welcome to your new world," he adds after a pause. "I hope you like it here."

Harry doesn't bother to stem the brilliant smile that splits his lips.

And even though he'll have Hogwarts' library at his fingertips in a month's time he also grabs one of the store's mail order catalogues on the way out.

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After Flourish & Blotts, despite his worry of being recognized, Harry finds himself dragging his feet. He kills some time and puts off the next task on his to do list by allowing himself to be distracted by the magical grocer that he'd never realized existed there in a little tuck of the road before it narrows and turns into the more meandering gloom of Knockturn Alley. It's more delightful than it should be to purchase things like tea and cocoa and bread and other simple groceries that will fit inside the small kitchenette his trunk studio boasts. Fucking Dursleys.

He even stops and buys a copy of the Daily Prophet from a vendor on the corner but eventually he runs out of reasonable excuses and finds himself standing midway between the two shops, looking back and forth, considering.

*You've faced down and killed a Dark Lord, he reminds himself, so grow a bloody spine and get on with it!*

Still, it takes another three deep breaths and the reminder that he'd been in bloody Gryffindor for six years before he looks once more, gives a firm nod of his head, and walks forward to open the door into *Magical Menagerie*.

The inside of the pet store is dim compared to the bright, sun lit streets outside, and a wave of noise assaults his ears as soon as he steps through the door: a riot of croaking toads and singing frogs blending with the meowing of cats and the screeching of owls. It is to the last that he goes, eyeing the mass of feathers moving up and down the crowded perches with a wariness more appropriate to approaching a Blast Ended Skrewt or even a small dragon rather than the most common form of wizarding communication. It's just...

He misses Hedwig.

She hadn't just been his mail carrier. She'd been his dearest companion and friend. She had never abandoned him, never mocked him, never called him a liar, and certainly never treated him like he was anything special, which is more than he can say about every other being in his life. He had been Just Harry to her and it had been the most refreshing and healthy relationship of his seventeen years.

And she had died for him.

Because of him.

Just one of many, in that regard.

But one of the most deeply mourned and the most dearly missed.

But he needs an owl of his own. The school has owls that students are welcome to use but they have no particular loyalty and Harry doesn't dare trust them with any potentially delicate information or letters that he might need to send. The knowledge has been gnawing at him

since the moment the realization had come crashing into his skull while talking with Urggrat about the mail redirection that Dumbledore had set up for him nearly ten years ago.

(And he's not thinking about that. *He. Is. Not.* Because if he starts then things are probably going to start shattering all around him. The meddling bastard.)

So yes, Harry knows that he needs an owl – one of his own, one that he can trust – but he can't decide which option is worse: replacing Hedwig entirely or purchasing her and carrying on as if he didn't already have six years of memories, a whole other life, with her swimming around inside his head.

He still can't decide. Even though he's standing here, staring up at a swirl of brown and tawny and gray and black feathers while the regal white bird that he knows is sitting in the building just up the street, he still can't decide.

"See one that you like?"

Harry jumps a little at the voice at his elbow. "Uh... they're beautiful animals," he says, because it's true, and because it avoids the question entirely. The clerk, clearly not long out of Hogwarts, blows a bubble shaped like a unicorn and pops it noisily while staring at Harry with a very Snape-like glare. "I'm not sure I want an owl," he admits after a few moments trying not to twitch beneath her gaze.

The glare lightens a little at that.

"Well..." she says after blowing and popping a few more bubblegum animals. "It's always best to wait if you're not sure but owls don't require a lot of care, especially if you're headed for Hogwarts. They keep a nice owlery there. Plus they're smart – usually," she amends after what Harry has a sneaking suspicion might actually be Pig, or at least a relative of his, preens himself so excitedly that he falls off the perch and nearly brains himself on the perch staggered underneath it. "... and dead useful."

"I know. I just..." Harry swallows. "I lost an owl recently and I..."

"...don't know if you're ready to move on yet?"

Letting out a shaky sigh, Harry nods. "Yeah."

The clerk pats his shoulder in a clear, if somewhat awkward, attempt at comfort. "Well, kid, if you change your mind let me know."

Harry stares up at the chaos of feathers and beaks and gleaming golden eyes for a long moment. He needs an owl. He just can't bring himself to need one of *them*.

"You're a sentimental idiot," he mutters to himself and drags a hand down his face. Of course, as far as he can tell, being a bleeding heart is what got him here in the first place. He's halfway to the door before something else occurs to him. "Actually..." He pauses, half turned back to where the *Menagerie's* clerk is already back behind the counter.

"Yes?"

“Do you... uh. Do you sell snakes?”

“Snakes?” the woman repeats, gum nearly falling out of her mouth as her eyebrows practically crawl into her hair. “Yeah, kid. We have snakes. Not many of them, mind. They’re not very popular these days what with You-Know-Who. But, yeah, we have some. You want to see ‘em?”

For a moment Harry just stands frozen by the door, heart pounding erratically in his chest. Does he want a snake? In today’s political climate openly owning one, especially as a *pet*, is tantamount to declaring for the Dark Lord. Or for the Dark in general, at this point, seeing as how Volde – no, *Tom* – is still currently living on the back of Quirrell’s head.

But still...

He wants to live his life. He wants to be himself. Just Harry.

And Just Harry happens to be a parseltongue and have a piece of the Dark Lord’s soul entwined with his own.

“Yeah. That’d be great.”

The cage in the very back corner of the shop is nearly as large as the Dursley’s sofa. The rock and hollowed log adorned interior is barely visible in the dim light of the shop but even from outside of the cage Harry can feel the heat of the warming charms cast on one side of the habitat.

“Sorry about that,” the clerk corrects the light situation with a flick of her wand, illuminating the area with a soft glow. “Some people really freak out if they realize that we’ve got these back here.”

“Some people are stupid,” Harry mutters under his breath as he presses closer to the enclosure, though apparently not quietly enough because the young woman laughs.

“Yeah,” she agrees. “Anyway, this is all we got. Like I said, it’s not much, but really we only sell a few a year. Usually to Hogwarts graduates who want to show some house pride. These are regular muggle boa constrictors. I can look up the exact variety if you’re interested. If you’re wanting anything more exotic then you’ll probably have to file for a special permit with the ministry. Most magical snakes are venomous and are required to be registered.”

“No, no... muggle and non-venomous is fine,” he assures as he stares at the bodies inside the cage. *And probably for the best*, he adds silently. Giving a parseltongue a venomous snake is probably about as safe as handing Dudley a loaded gun and he doesn’t need that temptation.

There are two snakes front and center that Harry guesses are only about two feet long, give or take an inch or two. One of them is a pale, almost washed out gray overlaid with darker gray markings. He would call it pale, ghostly even, were it not draped over a serpent so white that it shone, its markings only visible when the animal moves, the miniscule difference in color making the spots pearlescent in the soft light. They’re both gorgeous.

“...are just babies. Barely two months old. Then there’s that poor fellow in the back...”

Harry doesn’t even see him until she points him out, which is ridiculous considering the contrast between the animal’s colors and the dark colored bedding. His body is a pale – so pale it is practically white - glowing yellow with deep reddish orange markings that start out smaller and fainter at the curve of his head and steadily throw larger and bolder as they move down his body until the tip of his tail is brilliant enough that it makes Harry think of the blaze of the sun as it bursts over the horizon. He’s also quite a bit larger than the other two and likely closer to three feet in length.

“...a bit older. He’s very polite at feeding time and very mild mannered overall. People just seem to object to him on account of his looks.”

Harry blinks and tears his eyes away from the snake. “...what?”

The clerk shrugs. “Too Gryffindorish,” she explains, the disdain heavy in her voice.

Well.

That seems to settle it, doesn’t it?

“I’ll take him.”

The clerk clearly wasn’t expecting him to actually *want* one of the animals. “Really? Sure your parents won’t mind, kid?”

“I’ve got my own money that I’m allowed to spend as I see fit,” Harry replies. “Besides, dad’s constant companion is a black dog that’s still a little iffy on following basic commands and big enough to eat a bloody hippogriff.” Which is true enough, even if it’s said in the wrong tense.

The woman holds up her hands in a gesture of surrender. “Sure, sure,” she nods. “You know that snakes aren’t allowed at Hogwarts,” she adds and he admires her tenacity to make sure that he’s sure.

“Technically,” he replies and grins.

She snorts. “Technically,” she agrees with a bob of her head. “So I’m guessing you’ll need a full set up for him?”

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Half an hour later Harry is finally settling the gorgeous creature’s habitat on the floor of his studio, various supplies and informational booklets arrayed around him. “*We’re going to have to figure out a name for you,*” he hisses as he eyes the glowing coils as they slowly move around the new enclosure, investigating. “*Unless you’ve already got a name, that is.*”

The snake freezes, half coiled over the pre-charmed rock, and raises its head until its eyes are nearly level with Harry's.

*"You speak."*

*"I do,"* Harry smiles. It's perhaps his first real smile since... well. It's been a while. *"I would have introduced myself in the shop but I'm trying to pass unnoticed for a little bit. Being able to speak to snakes is considered rather... remarkable."*

*"Humans do startle rather easily,"* the snake agrees. *"They are always crying like a new caught mouse."*

Harry decides that he is going to quite like having a pet that can talk back.

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Unnamed snake in his trunk aside, he still needs an owl and he's still a bloody sentimental idiot which is why he finds himself holding a beautiful white owl on his arm, softly stroking her breast while tears prick at the corners of his eyes.

"Hello girl," he murmurs.

---

There is only one place left to visit after that and it's the place that Harry's been dreading visiting since he stepped foot in Diagon Alley. He pauses outside of the narrow little shop and stares up at the sign for a long time before he sighs, reaches for what's left of his Gryffindor courage, and ducks inside.

It's as crowded as he remembers, little boxes piled haphazardly in stacks that reach the ceiling and layered over every piece of furniture until every space is filled save for the bit of standing space at the very front of the shop and the narrow maze that leads around the boxes. As dusty as he remembers too, he thinks as he holds back a sneeze and watches the dust motes dance in the filtered beams of light that stream through half covered windows. This time though he can feel the hum of magic in the shop, subtle and soft like the buzzing of a bee's wings, but there all the same. An entire river of it just *waiting*.

His fingers twitch.

"Ah, Mr. Potter," a soft, breathy voice welcomes as the familiar image of Mr. Ollivander materializes out of the shadows, "I was wondering when you might be visiting me. A little earlier, are you not?" Harry opens his mouth, probably to say something stupid and ill advised but the wand maker continues without pausing. "I remember the day your mother walked through those doors to buy her first wand. Willow. Ten and a quarter inches. Swishy.

Lovely for charms work. Your father on the other hand favored a mahogany wand. Eleven inches. Pliable and with a bit more raw power – an excellent wand for transfiguration. Well, I say *favored* but it's really the wand who chooses the wizard.” He pauses and peers down at Harry with pale eyes that stare straight down to the core of him. Harry fights the urge to flinch back from the wand maker's all seeing gaze.

If there is anyone in Diagon Alley that can see through him it will be this man and Harry doesn't know if that reassures him or terrifies him. Probably a bit of both if he's being honest.

“Hmmm,” the man muses after several moments of study. “You will be a tricky customer, I think.”

Harry swallows. “Why do you say that sir?” But the wand maker's lips just twitch in a smile. And Harry doesn't press him. He knows he is going to be a tricky customer. He certainly was the first time and he doesn't imagine things have changed that much.

“Your wand arm?” he asks instead, pulling a measuring tape from his pocket and Harry obligingly holds out his right arm. Just like last time the tape begins taking measurements while Ollivander turns around and promptly disappears into the maze of wand boxes. By the time he returns the tape is measuring the distance between his nostrils and Harry is fighting the urge to bat it away. “Here. Cherry and unicorn hair. Pliant. Just pick it up and give it a flick.”

Harry sighs and does as instructed.

The cash register explodes.

“Oh my,” Ollivander looks rather impressed as he stares at the sprawl of gold and silver and bronze raining off the edge of his front counter. “Not that one. Here. Ash and dragon heartstring, ten and half inches...”

A pile of paperwork is thrown violently into the air and falls to the ground as little more than confetti.

“No. No. Clearly not. Walnut and dragon heartstring, rigid and... obviously not. How about Ebony and unicorn ... Merlin! Clearly that is not acceptable. Let's try...”

And so it goes, just like last time. Wand after wand shoved into his hands only to be rejected in a rather spectacular way that sets something on fire or destroys another piece of the shop. Ollivander, contrary to any sense whatsoever, looks almost delighted by each failure. Harry just sighs and keeps flicking wands until his wrist is sore.

“Interesting, Mr. Potter, very interesting. I knew you'd be a tricky one,” the wand maker mutters under his breath as he stands in front of his shelves, half a dozen wand boxes clutched in his arms. The front of the shop is an absolute wreck. The windows have been *reparo*'d at least a dozen times and Harry's lost count of the fires that have had to be put out or the wands that have been knocked over. “Hmmm...” he pauses suddenly and turns back, his eyes widening as they flick up to Harry's forehead where his scar is still covered by an unruly fringe of bubblegum pink hair. “I wonder...”

Harry slumps in relief as the man tosses all of the boxes in his arms onto the floor and disappears back into the interior. *Finally*.

When he returns the older man is slow and hesitant, an open box cradled in his hands. "They're very curious things, wands," he murmurs. "Very few trees can produce wood suitable for focusing magic and wand cores are notoriously difficult to source. I could have an entire handful of unicorn hair and only find a single strand to be suitable. I could pluck an entire phoenix bare and only come up with one feather with the strength to be the heart of a wand. Never mind all the trouble that ensues trying to match a core to a block of wood." Harry listens, absolutely fascinated at this bit of insight. So much of his life – and the war that has consumed it - has been inadvertently decided by wand lore that he can't help but greedily soak it up like a parched sponge. "The contents of this shop are the results of several lifetimes of work. Mine. My father's. My grandfather's. It is a never ending puzzle to fit all the pieces together and then to help match the right wand to the right wizard and sometimes we don't get it right."

Harry can't stop the questioning noise that falls out of his mouth.

"Tell me, Mr. Potter, what you think of this wand." Harry reaches for the wand only to stop, his fingers hovering over the box as the bottom drops out of his stomach. There, beneath his fingers, is a familiar holly and phoenix wand.

Shattered.

No, shattered is not the right word. It looks like it has exploded, erupted like some long suppressed volcano, the wood burst open until it is nothing more than an array of slivers surrounding a slender crimson and gold feather. Slivers of wood that have been scorched.

"...sir?" he manages to croak out after several stunned moments.

"Go ahead," the wand maker urges quietly. "Pick it up."

The only thing he can pick up is the feather – *Fawkes'* feather – and the moment he touches it a familiar heat blooms in his arm and races through his blood. He can almost hear the bird singing.

Ollivander sighs and suddenly looks decades older than he had a moment before, shoulder slumping as he stares down at the feather clutched in Harry's tiny hand. "Curious, Mr. Potter. Very curious."

"What is, sir?"

"I remember every wand I've ever made, ever wand I've ever sold. Every one. And the phoenix that gave that feather," he nods his head at the feather that Harry can't bring himself to let go of, "did, in fact, give one other feather. Those two wands were some of the easiest I have ever made. They went together so smoothly. Holly, eleven inches, and nice and supple. A wand well suited to balancing a quick tempered wizard who might frequently find himself in dangerous situations. Coupled with the phoenix feather... well. It's a very unusual combination. I have waited almost sixty years to see who this wand might go to. But it's



brother... thirteen and a half inches. Yew. A fierce, singular wand. One of the most powerful I've ever made and in need of an equally singular wizard to wield it. Excellent for dueling. It's the wand that gave you that scar." Softly, reverently, Ollivander brushes the tip of one finger against the lightning bolt on Harry's head and Harry shivers. "The holly. It would have worked for you, I think, had the feather not destroyed it."

The sight of the holly splinters in the cloth lined box make Harry want to cry. Merlin, it's just wood, but it had been – *would have been* - his wand. His faithful wand that had introduced him to magic. That had seen him through his first lessons. That had held off a hundred dementors. That had dueled Voldemort. That had tried to *crucio* Bellatrix Lestrange. That had nearly killed Draco Malfoy. That had met its end in Godrics Hollow and that he hadn't been able to throw away. Not even when it had been broken and dead, with not a glimmer of magic or sentience left in it. That wand had been as much a part of his body as his arm.

"It caused quite the fuss. Woke me up at the crack of dawn this morning with a bang. It happens sometimes, that the core rejects the wood. Not often, but sometimes. Sometimes things... change." Harry doesn't dare look away. He doesn't even dare *breathe*. Ollivander offers him a kind look and tucks the remnants of the holly wand beneath his arm. "Come along then, Mr. Potter. Let us see if we can find something acceptable to your feather."

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Ollivander leads him to a lower level that, in true wizarding fashion, is about ten times the size of what it should be and far brighter than any basement level has any business being. It's lit by lamps hanging in regular intervals from the ceiling and an entire wall of windows across the back surrounded by a well on the exterior to allow natural, not magical, light to filter in. The entire space is open and airy, a study in worn, golden, polished woods with the smell of freshly cut wood hanging sweet in the air. There is a long, scarred workbench down the center of the room with a handful of wands in various stages of completion adorning its surface and the walls are lined with cabinets and shelving. The cabinetry is little more than long, shallow drawers piled one on top of the other. The shelves hold hundreds, if not thousands, of little bottles. If Harry looks closely enough he can see that each one contains a potential wand core: the silvery shimmer of a unicorn hair, the purple-red strands of a dragon's heartstrings, or even the occasional glimmer and flash of a phoenix feather.

"Very well, Mr. Potter, please have a look," the wand maker invites as he makes a sharp flicking motion with his own wand and all of the drawers slide open with a series of clicks. "Keep the feather in your hand and run it over the pieces. Let me know when you find the right one."

"...the right one?"

The man smiles, giving the drawers a fond, if exasperated glance. "You'll know," he promises and settles down on a stool to wait. Clearly, he expects this process to be a long one.

Considering the bloody mess they've left upstairs Harry can't say that he disagrees.

The drawers hold nothing but wood. Piece upon piece in every color from stark white to a rich red-brown to the deepest of blacks, each probably a foot and a half in length and a little over an inch in diameter. With a quick glance at Mr. Ollivander to make sure he's doing it right, Harry lowers his hand and strokes it slowly across the woods.

They're cold.

Bloody, *fucking* cold.

Stick-his-hand-in-a-dementor-and-keep-it-there cold.

Swimming-naked-in-the-Black-Lake-in-February cold.

He yanks his hand with a hiss and glares at the wood. Behind him, Ollivander lets out a little laugh. "So cold it burns, doesn't it?" he asks and Harry nods.

"Yeah."

"You'll know when you find the right one," the wand maker repeats and Harry... well. He's got to go back to the drawers of freezing wood, doesn't he? He needs a bloody wand and *apparently* the feather in his hand, the feather that ties him to Voldemort, to *Tom Riddle*, almost as much as the scar on his forehead has decided that the holly is no longer good enough for it.

*Sometimes things change*, Ollivander's voice echoes in his head.

And isn't that the understatement of the century.

The Harry of now is a completely different person than the boy who walked into this shop the first time. He doesn't know why he's surprised that his original wand has self destructed rather than come to his hand. It still hurts though.

He sighs and drags his hand across another drawer of wood pieces, the surfaces practically silky beneath his touch.

Nothing.

Nothing but cold.

Not for this drawer or the next one or the one after that. Or for any of the ones that come after.

Occasionally there's a glimmer, a spark against his skin that's like catching the glint of light off a mirror out of the corner of his eyes but nothing ever comes of it. By the time he goes back the glimmer is gone, the wood cold and unyielding beneath his touch.

Possibilities, he thinks.

Options that might have played out in a different world for a different Harry Potter.

But not here.

Not for him.

He's three quarters of the way around the room when he finds it. It's not just a warmth against his fingertips or a glimmer that he catches at the edge of his gaze. It's a bloody inferno. It's fiendfyre racing up arm and digging into his heart, scorching through his veins and his nerves until he feels like he might combust.

Ollivander is at his side instantly. "Which one?" he asks and Harry hands it to him.

It is black, so black that it practically eats the light inside of the studio, a beautiful swirl of darkness that howls gleefully beneath his touch.

The wand maker takes it reverently. "Interesting," he breathes.

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Harry is not quite sure how much time it takes to finish his wand. An hour, certainly. Maybe two. Maybe more. At some point a house elf pops in with tea and a sandwich that Harry inhales gratefully. Once Ollivander has to get up and return to the main shop when a twinkling little bell announces that he has a customer but he's back within twenty minutes – *the lucky bastard*, Harry thinks, directing his thoughts to the customer even now stepping back onto the street. Other than that, though, the man remains unmoved for the entire duration.

Twice he calls Harry over to lay his hand against the wood and the feather and he stares, seeing something beneath the increased hum of magic in the air. The phantom of what the wand wants to be, maybe. Harry just goes where Ollivander tells him to and otherwise sits on a stool a few feet away and watches in silence as the other man carefully turns the wood and the feather into a piece of art. Into a tool. Into a weapon.

Harry is nervous, impatient, his knee jumping relentlessly but he doesn't move from his stool unless told to. He's rash and has had more than his share of idiotic moments but he's not stupid. He stays put and waits and focuses on keeping his hair pink.

Harry's fairly certain he's never focused so bloody hard on something in his life. Except for catching the snitch. Maybe.

That probably says bad things about him.

When Ollivander finishes he slumps back on his stool with a sigh and holds out his hand toward Harry. "Ebony and phoenix feather," he croaks. "Eleven and three quarter inches. Firm."

It's beautiful.

Harry is captivated. Enthralled. Caught like a teenaged Ron Weasley in front a dozen Veela.

It is a bit thinner than the Holly wand, thinner than a muggle pencil near the tip and gradually thickening until it's a little more than half an inch in diameter at the thickest part of the handle, which then thins and turns in a wide hook that looks like it will rest comfortably around the heel of his palm. The majority of the wand is that inky, bottomless black and shined it loos more like a piece of dark glass instead of wood. It is near the small lip separating the main blade of the wand from the hilt of it that the soft, wispy swirls of cream begin to appear. It's not much, just a touch here and there as the grain spirals around the handle. They gleam like stars in the sky, the swirl and spread of a galaxy across the endless black of space.

It is smooth and sleek and simple.

It is nothing but a wand. It doesn't need to be anything more.

The moment Harry touches it fireworks go off in his head and his magic rises to meet it like a cold tide, inexorable and fathomless.

"It's perfect," he tells the wand maker and it may be the most honest thing that has ever come out of his mouth. Ever.

Ollivander gives him a weary smile that only pulls at half of his mouth. "I am glad that it suits you. It is a formidable wand. I expect you will do great things with it, Mr. Potter. Great things."

Harry shivers and cradles the wand to his chest. "I'm going to try," he murmurs and beneath his fingertips the wand hums in agreement.

## Chapter End Notes

1. Because every parseltongue should have a snake, damn it. For the curious: the color morphs of the boas in this chapter are ghost and moonglow (the two younger ones) and Harry's is a lipstick sunglow.

2. I have approximately 9000 thoughts on wand lore so I absolutely had to take the chance to give Harry a (slightly) different wand. I think the holly definitely worked as a representation for canon Harry but, as Harry himself notes, he's a very different person now than he was the first time he bought a wand. I very much wanted to keep the brother wand aspect but I wanted to acknowledge that change so after way too long staring at the HP wiki I settled on Ebony for the wood. It is described as a wood that "is happiest in the hand of those with the courage to be themselves. Frequently non-conformist, highly individual or comfortable with the status of outsider... the ebony wand's perfect match is one who will hold fast to his or her beliefs, no matter what the external pressure, and will not be swayed lightly from their purpose" which I absolutely believe summarizes what I want to do with this Harry.

3. I very nearly split this into two chapters but I figured that you've been waiting for-fucking-ever for it and absolutely deserve the dubious present of having this fic double in size all at once. Also, I kind of wanted to keep all the shopping stuff together.

Next chapter: Harry tries to figure out A Plan (and he has no idea what the fuck he's doing, but by Merlin that's never stopped him before).

# Four

## Chapter Notes

Wow. I can't believe the love the last chapter got. Seriously, your comments made me all mushy and heart eyed... and are probably entirely responsible for this chapter. It's a bit of a filler/foundational chapter but it just didn't feel right to jump straight from the last chapter to the Hogwarts Express.

Legit author notes: This absolutely will be a Tom x Harry fic. There will probably be some brief pairings of Harry with other characters before he gets together with Tom, but Tom's his endgame. I also removed the crack tag from this fic because it has absolutely taken on a life of its own and is not headed in the crack direction that I'd thought it would go.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

After spending no small amount of time thinking about the portkeys to the various Potter properties currently sitting in a magical pouch in his pocket Harry does a bit of shopping in the muggle world – because no matter how determined he is to fit in to his new world, he's not giving up wearing muggle jeans – and takes a cab back to Kings Cross. There he finds a quiet, out of the way broom closet with a broken door handle that has – judging by the layer of dust on everything – not been touched in quite some time and once out of the sight of prying eyes, he resizes his trunk and climbs inside.

The flat is a mess of shopping bags spread across the hardwood floors, a riot of colors against the off white of the walls and Hedwig is sitting on a stand in one corner, her eyes fixed speculatively on the long tank set up against the nearby wall. The snake, at least, is happily settled and fast asleep.

The sight of... everything, is enough to make something warm swell almost uncomfortably in Harry's chest. "Well," he announces to the room, earning a long, slow blink from Hedwig, "here we are." The owl goes back to staring at the snake and Harry smiles, blinking away the tears that prick at the corner of his eyes.

And then he gets to work.

He needs a plan but first, first he needs to somehow organize this mess. Maybe that will help organize his mind so he can actually think without bursting into tears or having his magic accidentally shatter the glass in the faux windows on the far side of the room.

He finds his clothes first and changes into a pair of denims and t-shirt that *are new and actually fit* – and part of him wonders if that knowledge is ever going to stop sending a little thrill through him - after taking a moment in the loo to splash water on the face. The

bathroom, like the rest of the flat, isn't overly large but certainly has more than enough room for one person. It is done in tasteful neutrals: off white walls and a black and white tiled floor with a standard seeming white tub set in a tiled alcove and equipped with a showerhead sticking from the wall. In the living space the lack of color reminds him too much of that fluffy in-between place but in bathroom he actually likes it.

It's bright, airy, clean, and *his*. Plus the jewel toned towels that he bought won't clash with anything.

The only other space in the flat is a roomy dressing room with one wall devoted to drawers and a large mirror and another half filled with shelves clearly meant for shoes. The rest of it is outfitted with rods that are thankfully - because Harry hadn't even thought to buy some - half full of empty hangers. And now that he's dressed in something slightly more appropriate for sorting through all the bags and packages he had acquired he sets to work filling up the drawers and hangers and shelves. Of course, referring to it as '*filling them up*' is laughable at best. He'd bought what he considered to be a very reasonable number of clothes – extravagant, even, compared to the last seventeen years of his life – and they barely take up a third of the available space.

It's soothing though. Soothing to set the few pairs of shoes on the shelf. Soothing to unload pants and socks and t shirts into drawers. Soothing to hang up robes and trousers and shirts and coats and cloaks, to hang enchanted scarves and ties over hooks.

It's soothing to fold his towels and washcloths and set them away in the cupboard next to the sink, leaving one set out that he hangs next to the tub. Soothing to put his toiletries on the ledge next to the tub and on the countertop next to the sink and to place the few first aid items and medicinal potions that he'd bought in the medicine cabinet hanging over the toilet. Soothing to put the plush black rug on the floor to protect his feet from the cold tile.

It's soothing to sort through the rest of his belongings. He doesn't have any shelves or extra trunks and the cupboards in the small kitchen are reserved for the groceries and the minimal pots, pans, dishes, and cutlery that he'd bought but he can sort his school specific items into one neat pile and organize everything else as best as he can.

It soothes something dark and lonely and cold coiled in the center of his chest, something he hadn't even realized was there until the quiet act of putting *his things* away in *his flat* quieted it. He's never had a home, he realizes. He's never had a place that was *his*. The closest he's ever gotten has been his dorm room in Gryffindor tower... or his bloody cupboard.

But this is his. Just his. No one else has had it before him. No one else even knows it exists.

Harry lets out a little laugh and dashes the tears that have been leaking from his eyes while he's standing here surveying his little kingdom. "Don't mind me," he tells Hedwig when she tips her head and hoots at him. "It's been a long day."

Understatement.

It has, quite possibly been the longest day of his life. Lives. Because the last time he really slept was before they broke into Gringotts – if he could actually call that tossing and turning ‘sleep’. Merlin, no wonder he feels exhausted. But he’s not going to bed just yet. He can’t. Because no sleep will wait for him there until he has some sort of... direction and organization to his thoughts.

Not for the first time he wishes he were a better bloody occlumens. Somewhere, somewhen in the long, miserable hours spent in a magical tent with hunger pains licking at his belly and a desperate, angry horcrux seeping into his every thought and emotion Hermione had at least managed to beat – by sheer bloody repetition – the basics of occlumency into his brain. He can organize his thoughts, at least a little, now. If he hadn’t managed to learn at least that much he doubts he would have been able to understand the magnitude of the knowledge given to him by Snape’s memories; doubts he would have been to put the pieces together fast enough to make his way out to the Forbidden Forest without anyone stopping him. He still can’t successfully clear his mind half the time and he wonders how much of that is him and how much of it is the result of fighting against the nature of the horcrux that lives inside of him.

It’s a thought that he quietly shelves for later.

Right now he needs to know what he’s going to do.

He needs a plan.

He takes a deep breath and then another and then one more for good measure and goes to make himself something to eat.

After he’s consumed a sandwich he settles down with a fresh pot of tea, a handful of biscuits, one of his new pens, an array of inks, and the journal. For a moment he just sits there, worrying at his bottom lip as he stares at the blank, creamy pages and wonders how the hell he is supposed to do this. Plans are... not his forte. In fact, his general approach to plans can be classified as equal parts bullshit, dumb luck, and rash bravery/willful stupidity. He knows this. Has known it for years. Snape’s snipes about his intelligence and arrogance wouldn’t have pricked so much if he’d been able to brush them off as obvious falsehoods. But it had been what was expected of him and it had, for the most part, worked in his favor.

But if the last nine months in that fucking tent has taught him anything, *anything at all*, it is how to be patient and how to take a moment to bloody *think*.

So.

A plan.

Hermione, no doubt, would have him write out and organize all the necessary information – horcruxes, Dumbledore, Voldemort, Snape, at least a half dozen other people, the prophecy, the Deathly Hollows, and his entire bloody life. Probably color code it and cross index it. And yeah... that’s, that’s not happening. Not that it wouldn’t be bloody useful to have all that information written down and Harry doesn’t doubt that it will happen but... what would he even *do* with all of it in one location?



Cry, probably.

Or break something.

Things tend to explode when he gets emotional. He should probably work on that.

But really, who is he kidding here? “I have no idea what I’m doing,” he tells Hedwig. “*None*,” he hisses at the snake that’s now lounging lazily on top of a tank and watching him with what Harry can only assume is curiosity.

“*What are you trying to do? You taste like prey about to be caught*,” the snake tells him and really, that’s not surprising.

“*Not screw things up*,” Harry mutters and runs his fingers down the warm, dry scales of the snake’s back. In the past, his normal reaction to a threat, to any problem really, had been to charge in and hope for the bloody best. Obviously, that’s not going to work this time around. The whole point is to do something *different*. He’s already lived the brash and brave life once and look what that fucking got him – dead. Dead, having watched the entire wizarding world be ripped apart by prejudice and war, having watched people he cared about – people that actually *cared about him* – die. Because of him. Because he had to be right, because the only bloody plan in his brain was *attack*.

No, he definitely needs to do things differently this time. Completely different – though simply doing everything the opposite of the way he had the first time sounds a bit like cheating.

“Well,” he muses after a thoughtful moment, “the Sorting Hat *did* originally want to put me in Slytherin.”

And sure, some of that is probably the result of the piece of Tom Marvolo Riddle that’s riding around in his body but Harry’s not totally stupid. He’s spent almost a year in a tent – and a handful of summers before that – with nothing to do but think, trapped inside his own head with only his own mind for conversation. And he’s willing to admit, here, when it’s just him and his owl and his snake that Harry Potter is more a serpent than a lion.

Planning skills notwithstanding.

So maybe he needs to approach this like a Slytherin. He needs to look at the whole situation with cunning, ambition, and a healthy dose of self-preservation. That’s going to be new. Mostly. He’s never been overly ambitious for himself, his greatest wish simply being to blend in and be normal, but he gave his entire life – quite literally – in the pursuit of someone else’s ambition. Now, perhaps, it’s time for some ambition of his own and really, isn’t that what he’s been doing since he woke up this morning?

*What does he, Harry Potter, want?*

It all seems to circle back to that.

“What do I want?” he repeats. It feels weird to say it out loud. Even weirder than it felt to think it, to feel it. It seems preposterous somehow that he should get to choose.

But he does. He has been. He’s sitting in proof of it.

So yes, he needs to write down the information, anything he thinks might be useful, but first...

Harry selects a beautiful, deep blue ink and, after one more moment of thought, writes *WHAT I WANT* in neat, blocky letters across the top of the first page.

Another pause and then, “Alright,” he tells himself. “You can do this.”

He *can*.

After another moment of consideration – *not* hesitation, thank you very much – he writes ‘*be my own person*’ as the first bullet point. And if it happens to be barely legible that’s because even after seven years of writing with quill and ink he’s never managed anything more than what could politely be termed as a tidy scrawl and not because his hands won’t stop bloody shaking.

Also, what does *be my own person* even mean? Harry has no idea.

Well, no. That’s not quite true. He’s ten bloody years too late to prevent himself from being The Boy Who Lived but he’s not going to let that *own* him this time around. No, he can’t escape it and he can’t ignore it so *he* will own *it*. He will define it with himself instead of letting it define him. He won’t let it make him Dumbledore’s champion or Voldemort’s enemy. He won’t let it force him into being the bloody *Chosen One*. Not again.

Biting back the snarl that’s purring at the base of his throat Harry takes a deep breath and rubs his thumb across the band of his ring, the cool metal a grounding force against his skin. Already, everything has changed.

*That’s done*, he reminds himself. *It’s over. It’s never going to happen again. I won’t let it.*

Still, he writes the basic points of it on his list just in case he ever needs a reminder.

After another hesitant moment he hastily adds, ‘*not a replacement or replica of my parents*’ to the list.

Merlin, but that bloody hurts to write, even if it is true.

And he knows it is true. He knows he will never be James bloody Potter because he has spent years chasing after every scrap of approval given in his dead father’s name. Or had anyway, until the moment he’d watched his father and godfather hang Snape upside down in front of half of the school. And even then...

Harry shakes his head. His father loved him – *loves* him, if he dares trust the resurrection stone – but once upon a time he had, in his own way, been as bad as Dudley. Or Malfoy. And Harry doesn’t doubt that Snape gave as good as he got - even if it was three and a rat to one –

but he didn't grow up like his father or his mum. He grew up with the Dursleys. He grew up hated and starved and *alone* and there is part of him that will always wonder how his dad and Sirius – and his mum, for that matter – would have treated him had he shown up as a student in their time in Dudley's ratty, oversized hand-me-downs and – without the bias against his parents' killer – been sorted in Slytherin.

He'll never know for sure but he suspects that it wouldn't have turned out well for him.

On the flip side of that, he doesn't want to be his mum either. He doesn't want to be all that remains of her, a guilt fueled memory trapped in a boy's body for Dumbledore to beat and bait and trap Snape with.

They gave their lives for him and they loved – *love* – him and he will never stop being grateful for that but he wants to be something more than an embodiment of their memories. He wants to be more than *Lily and James' son*.

Something that, he acknowledges with a heavy sigh, is going to be bloody *difficult*. And he's out flown a fucking dragon.

The easiest thing to change, of course, will be his Hogwarts house. Everyone expects him to be in Gryffindor, *like his parents*, and him being sorted there only reinforced the insubstantial idea everyone had of him by way of his parents' lives and deaths.

Honestly, he's not even sure he could convince the Sorting Hat to put him in Gryffindor again even if wanted to be there. Even now, part of him *does* want to be there in that high, windowed tower with the crimson draperies and the comfortable couches and bubble like chairs pulled up to scarred desktops. It's one of the closest things he's ever had to a home and it calls to him in its familiarity, the promise of a lifetime of habits just waiting for him to slip back into.

"Different," he reminds himself as he gets up to clean out the teapot and use the loo. "You have to do things differently."

He ends up staring at himself in the mirror over the bathroom sink, fingers gripping the edge of the vanity until they turn pale. That is the other thing that is going to have be different. At seventeen, almost eighteen, he had finally grown into his own person. Age and puberty had brought out hints of his mum – beyond the green of his eyes, of course – in his face and given him features that were all his own, leaving him with a normal passing resemblance to his parents but not making him their duplicate. Like he is now. Merlin, he'd forgotten just how much he looked like pictures of his dad at this age. Like someone had plucked his dad – well, a shorter, tinier, paler version – of his dad out of his school photos and plopped him down in Harry's stead.

He'd liked that, the first time around. Liked the visible reminder that he hadn't always been utterly alone. That he had come from someplace.

Not this time though. This time he's more than the scared little boy who knew nothing but the darkness of the cupboard under the stairs and the Dursleys.

So he needs to make himself look less like his father.

Which means he needs to find some way to control and change his hair. Maybe if he grows it longer? Surely he can manage that without it regressing. His hair had always returned to this mess after Aunt Petunia had tried to cow or destroy it because Harry had wanted it to. Perhaps, it will grow longer if he wishes it? There are potions that he can buy to do that but he'd rather avoid going back to the alley. Owl order then, if doing it by sheer will doesn't work.

And the glasses. He'd love to be rid of them completely but his eyes are shit and he knows it. New glasses then and maybe some contacts. He's already taken care of a new wardrobe. The rest will be up to him and how he acts.

*It's our choices that make us who we are*, he murmurs inside of his head and something suspiciously like a laugh bubbles in his chest. His mind is still muddled, his thoughts chaotic, but he thinks that maybe, somewhere in all of this he has – if not an actual plan – than at least a starting point.

It will have to do for now.

---

The problem with time travel, Harry decides as he sits on bench amongst the morning bustle of Kings Cross, is that the more changes he makes the less useful his knowledge of the future will be. The more he changes, the less he will know.

In the instance of his letter, it's probably not going to change much. His first arrived by muggle post. He's not sure if there will still be a letter lying on the rug in front of the door this morning or if the inevitable magic involved in them will mean that it will get delivered right to this spot in – Harry glances at the muggle watch on his wrist – approximately thirty minutes, give or take. He's inclined to believe – and hoping – for the latter.

Of course, whether it comes by owl or whether Hagrid is going to suddenly be pushing through the crowd, booming like a jolly cannon remains to be seen.

As fond as he is of the half-giant, he's sincerely hoping for the former.

So any changes to how he receives his letter are probably rather minimal in the grand scheme of things and they're changes that he's okay with happening, however it turns out. Not that he really has a choice, of course, given how he had rushed out of the Dursleys without thinking. Not that he would have stayed. Ever.

On the other hand, rushing out to the Little Hangleton and fetching the Resurrection Stone and horcrux from the ruins of the Gaunt shack – like part of him very, very much wants to – would probably cause a great number of problems. If nothing else, should he fail to actually get the ring, he has left a trail for Dumbledore to follow even if it is only in the memories of

the people that see and dismiss his presence. Likewise, making his way to the Burrow and dragging Wormtail into the Ministry would tip his hand in far too many ways, likely exposing him utterly.

No, he is going to have to move slowly – more slowly than he would like, anyway – and build up some sort of support base because he still looks like a too small eleven year old and not a battle hardened young adult.

Ugh. That's going to be a nightmare.

Of course, he's got five weeks to figure out how to deal with it and to figure out how he *is* going to handle going back to Hogwarts and clearing Sirius' name. The ring, he suspects, will have to wait until at least next summer but theoretically, at least, he'll be able to retrieve the diadem. He's not entirely sure *what* he's going to do about Tom Marvolo Riddle – or the wraith currently living on the back of the Quirrell's head – but he knows that he doesn't want the horcruxes to be where Dumbledore can get them.

Or Voldemort. Not yet.

Rubbing at his face, Harry tips his head back, breathes, and runs through the mental exercises Hermione had tried to teach him to help clear his mind. It certainly doesn't do that but he feels more settled afterward and less like he's about to break down again. Of course the six hours of sleep he'd managed to get the night before had helped a great deal on that front as well. It'd been one of the best nights of sleep he'd ever had. No Dursleys, no Death Eaters, no desperate horcruxes. Just him and the pallet of blankets he'd made up on the floor, lacking a proper bed to put them on. Enough furniture to furnish a small flat had been one of those things that he'd suspected that even the wizarding world would raise an eyebrow at a child buying on their own. He'll have to owl order some furniture or maybe there will be some in the Room of Requirement that Hogwarts will let him have.

In the somewhat calmed racing of his head he makes a note.

And speaking of Hogwarts...

"Hello there, lovely thing," he murmurs, opening his eyes to smile at the familiar face of one of the school's tawny barn owls who has taken up residence on the back of the bench and is hooting at him insistently. "Is this for me?" he asks, picking up the thick envelope that the owl dropped into his lap. The owl bobs her head. "Do you mind waiting around for my reply?" Another bob and Harry smiles as he offers her the owl treat he had stashed in his pocket hours ago, hoping that he would get a chance to use it.

Owl taken care of, Harry can't resist turning the envelope over to look at the address written gracefully in black ink.

*Harry Potter*

*The Bench Beneath the Clock*

*Platform 7*  
*Kings Cross Station*  
*London, England*

Well, at least that's better than 'The Cupboard Under the Stairs'.

Breaking the seal, Harry pulls the sheets of folded parchment from within and scans it quickly. The letters themselves are exactly as he remembers and there's nothing surprising on the supply list. He certainly has everything required – and then some. Dropping his acceptance letter onto the bench he pulls the short, polite reply he had penned this morning in the neatest handwriting he could manage and offers it to the owl. "This is for you." The owl gives him a long, surprised blink and Harry just smiles, waiting patiently until the bird grasps the letter in its talons and lifts into the air.

He sits on the bench until it nothing but a speck in the sky and then he carefully rips the letter into dozens of tiny little pieces which he dumps in the closest garbage bin as he walks past. He doesn't *think* that there are any spells on the letter – it certainly hadn't felt that way but even though the last few years have honed his senses sharply he doesn't dare think that he could find something if, say, Dumbledore wanted to truly hide it – but better safe than sorry.

Ten minutes later he's disappeared into the swirl of humanity filling London's streets.

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Harry spends the next five weeks reading. Well, not entirely. But mostly. Definitely mostly. As suspected the book on the history of the pureblooded families and their influence in the Wizengamot is drier than burnt, day old toast but he only makes himself read one page of that per day and frequently breaks it up with other, more interesting books. The booklets written to introduce muggleborns to the Wizarding World are dry but certainly informative or at least more informative than the *absolutely bloody nothing* that he'd had the first time. The textbooks are a review. Mostly, anyway, though probably not as much of one as they should be. In the evening he curls up in his bed and reads through the children's stories and the popular works of wizarding fiction. He reads his favorites out loud to the snake – whom, after consulting a baby name book and the snake himself, consents to be called Inigo. Harry's not sure the constrictor actually gets anything out of the experience but it gives him a chance to practice speaking parseltongue.

When he's not reading he's making notes in the journal and before long his list of wants has expanded to include things like: *do well at school, have a fulfilling career, have a family, never see the Dursleys again, free Sirius and see that his name is legally cleared, improved creature rights, free Snape from life debt, prevent the return of crazy, snake-faced Voldemort,*

and a half dozen other notations. Further on he's started writing down all the details of his Hogwarts life could possibly be useful, arranging them in a neat timeline.

When he's not reading, writing, or letting all of his thoughts seep in his head regarding the ongoing task of making A Plan he works on the parts of said plan that he already knows. After much thought he sends Hedwig off to *Havesmere & Brown Cosmetics and Soaping Co* with an order for hair growth potion and enough hair care products to make Hermione – or perhaps more accurately, Lavender – proud. When Hedwig returns the potion goes in the medicine cabinet and the rest of the products take up residence in his bathroom, filling an entire shelf of the linen closet. Eventually, he finds a muggle optometrist who is willing to overlook the fact that he is a small child in favor of the cash held in his hand and has his eyes properly examined for the first time in his life. He'd always known that his eyesight is bad – the term *blind as a bat* bounces around inside his head – but he hadn't realized just *how bad* it is until he put on a properly prescribed pair of glasses.

And, after spending his entire life trapped – in the cupboard, at the Dursleys, at Grimmauld Place, at school – Harry explores. He doesn't go further than London but really, outside of a burning desire to go to the beach and a persistent, niggling itch to pay a visit to the Gaunt shack, he doesn't want or need to. Instead, he tours the Tower of London, Westminster Abbey, and Buckingham Palace. He spends multiple days exploring the British Museum and even, just for kicks and giggles, visits the zoo. He doesn't free the snake this time, though he does stand and chat with it for nearly half an hour. Every night is spent in a different location and he finds a quick preference for the many parks, something that allows him to let Hedwig out to hunt and stretch her wings.

Despite the chaos in his mind and the worry that sits in his heart the days are peaceful. Quiet. *His*. Harry hasn't had days like this in years.

Or ever, really.

So during the day Harry wanders through London and reads his books and tries to plot a new life for himself. When night falls he wraps Inigo around his shoulders like a shawl and sits on the ground and watches Hedwig wing across a star filled sky.

And the days tick down until suddenly, inevitably, it's the first of September.

## Chapter End Notes

For the curious: Inigo is the Basque variation of the name Ignatius and means "fiery".

# Five

## Chapter Notes

I live! This fic lives! Huzzah.

So it's been forever and I'd love it if I had some super awesome excuse for that but the sad reality is RL gets crazy and sadly, I have passed the point in my life where I can live off of less than 3 hours of sleep for an extended period of time. Sadness. I'd also really love to say that updates will be much more frequent from now on but... haha. Life is a crazy bitch right now. In the next 4-6 months I'll be selling a house, buying a house, probably renovating a house, and having a baby. (After dealing with infertility issues and a handful of losses to get the kids we do have both the husband and I were completely blindsided by this out of nowhere, should-not-have-technically-been-possible surprise baby. It's been so surreal. Exciting, but you know, pinch me because I'm not entirely sure that I'm not dreaming). So. You know. C.R.A.Z.Y. But I do want to reassure you that this fic has not been abandoned and barring the loss of life/limb/what little remains of my sanity will not be. It might just be a little slow in making it from my brain to word document.

As always, thank you so much for your support, comments, and kudos. They bring joy to my life. You're wonderful!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Alright, Harry,” he tells his reflection. “You can do this.”

His reflection blinks back at him. His reflection doesn’t believe him.

That’s okay. Harry doesn’t believe himself either.

“It’s just like a quidditch game,” he tries to tell himself. “Your hands sweat, your stomach heaves, and everything is absolutely bloody fine once you get on the broom.” Except there isn’t a broom to get on and there’s no snitch to catch. There’s just a scarlet steam engine and cars full of school children in various levels of excitement and terror who haven’t had to fight in a war. Who don’t even know that one is coming. Was coming? Would come?

“Only if you screw things up,” Harry mutters and tries, very hard, not to think about all the times he had screwed up. About all the people that are dead because of him. Were dead.

Damn time travel.

Behind him Hedwig hoots and shuffles around in her cage.



“I know, I know,” Harry tells her, glancing at the muggle watch lying on the vanity top. He’d bought it after the first day when he realized that not being able to cast a *tempus* would not so slowly drive him mad. He’s only taken it off to shower since then and as a result there’s a fine strip of paler flesh around his wrist. His robes will hide it, he’s sure, until the lack of being outside for most of the day pales his skin again. “We’ve still got an hour until the train leaves.” And he’s not sure he’s ready to get on it, his gut churning with nerves and his hands shaking and damp.

Bloody hell, he’d been more confident confronting Voldemort than he is getting on a train.

“You can do this,” he whispers, gripping the edges of the counter until it feels like his hands are going to break. It’s just getting on a train. It’s just the beginning, what feels like the *real* beginning, of everything. It’s his life. It’s the fate of the wizarding world.

So nothing new, really.

It just felt easier when *the fate of the wizarding world* could be solved with the murder of a dark wizard by a teenage boy.

“You can do this,” he repeats, a little stronger, and stares at the boy in the mirror. The face that stares back is almost a stranger. Part of that is because it’s been seven years since he’s been eleven years old and his past eleven year old self had never had much inclination or opportunity to look in a mirror. Mostly, though, it’s that his past eleven year old self had never looked like this. Past Harry had been a tiny, scrawny little thing with skin almost translucently pale from spending most of his life in a windowless cupboard. His hair had been an unruly bird’s nest, his glasses round and held together with a half dozen pieces of scotch tape. His clothes had been baggy and worn and despite all of that he had been so fucking innocent that it hurts a little to look back on it.

The kid staring back from the mirror isn’t innocent. His body might be small and scrawny again – though the past month of decent, healthy meals and regular exercise has filled out his face in a way that past him had never managed until months into each school year – but eyes staring back at him are the eyes that have seen a man burned to death and faced down a thousand year old basilisk. They’re the eyes that have seen murder and resurrection and have faced torture and death without flinching. There’s no innocence left in them. He would have to be a better occlumens than Snape to even dream about hiding it.

He can almost hear the man laughing in his head at the thought, the sound appropriately biting.

It’s oddly steadying.

The physical changes are more noticeable – at least to him. His skin has darkened in the sun, the paleness of it morphing to a burnished gold and the small apothecary of hair care potions and products have done their job. Once a veritable tangle closely resembling a Devil’s Snare, it now falls in thick black waves to just past his shoulders. Half of it is pulled away from his face, exposing the curve of his cheekbones and – more importantly – the thin red line of the scar bisecting his forehead. Seeing the scar in the mirror is the weirdest thing and Harry feels naked with it exposed. More naked than, well, actually *being* naked. He’s wearing contacts

today, his new glasses carefully stowed in their case and sitting in the top drawer of the vanity next to his toothbrush. Between that and the lack of hair falling over his forehead he feels bloody vulnerable but everyone knows that the Potters have crappy eyesight. They're as well known for it as the Malfoys are for their platinum hair or the Weasleys for their family size.

And he doesn't want to be a Potter today.

*No*, he corrects himself silently as he smooths down the buttery soft weave of the black jumper he'd thrown on what feels like ages ago. *I just don't want to be James Potter.*

Behind him, Hedwig lets out another demanding hoot and Harry smiles. "Alright, alright," he tells the owl as he shuts the bathroom door behind him. "We can go now. *You are comfortable?*" he adds, hiss to the coils of pink and gold heaped across the charmed rock.

*"The mouse was tasty and the rock is warm,"* Inigo replies, which Harry thinks means yes.

*"Enjoy your nap. I'll come get you tonight once everything is settled."* The promise doesn't warrant more than an assenting flick of the constrictor's tail but Harry's not fooled. Having discovered the joy of riding around on a warm blooded creature – especially one that can understand him and be directed towards interesting smells and the patch of sunlight that's *just right* – Inigo's tolerance for being stuck in his cage is limited – even if it is as big as the one at the shop and he's got it all to himself.

Not that Harry blames him.

A cage is a cage is a cage.

Dudley's second bedroom had been both better and worse than the cupboard but a prison all the same.

Grimmauld Place and that bloody tent had both, in their own way, been cages.

Even Hogwarts and the Burrow had been cages by the end.

Harry is so very tired of cages.

So, yes, tonight he'll climb back into his trunk and bring Inigo out with him because the beautiful creature belongs draped around Harry's shoulders – or coiled against his stomach beneath the warm weight of his bedding - and not stuck behind a centimeter of glass.

"Come on girl," he murmurs and holds up his arm for Hedwig to fly to and the weight of her landing carefully on his arm is still enough to make his heart skip a beat. "It's time to go."

He has a train to catch.

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He releases Hedwig before he goes through the barrier, unable to think of a single reason why he should make her sit in her cage for seven or eight hours when she is perfectly capable of flying to Hogwarts on her own. Once she's gone he locks up his trunk, shrinks it down, and secures it in his trouser pocket before casually strolling out into the hustle and bustle of Kings Cross.

"You can do this," he reminds himself and, grabbing hold of the last dregs of Gryffindor bravery swimming around in his veins, he walks forward and into the magical world.

Platform Nine and Three Quarters is exactly as he remembers it from his earliest trips: humming and alive. It's a brilliant chaos of voices and emotion with magic that rubs and curls about his limbs like a friendly cat. It's easier than he thought it would be to slip through the crowds, even with his scar exposed. He's not sure whether it's because he's lacking a trunk to haul around behind him like nearly half of the school aged children are or if it is simply because he is so small for his age that, at first glance, no one quite thinks that he's old enough to even be attending Hogwarts.

A bit of both, probably.

Keeping to the edges of the crowd he skirts around familiar faces – he very nearly stumbles at the sight of a younger Cedric Diggory standing with his parents, his expression caught between fondness and an exasperated eye roll – and makes it to the train without incident. He pauses on the steps though, unable to stop himself from looking back over the gathering student body, at the future of the wizarding world when the future looks bright and not shrouded in death and hopelessness.

He can do this. For them. For him. For the lonely, broken monster abandoned under a bench.

He can.

Sure.

Harry lets out a sigh and, just as he turns to go his gaze is caught from across the platform by a pair of pale blue eyes. For a moment he is frozen, suspended in a single second as his heart begins to pound and his hands begin to sweat as his fingers curl in preparation to catch his wand, a number of curses crowding at the back of his tongue and...

No.

He's an arrogant, entitled arse – perhaps not without good reason, Harry's mind notes – and he's no doubt already done terrible things. But so has Harry. So have a fair number of the people standing on this platform. More even, if he takes in the events of the future or at least, of the future as he lived it.

But right now, at this minute, he hasn't poorly disposed of a horcrux, enabling it to possess an eleven year old girl and set a thousand year old basilisk on a school full of children. He hasn't tried to curse Harry or chased him through the Ministry or spent time in Azkaban or lived night and day with a megalomaniac who is extremely disappointed in his life choices.

Right now he's just an arrogant, entitled, well connected, and bigoted arse who Harry can't say that he actually knows all that much about. But he knows that the world is nearly as black and white as he had believed it or as Dumbledore had painted it.

There is more to life than good and Death Eaters – and he needs to remember that, even if the scrutiny of that ice blue gaze sends him into immediate flight or fight.

Harry blinks. Time moves forward. He forces his fingers to relax, forces a calming breath of air into his lungs, and respectfully inclines his head before he turns on his heel and disappears into the dim interior of the train, leaving Lucius Malfoy to stare after him. No doubt Draco will find him on the train. Again.

Firmly pushing down the urge to find an abandoned compartment, shut himself in, and ward it like he'd had to ward the fucking tent Harry passes through the first few cars, sparing a glance here and there for the already occupied compartments.

Eleven, he reminds himself, he is *eleven*. He is eleven and he's just been introduced to magic. He is eleven and he's apprehensive and excited and awestruck – all of which is actually true, minus the age bit. He is eleven and while the wizarding world is a riot of problems it hasn't reached the boiling point yet. He is eleven and no one is dead yet. Well, no one he knows. No one he feels responsible for.

He is eleven years old and Merlin, if he doesn't get his head out of his arse he might as well as continued to waltz to Dumbledore's whim and gone back and killed what was left of Tom Marvolo Riddle. Or just sat there in that insubstantial train station for eternity and done absolutely nothing. They amount to the same thing, he thinks. As does the constant worry roiling in his gut. He doesn't know how or why – doesn't understand it either – but he has a second chance. And maybe it's not real. Maybe this is all in his head. Maybe he's never left the cupboard at Number Four and everything from magic and Hogwarts forward is nothing but something a shattered mind has conjured up to explain and escape the abuse of his childhood.

But whether it's real or not real he has a chance here. A chance to live his life. A chance that he'll waste if he spends it all worrying that he'll make mistakes. He's Harry bloody Potter. Of course he's going to make mistakes. He just hopes they're not the same ones and that when this life ends – whether it be in six years or sixty – that he doesn't stand at the train station and think of how everything was such a colossal waste.

*What happens next?*

*Why now, my boy, now you get to choose.*

“Pardon, is this seat taken?” he asks politely and watches as the pudgy boy sitting huddled next to the window with his hands clenched in his lap nearly jumps out of his skin.

“Oh, uh, yes... I-I mean n-no,” the boy stammers out as he peeks up at Harry from underneath the neatly combed locks of honey blonde hair that Harry knows will someday darken to a deep, chestnut brown. Harry's pretty sure the boy's gaze doesn't reach higher than

his chin. "You're welcome to s-sit there," he adds after a moment, shoulders rising and straightening in an obvious effort to control his nerves.

"Thanks," Harry tells him with a smile as he slides into the compartment. "I hope you don't mind. There are still a lot of empty compartments but..." he shrugs. "I don't really want to sit alone, you know?" The boy blinks. Harry bites back a sigh. He'd forgotten just how... beaten down the other boy had been in the beginning. As broken as Harry in his own way. "I'm Harry, by the way," he adds, because if this doesn't get a bloody reaction than nothing will. "Harry Potter."

The other boy sits up so fast that he somehow manages to bang the side of his face on the window and – for the first time since they started speaking – looks Harry full in the face. "Y-you a-are ...*Merlin*," the boy breathes, gaze latching on to the scar adorning Harry's forehead. Harry's not sure whether he's pleased at the boy's reaction or disappointed that – once again – it's his scar and all of the ridiculous nonsense attached to it that people see and not the boy that it marks. "Oh!" the boy lets out a squeak after less than a minute of gawking and promptly turns a red to rival a Weasley's hair. "F-forgive me. I didn't mean to stare. Gran says I'm h-hopeless," he offers Harry a small, slightly pained smile as if to say *what can you do?* and holds out hand. "I'm Neville Longbottom."

Neville's hand is trembling and slightly damp but Harry takes it without hesitation. "Pleased to meet you Neville."

That, at least, gets a genuine smile out of the boy.

Well, at least until something dark leaps off his lap and disappears under one of the seats. "Trevor!" Neville cries and dives after him. "Come back!"

Harry has to bite his tongue to keep from laughing and, after a moment, gets down on his knees to help Neville search for his runaway toad. A few minutes and a silent *accio* later Harry holds up his hands. "Got him!" he announces and Neville nearly melts onto the floor with relief.

"Oh, thank Merlin," he mutters as he gathers the toad back into his hands. "Gran would kill me if I lost him." He clutches the toad protectively to his chest and Harry's lips twitch as he watches the other boy stroke his familiar with gentle hands. "I know t-toads aren't terribly popular anymore," he says as he settles back into the seat across from Harry, "b-but I like them. They like to burrow in the earth among lots of green things." The most genuine smile that Harry has ever seen slips across Neville's face.

"You like plants?"

Neville blushes and nods. "Y-yes. Gran says it's not really appropriate b-but I like to follow the gardener around and h-help."

"I like gardening too," Harry puts in and it's even mostly true. Pruning the rose bushes and weeding the flower beds had always been preferable to being stuck indoors with whatever torment his aunt, uncle, and cousin had seen fit to dish out. "But outside of yanking up weeds I'm complete pants at it."

“O-oh... I’m s-sure you’re n-no...” Harry waves away Neville’s protest.

“Complete. Pants. At. It,” he repeats. “Honestly, I have a bad habit of getting lost in thought and then *poof*, before I know it I’ve accidentally pulled up all my aunt’s dahlias. I imagine it will be only worse with plants that move or... whatever. But I bet you’re looking forward to Herbology.”

“I am,” Neville grins again, excitement bubbling over as he adds, “Hogwarts is supposed to have some of the most extensive greenhouses in Britain. They even have a mandrake bed!” And then, just for a moment Harry can see the man Neville becomes, passionate and thoughtful, with a sense of self and a steadiness that Harry had found himself envying more than once. Harry gives his head a little shake, clearing away the ever encroaching fog of thoughts just as Neville asks, “W-what about y-you? Probably looking f-forward to Defense.”

Harry shrugs because, yeah, he kind of is looking forward to defense – though not at all for the reasons Neville is probably thinking. He’s not looking forward to it because he’s some prodigy at defense – he’s good, yeah, but he rather thinks that’s because in the past if he wasn’t good then there was an increasingly good chance that he’d end up dead in some Voldemort driven madness – though he does enjoy it when they have a good professor. Remus had been brilliant and Snape, much as sixteen year old him had despised the man, had been fascinating and insightful. Merlin, even Crouch-as-Moody had been amazing at the job. Bat shit crazy, of course, but amazing.

But no, Harry is not particularly looking forward to Defense this year because of the subject matter or because of Quirrell’s teaching style. No, he’s rather looking forward to the reassurance that what is left of Voldemort is living on the back of the stuttering professor’s head. As terrible and awful and... everything that the man was – had been, would be – Harry can’t help but remember the rush of relief he had felt at seeing the unfaded pink of his scar in the Dursley’s mirror, can’t help but remember the brief weight of an exhausted, abandoned infant in his arms.

But he really can’t tell Neville that, can he? There’s crazy risk taking and then there’s just asking to have Dumbledore try to murder him the moment he steps off the train.

Nor can he tell the other boy that he has no idea what he’s looking forward to, in terms of content, because despite six years of magical education he has never actually had the bloody chance to really discover what subjects he actually *likes*. Each year had been filled with a mystery to solve – an evil or injustice he felt obligated to stop. School had been... secondary. In the end it had been nothing more than something that occasionally taught him how to stay alive while providing busywork to pass the moments between emergencies.

But it’s not like he can tell Neville that either.

So instead he shrugs. “I guess? Honestly, everything sounds really interesting. I still can’t believe magic is *real*.”

And that is not a lie. Not even a little bit.

Neville looks up from Trevor and blinks. “What d-do you...”

The sound of the compartment door sliding open interrupts and both boys look up as two girls peek into the compartment. There's something vaguely familiar about both of them: one taller with strawberry blonde hair pulled back in a braid and cornflower blue eyes, the shorter with rounder features and a beaming smile half hidden behind a cascade of yellow curls.

"Oh, thank Merlin," the taller one of them mutters. "Can we join you?" she asks, already halfway into the compartment, tugging her companion in after her. The train, nearly vacant when Harry had boarded a quarter of an hour ago, is crowded and busy with most of the students having to shout to be heard above everyone else.

"Of course," Harry answers after a quick glance at Neville, who looks a bit like he's gotten a good look at a basilisk in a mirror.

"Thanks! Everything is filling up so fast!" the shorter girl exclaims as she plops down on the bench near Neville. "I'm Hannah, Hannah Abbott."

Huh. No wonder she looks familiar.

"Harry Potter."

The sound of his name brings her head whipping up from where she'd been digging in the bag sitting on her lap so fast that Harry's a bit surprised he doesn't hear her neck crack. "Wow," she breathes after a moment of stunned silence that makes Harry want to fidget awkwardly. "*Wow*," she repeats, a little breathless. "I mean, I knew you would be in our year but..." Her eyes, the same clear blue of a spring sky after rain, stare at him so hard that Harry completely expects to burst into flame. Or have his clothes spontaneously vanished. "...*wow*."

"*Hannah*," the other girl sighs in exasperation, sinking onto the same bench of Harry with a sort of properness that makes Harry blink. "I apologize for her," the girl continues, turning to Harry. "She gets a little star struck and carried away. Susan Bones," she adds, offering Harry her hand in a no-nonsense gesture that Harry takes before he's even aware of it.

She'd been very competent and to the point in the DA too, now that Harry's thinking about it.

Quieter, though.

Of course, that probably had something to do with the fact that her aunt had been – *is* – the Head of the DMLE. Trying to fight evil and corruption from the heart of it, while playing by the rules...

Yeah. Harry would have been quiet too.

"...of the summer was pleasant?"

Harry blinks back to the present in time to see Neville turn an interesting shade of pink and nod his head. "Y-yes. It w-was." For a second it looks like he's going to say something else but then his nerve fails him and he goes back to staring at the toad in his lap.

"So, uh, Neville and I were just talking about what classes we're looking forward to..."

Hannah's face is brightened by a sunny grin. "Charms," she announces without hesitation. "They just seem so useful!"

This time Susan *does* roll her eyes. "Yes, because you'll *never* have to brew a potion in real life."

"I won't!" Hannah insists. "That's what apothecaries are for! If I'm going to be stewing over a flame all day I'd much rather make something that tastes good. I make *the best* lemon drizzle cake," she boasts with a small smile. "Plus," she adds with a poke of her finger at Susan, "cousin Elizabeth lent me some past copies of *Witch Weekly* and mum won't be around to say that I'm too young to look like a hussy if I want to charm on some lipstick."

Susan looks torn between amused and intrigued by that statement and Harry finds himself hiding a smile. It's ridiculous. This whole conversation is ridiculous but there is something... innocent about it. Something pure and hopeful and he soaks it up like a bloody sponge. Like quiet sunsets and the weight of Hedwig on his arm, it's a salve on the weary, broken bits of him.

"Well, *I'm* excited for potions, even if Professor Snape is supposed to be terrifying and strict," Susan confesses. "And Aunt Susan has always been a dab hand at transfiguration. I think she's hoping that I'll follow in her footsteps there." The slight brush of pink across the girl's cheeks says that her aunt isn't the *only* one hoping that. "What about you two?"

"H-herbology," Neville answers instantly and clutches at Trevor tightly enough that his little eyes sort of bug out.

"Everything," Harry answers with a shrug as the girls eyes turn on him. "It's just fascinating and... *amazing* what magic can do." Terrible too. Wonderful and terrible and utterly mad. "I'm sure I'll have a favorite eventually but..." he shrugs again. "It's all a bit brilliant, isn't it?"

With the ice broken the four of them fall into a comfortable get-to-know-you sort of conversation. Well, the three of them, really, but Neville contributes more than Harry thought he would. Or remembers him ever doing during such conversations in the Gryffindor common room. Bloody hell, it'd been their fourth year before Harry had even noticed that Neville liked herbology and even then it only happened because a crazy Death Eater gave the other boy a book in the hopes that Harry would sit up and take a hint about how not to drown in the Black Lake. Which actually hadn't worked. Because Harry is a dunderhead.

Just as the train begins to move they are joined by another first year, a girl who absentmindedly introduces herself as Mandy Brocklehurst as she shoves her dark hair up into a messy knot on top of her head. Harry can't place her for the life of him, which is ridiculous because there's all of thirty-odd students in their year. She definitely hadn't been in Gryffindor or Slytherin *or* the DA. Or played quidditch, which pretty much means that Harry has no bloody idea who she is. Six years attending school with her and he has no idea who this girl is. Knows nothing about her. It takes a great deal of effort not to laugh rather hysterically as the others introduce themselves because apparently if Voldemort had ever bothered to enlist a Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff student to do his dirty work Harry would have



never made it to their confrontation in the Forbidden Forest. Hell, he would have never even seen the attack coming.

Merlin.

Harry manages to exert some measure of control over his emotions just in time to introduce himself. Unlike the others Mandy doesn't melt into a puddle of star struck goo – or exasperation, in the case of Susan – like the others had as he gives his name. Instead, she blinks rather rapidly at him and asks, "Are you really?" before turning to everyone else and asking if they mind if she lets her cat out of its carrier, which then leads to a mad scramble to find some sort of container to hold Trevor.

It's delightfully refreshing.

"H-h-he's got a cage, in m-my t-trunk," Neville stutters out apologetically, "but h-his travel c-carrier was b-broken."

"And you didn't have time to buy a new one?" Susan asks, not unkindly as she digs through her own bag, scowling at the obvious lack of a container suitable for holding a toad.

Neville shrugs and huddles down into the slope of his shoulders. "It w-wasn't b-broken when I g-g-got on the t-train." The three girls promptly pause as they dig through their bags and turn to stare at him, eyes wide. "Some o-older y-years pushed past a-and..." he trails off and stares down at the amphibian clutched between his hands. "I d-didn't w-want him t-to cut h-himself on the broken g-glass."

"Well of course you didn't," Susan murmurs gently, while Mandy presses her lips into a flat frown and glares at the compartment door.

"That's awful!" Hannah tells him and shoves her arm nearly up to her shoulder into the bag that clearly has some space expansion charms on it. "I don't understand why some people are such *idiots*... would this work?" The box clutched in her hands is one of Honeydukes' boxed assortments. One of the larger sizes that advertises *Enough to satisfy an entire quidditch team!* in flashing gold script at the corner of the box. "I mean, I'd have to take the chocolate out of it but we could punch some holes around the sides to let in air..."

"Thank you," Neville whispers and Hannah beams at him. Five minutes later Trevor is settled securely in the chocolate box and sitting on the seat next to Neville and a sleek tortoiseshell colored cat named Thea is investigating the compartment, chirping as she hops up in laps and pokes her nose in bags and in the shadows underneath the benches.

"You should report them when we get to the school," Susan tells the round-faced boy as they ease back into conversation. "The older years that broke the cage," she adds, just in case Neville needs the clarification. The look of horror on Neville's face is enough to make Harry's heart twist.

"N-no... but t-then t-they'll..." he tries to protest and Harry privately agrees with the other boy's fears. He can't picture any of the older students – Gryffindors or Slytherins – that would react well to being told on for something as small as shoving into a first year.

“They could have hurt your familiar,” presses Susan, her face grim. “That’s a serious allegation and you know it.”

Harry blinks. “... what?” He gives his head a little shake. “I mean... it is?”

Susan gives him an odd look. “Of course it is. Even an improperly bonded familiar is an extension of your magic and the bond itself is sacred. One of the oldest bonds there is. To harm another wizard’s familiar is a rather hefty fine at the very least. If the older years had hurt...”

“...T-trevor.”

“...Trevor with their bullying they would have faced suspension. Death would have resulted in their expulsion from Hogwarts and, if they were of age, an Azkaban sentence would not have been out of the question.”

Harry stares, his heart pounding painfully in his chest as he remembers Umbridge’s blatant attack on Hedwig. How had he not known this? How had no one mentioned it? *Why* had no one mentioned it? Why had no one *done something*?

“...Harry?”

“Yeah. Sorry. Still here,” he forces himself to give an awkward laugh. “I just... I didn’t know that.”

“Oh.”

Now Hannah and Mandy are giving him odd looks as well.

That... that’s just bloody great.

Harry sighs and plasters a smile that he’s not sure anyone believes onto his face. “So Mandy, what subject are you looking forward to the most?”

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It takes Draco less than half an hour to find him.

Harry’s not sure why he’s surprised that the platinum haired boy locates him so quickly, but he is. He’s also impressed but he’ll be damned if he mentions *that*.

*Not the Draco you knew. Not the Draco you knew*, he repeats mentally as he and the rest of the compartment spare a glance for the Malfoy heir standing in the doorway, the familiar forms of Crabbe and Goyle filling the area behind him.

“Can we help you?” Susan finally asks, polite, but there’s an unmistakable wariness to her tone.

“They’re saying that Harry Potter is on the train,” Draco’s eyes move over the compartment until they come to rest on Harry’s face. His entire face. That surprises Harry. Or maybe Malfoy’s just received some super posh lessons on how to stare at something without looking like he’s staring at something. It wouldn’t surprise him. “I was just curious if what they were saying was true.”

“It is,” Harry’s heart his hammering away inside his chest and his palms are embarrassingly sweaty but outwardly he’s calm. Or, at least, he thinks he is. He’s not going off like a tea kettle, hissing and spitting and whistling at everything which is, frankly, an improvement over most of his past interactions with Malfoy. *Not the Draco you knew. Not the Draco you knew.* He’s not the Draco that tormented Neville or called Hermione a mudblood or mocked him endlessly through most of their school years. Not the Draco that let Death Eaters into Hogwarts or tried to murder Dumbledore. Not the Draco that won the allegiance of the Elder Wand and in turn lost it to Harry. He’s not that Draco. Not quite. Not yet. Hopefully, not ever.

Harry forces himself to breathe and hold out his hand. “Harry Potter,” he offers and can’t help the way his mouth turns up at the reversal of original events.

The other boy hesitates for just a second, the silvery gray of his eyes assessing Harry for a moment before he seems to nod to himself and step into the compartment, clasping Harry’s hand with his own. “Draco Malfoy. These are Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle,” he motions with his chin to the other boys. “Mind if I join you?”

“But there’s only one seat!” Hannah points out in a bit of a breathless rush. “Sorry. I’m just saying...”

“I know,” Malfoy drawls with a quirk of his eyebrow. He gives the boys behind him another elegant jerk of his head. “Go back to Pansy. She will keep an eye on you until we get to Hogwarts.”

“Is that how you treat your friends?” Harry asks before he can stop himself, the disdain heavy on his lips but the look Malfoy gives him is more quizzical than anything else.

“Friends? They’re not my friends,” Malfoy dismisses with a callousness that Harry can’t – even after *everything* – believe. How dare he? How *dare* he? Of all the arrogant, insufferable...! Crabbe *died* because of him. Them. All of them. Died because he followed a friend into... Harry clenches his fingers in his lap and tries to calm himself, tries to ignore the way the windows are rattling harder in the walls of the train.

Neville notices first, though Harry’s not sure if that’s because he’s sitting the closest to the windows or because he’s just that much more observant than everyone else in the compartment.

Everyone else is just looking at him oddly. Even Mandy, who is absentmindedly batting Thea’s paws away from the wisps of her hair that have escaped the knot on top of her head.

“T-they’re v-v-vassals. H-have been f-for centuries.”

*Vassals?* The word is vaguely familiar, rattling around in Harry's brain as he tries to push past the blinding frustration that Malfoy has always managed to raise in him and the echo of Ron's voice muttering about *slimy gits* and *Slytherins* and *honestly, what did you expect from the ferret?* He's read about that recently. Probably in the enormous book on the Wizengamot and pureblood alliances that is so bloody dry that it makes Binns' class look as exciting as trying to ride a dragon in comparison. Which would be why it's all swimming together in incomprehensible mush that does nothing but leave vague impressions on Harry's mind.

Impressions that aren't very favorable.

"... slaves?" Harry snorts. "Is that supposed to make it *better*?"

Malfoy recoils like he's been struck. "What in Merlin's name are you on about, Potter?" And his tone is so familiar, so like every miserable interaction Harry had ever had with the blonde prat that Harry can feel himself puffing up like a pissed off cat.

*Not the Draco you knew. Not yet,* the reasonable part of his mind tries to repeat but the rest of him is brimful of indignation, like a volatile cauldron one stir away from exploding all over the damn place and earning him a month of detentions.

It's a bloody miracle that he doesn't roll his eyes. "You *just* said..." he begins hotly but Neville interrupts him, his voice quiet and shaking but with a hint of steel.

"Vassals a-aren't s-s-slaves."

Harry jerks in his seat and turns to Neville, blinking. Because he's pretty bloody certain that's... the book... it said... "...what?"

"Vassals are Houses that have surrendered their political autonomy to another House," Mandy butts in, sounding entirely too much like Hermione as she recites the information.

Harry blinks. "...what?"

"Oh, for Merlin's sake," Malfoy takes another step into the compartment and lets the door click shut behind him. "What she means, Potter, is that my family is responsible for their families much like a parent is responsible for their child. Did your tutors not teach you anything?"

"Didn't have tutors," Harry mutters and just like that he feels like a puppet whose strings have been cut and he collapses against the well-worn bench seat, sighing. Clearly, the month spent reading has not made up the difference between what he should know and what little is actually rattling around in his brain. "My apologies," he offers and Draco gives him a short, sharp nod after a moment, confusion still flickering at the corner of his steel gray eyes. The Black eyes, Harry realizes with a start. *Sirius' eyes*. He forgets – *of course*, he forgets – that Draco is related to Sirius as well as Bellatrix. He forgets that he's the only person in this carriage who has lived through a war. Who has been tortured. Hunted. Controlled. He wants to shed the past, to let his former life slip off of him like water off a duck's back, or a snake shedding its skin when it outgrows it. He wants it, but he doesn't need Snape's voice calling him a narrow minded imbecile in the back of his head to realize that such a thing is not going

to happen. He forgets, though. Harry gives his head a little shake. "Of course you can join us."

Draco eyes him warily but then he takes the seat between Harry and Susan, pale fingers absentmindedly rubbing at Thea's ears when she hops up into his lap. The silence is awkward, the six of them sitting there on the edges of their seats and trying not to look at each other too much. Harry bites back a sigh. *Of course* he managed to bollocks everything up.

"So, what subject are you looking forward to?" Hannah asks just as Harry is contemplating throwing himself from the moving train and being done with it all. Draco looks a little taken back at the bubbly cheerfulness in the girl's voice and looks around like he can't quite believe that she's talking to him. "We've all answered. I'm excited for Charms and Susan for Potions and Transfiguration. Neville likes Herbology and Mandy's rather keen on History. Harry here thinks everything is brilliant," and Harry can't stop the blush that burns at his cheeks when she rolls her eyes and winks at him. "So what about you?"

After a moment of hesitation Draco confesses, "I like to fly, but going through the intro classes will be a bore. I... potions, I suppose. My godfather is a Potions Master and is the professor at Hogwarts and he's been teaching me the basics. I enjoy it."

"Professor Snape is your godfather?" Susan asks, eyes round as bludgers, and Harry blesses her for her question because it means that he doesn't have to ask it and inevitably have it come out insulting. Or something.

Frankly, he's just grateful that his mouth isn't hanging open like a bloody fly trap.

Instead, he fights the urge to laugh rather hysterically because that makes so much sense. A horrible, twisted sort of sense.

And yet, at the same time, it doesn't. It doesn't at all. Snape's a half-blood, brilliant, but from a poor background. And he'd have been young, not much more than twenty, when Draco was born. A Death Eater, sure, but only for a couple of years at most, for all that he'd likely been friends with many of them in the years proceeding. So what had made Lucius bloody Malfoy, one of the most arrogant, influential blood supremists that Harry had known name a poor half-blood with limited connections as his heir's godfather?

*There is more to life than good and Death Eaters.*

At this rate, he should get it tattooed across his bloody forehead so that he stops being surprised every time the world illustrates it to him.

"...he as strict as everyone says?" Susan continues as he stares at Draco. *Fascinated by Malfoy*, he thinks rather hysterically, *and Snape. Apparently true in both lives.*

A fond sort of smirk breaks across Draco's narrow features. "Merlin, probably worse," he admits with a shrug. "He takes potions *very* seriously. Bit of advice? Memorize his syllabus and don't ever show up to class unprepared. He has no tolerance for stupidity or lack of effort."

It is, all things considered, probably the best advice Harry has ever heard.

Merlin help him, he should probably listen to it.

---

Despite the rough start and the initial wariness the others in the compartment clearly felt at Draco's presence the rest of the train ride is smooth and... pleasant. Surprisingly so. His first train ride had been filled with excitement and apprehension and the hot flash flare of indignation mixed with the absolute glee bubbling in his veins. And that's all still there, but in different quantities: the same ingredients blended together to make a cake where once he had made biscuits. It is unsettling. It is exhilarating. It is...

Harry doesn't know what it is but he thinks he might like it. Maybe. Probably.

Regardless of how he feels about it though he suspects that the rest of his life is going to feel this way. Or at least the next six or seven years – all the same ingredients mixed up and formed into something completely different and new.

Hopefully something better.

Letting a small smile pull at the corner of his mouth, Harry follows the rest of their little group from their compartment and off the train into the chilly night air.

"Firs' years! Firs' years, over here!" Hagrid's booming voice is enough to make him shiver. "C'mon now, follow me! Firs' years, this way! You'll get yer first glimpse o' Hogwarts in a moment. Just come..."

Like a herd of nervous unicorns, all gangly and innocent, the eleven-year-olds cautiously peel away from the chaos of the older students swarming across the platform and follow the half giant's instructions and waving hand, letting their feet carry them down a well-worn path and around a curve to the Black Lake. Harry follows along behind them with Neville at his side and the rest just in front of them, a mixture of apprehension and longing beating away at the inside of his chest. Even the others are quiet, eyes wide as they peer through the darkness to catch their first glimpse of the castle.

There.

Proud. Whole. Weathered stone walls and sweeping turrets and hundreds of windows glowing gold against the great expanse of the starry sky.

Hogwarts.

## Chapter End Notes

I feel like so much of this chapter can be summed up with, "Harry, bless his heart, he tries."

Next chapter will be the Sorting Ceremony :)

# Six

## Chapter Notes

Still here. Still alive. Still picking away at all of my writing projects. Thank you for all of your continued support. It makes me grin like a loon.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Walking through the doors of Hogwarts is one of the strangest things that Harry has ever done. Which is an odd thought to think because Harry's life has been nothing but a long chain of strange things, each one more bizarre than the last. But still, it is true.

This isn't *being hunted and killed by a supervillain* strange or even *left with the milk on my aunt's doorstep by an eccentric old man and a woman who can change into a cat* strange.

This isn't *my hair never stays cut* or *I can speak to snakes* strange. It's not even *yer a wizard, Harry* strange or the inevitable feast of strangeness that comes with living in an old magical castle.

It's not even *I died and suddenly found myself seven years in the past* strange, though that, Harry thinks, probably comes the closest.

It's the strangeness of standing – *seeing, feeling* – two different things at once.

The entrance hall is pristine and brightly lit, long cream tapers floating in the air above his head and sconces full of fire flickering against ancient stone walls but in his mind he sees the memory of the last time he was here – of half destroyed walls and stones streaked and crackling with the remnants of fired spells. Of blood, pooled and tacky on the floor, barely visible in the dim, dust filled light – and the juxtaposition of memory and reality is nearly enough to take him to his knees.

Draco, of all people, notices.

“You okay there, Potter?” he asks, grabbing Harry by the elbow and Harry... Harry is not fine. He is not fine at all. He flinches at the touch, barely aborting the reflexive grab for his wand and the hex that fills his mouth until it practically chokes him. Instead, he shakes beneath Malfoy's touch and forces himself to inhale through clenched teeth until his lungs feel like bursting.

“Yeah,” he tries to pass off as soon as he feels like he can speak without screaming. “Just a little lightheaded. Probably didn't eat enough on the train.” As far as excuses go it's true enough. He had taken a piece of the chocolate that Hannah had passed around after emptying the box for Trevor but he hadn't eat much more than half a cauldron cake during the rest of



the train ride despite the fact that he and Draco had bought a ridiculous amount of snacks and sweets off the trolley to share amongst their compartment.

He had pointedly refused to open any of the chocolate frogs.

Draco narrows his eyes suspiciously but Harry is saved from having to find a better excuse by a familiar voice shouting, “Potter? *The* Harry Potter?”

And just like that the entire group of First Years falls silent and swivels towards him.

Thanks, Ron.

The redhead in question shoves his way forward and Merlin, Harry had forgotten how little eleven year old Ron is. He’s always been tall and gangly with long limbs that had – *would*, someday – make him an incredible Keeper but right now he’s awkward and round faced with a bit of dirt on his nose and a coltish, unfinished look about him. “Blimey,” he breathes out, staring at Harry’s exposed forehead with fascination that makes Harry shift uncomfortably. “Look at it! Is that where You-Know-Who...?”

“...tried to kill me after murdering my parents?” Harry asks quietly. “Yeah.” There’s a sound like rushing water in his ears but for now, for this moment, he can’t take his eyes off the boy who was the first child to ever treat him with a modicum of kindness. He’s so *young*. But he’s also so terribly, consistently *Ron* and just like the hall around them the memory of the man who had walked into battle at his side, who had helped him break into Gringotts, who had *turned away and left him* – more than once – imposes itself over the child he’s faced with.

“Wicked,” the boy reaches out towards Harry’s head and Harry jerks away. Violently. Violently enough that he ended up on his arse despite Draco’s last minute effort to haul him up by his elbow.

“Harry!” Hannah is at his side in a flurry of blonde curls, her eyes wide with concern. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” he reassures her and he is. He is fine. His tailbone is throbbing but not enough to signal any actual bruising to his flesh – just his bloody pride – and thirteen years of being hauled around by Uncle Vernon like a bag of rubbish has given him ample experience with the tingly pain in his arm. It will go away soon enough. His magic will see to it, if nothing else.

“Oh good. I was really worried,” and that, *that* catches Harry off guard because he’ll never not be surprised when someone is worried over him. Hermione had, upon occasion, expressed concern over his well being but it had always, *inevitably* been followed up with lectures and berating about how he needed to be more careful, about how it was his fault in the first place and if he would only *just think*.

Which, if he’s being perfectly honest – and he’s trying, Merlin, he’s *trying* to be honest these days. At least with himself – she was usually right. But still, making him feel like he’s an inch tall and of lesser intelligence than the average garden gnome sort of ruins the warmth of concern. In his opinion, anyway.

“And *you*...!” Hannah rounds on a gaping Ronald Weasley with the force of a small tornado. “What are you doing, grabbing at people’s faces! Did your mother not teach you any manners?”

Beside him, Draco sniggers and Ron turns a bright red that clashes horribly with his hair.

Harry sighs.

Still, the sight of Ron Weasley and Draco Malfoy reduced to staring at each other like something disgusting found buried under a literal ton of thestral shit is refreshing in its normality. Grounding, even, and Harry calmly accepts Draco’s offered hand and lets the other boy help pull him to his feet. The interaction makes the color on Ron’s face darken, the almost purple hue creeping up to the tip of his ears as he stares. *The danger color*, Harry notes absentmindedly. The color that indicates that the red head is approximately half a second away from losing his temper. And sure enough...

“*You*...!” he stabs his finger angrily at Draco, only missing shoving the blond in the chest because Draco is smart enough to step out of the way. Something he accomplishes with much more grace than Harry managed.

“Is something the matter, gentlemen?”

Whether he’s eleven or seventeen Minerva McGonagall’s voice is enough to make him snap to attention and fervently wonder if his hair is combed and his shirt tucked in while simultaneously panicking because he automatically feels like he’s running fifteen minutes late and he’s forgotten to finish his homework.

She looks younger than he remembers. Which seems a stupid thought to have but McGonagall had always seemed unchanging: a stern, constant presence from year to year.

He wonders what she sees when she looks at him. Does she stare at his face and see his parents’ lives laid over his features just as he sees a different future lying over hers?

Time travel, Harry decides, is going to make him lose his bloody mind.

“No professor,” he replies politely, ignoring the way Draco stiffens next to him and both Susan and Hannah make some sort of disagreeing noise in their throats. “Just a little jostling in our hurry to get up the stairs.”

She doesn’t believe him, of course. He doubts McGonagall has ever believed a single excuse he’s ever given her – truthful or not. Harry’s a bloody terrible liar. Always has been. It’s an unfortunate byproduct of spending most of his life shoved into a closet or distant room pretending he doesn’t exist. There’s no need to control your facial expressions if no one ever sees you.

It’s on his list of things to correct about himself. Not that he really *wants* to be a liar but he figures it’s probably unavoidable at this point. What with the whole time travel mess.

Harry sighs as McGonagall gives them a curt nod and sweeps past them to take her place in front of the doors leading to the great hall.

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If being in the entrance hall had almost brought Harry to his knees, stepping into the great hall is a thousand times worse. He gags at the room he's always associated with home, with *belonging*, and his heart hammers in his chest so fast that he can't breathe. He can't breathe and he can't hear anything over the rushing of his blood and his hands are cold, so cold, as he clenches them in the pockets of his robes in a desperate attempt to keep himself from falling to the ground and being violently ill. The great hall has always been one of the most wonderful things he's ever seen and vaguely he can hear Hermione's familiar voice nattering on about how the ceiling is enchanted and he wants to put his face in his hands and laugh and laugh and laugh.

Or sob.

Mostly sob.

Because there, there where the Hufflepuff table ends before the head table that's where the Weasley's were gathered. That's where Fred lay. Where Mrs. Weasley sobbed. Where George sat blank faced and empty, half of him torn away.

And there. There, right about where Cho Chang and Marietta Edgecomb – bloody hell, but they're so young – that's where Remus and Tonks lay.

And little Colin Creevey, just there, with half his torso blasted away and Lavender Brown with her throat torn out and her body mauled almost beyond recognition.

And... and...

He recounts the names, one after another, remembers the faces and the blood and the cries and the stillness and how he had just stood there – just stood *here* in this bloody spot – and watched and...

... and he'd left. He'd left them all because it was his fault. His fault and Voldemort's and Albus Dumbledore's and...

He'd died, hadn't he?

Just like everyone else.

But here he is.

And they're not dead yet.

“... H-h-harry?”

Harry blinks.

The great hall swims back into focus in a riot of color and noise. Tapestries in the house emblems cover stone walls. Hundreds, if not thousands, of candles float in the air. The shuffle of feet, the jostling of limbs, the whisper of conversation and the tinkling of giggles half hidden behind hands raised to lips hit him like a wave. Somewhere, Hermione is still lecturing. He wonders which poor bastard is having to listen to her regurgitate a chapter of *Hogwarts: A History* in her excitement. The four long tables gleam in the candlelight, their benches are filled with black robed children and young adults and not replaced with rows of corpses.

*They're not dead yet*, his mind repeats frantically, his heart beating it in a frantic tattoo against his ribcage. *They're not dead yet*.

"I'm fine," he manages. He's not, of course. He's not fine. It's probably even obvious that he's not fine. He's still standing in the doorway like someone has hit him with a sticking charm and his little group, formed by a seven hour train ride, has not left him even though the rest of the first years are halfway to the front of the hall.

Draco and Susan and even Neville make disagreeing noises and Mandy fixes him with a look that can only be termed *exasperated disbelief*.

"You're not," Hannah tells him bluntly. "I said that you needed to eat more!" And she had, back when he had been nibbling on a cauldron cake and nothing else. She's already digging in the pockets of her robes and she lets out a small cry of triumph as she finds something and pulls it out.

A chocolate frog.

Harry sighs but he takes the wiggling treat from her and bites its head off with a frustrated sort of viciousness that bubbles in his gut.

The chocolate is delicious, melting across his tongue and hitting his stomach like some sort of warm hug.

The card is Dumbledore.

Some things, apparently, are inevitable.

But not everything, Harry thinks as he spots Lavender's glossy blonde curls bouncing across her shoulders.

They're not dead yet and Harry needs to get his bloody act together if he wants them to stay that way.

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The sorting, at first, goes pretty much how Harry remembers it.

Or rather, he thinks it does. He hadn't really paid that much attention the first time. He'd been too busy quietly freaking out.

Hannah and Susan are both sorted into Hufflepuff. Mandy, apparently, is a Ravenclaw and well pleased with it. Hermione spends almost five minutes under the Sorting Hat before it announces "*GRYFFINDOR!*" and Harry wonders if she had to convince it to put her there, like he had. If it had to tried to shout "Ravenclaw" the moment it touched her head but she'd overridden it, laying out a verbose, carefully formulated argument for the house of the lion. It's not something he had ever bothered to ask. Maybe he'll get around to it this time. Eventually.

Neville also ends up in Gryffindor and, like last time, stunned and bewildered he runs halfway to the table with the hat on his head.

When McGonagall calls Draco's name he saunters up to the stool and is promptly sorted into Slytherin.

He draws more notice now that the protective ring of friends – are they friends yet? He thinks they might be and Merlin, the thought of being friends with Draco makes his head spin – has vanished. Ron's continued gaping, interspersed with not so silent exclamations of "Bloody hell!" and the occasional confused look only exasperates the situation. It's not long before the entire hall is whispering behind their hands and pointing in his direction, necks craning as people contort themselves to get a glimpse of the mark on his head.

Harry ignores them. Or at least he tries to, fisting his hands in his robes to stop himself from reflexively patting his hair down over his scar.

And then...

"Potter, Harry!"

The whispers explode into a cacophony of excited exclamations and there's several people that lean out from the benches – Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw both – to try and touch him as he walks past. He shudders and slips away from their fingers with the grace of someone who has spent their life running and gingerly perches on the stool at the front of the Great Hall.

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*Well, well, well. What do we have here?*

*"Not Gryffindor. Not Gryffindor. Not Gryffindor,"* Harry chants as the brim of the sorting hat settles against his head.

*Not Gryffindor? I must admit that's not a request I receive very often. Are you sure? Bravery and boldness— you've got them in spades. Godric would have liked you.*

*“Not Gryffindor,” Harry repeats firmly. Not again.*

*Not again, hmm? You time travel lot are always so fascinating. So many complexities. So many stories inside your head.*

*“Not Gry... wait. You’ve had other time travelers? This has happened before?”* The force of the relief sliding through his veins makes him slump momentarily on the stool. It’s not just him then. He’s not a freak. It’s happened before.

*Oh, but of course. Not very often, mind, but there’s probably one every hundred years or so. It’s always a treat to be sat on a head and find that I’ve already sorted it.*

*“... it is?”*

*Of course it is. I get to see if I was right. It’s difficult, quite difficult you see, to try and force an eleven-year-old into a box. So many possibilities at eleven. So much potential.*

*“And where you? Right?”* Harry can’t stop himself from asking. Terrified and exhilarated all at the same time over what the hat’s answer might be. *“About me?”*

*I told you, Mr. Potter, that Godric would have liked you. There’s a great deal of bravery in you. You’re bold. You’ve got an impressive streak of chivalry and forthrightness. All very good qualities to have. So you tell me – was I right to give you to the lions?*

Harry swallows roughly. *“You’re in my head,”* he points out. *“You already know what I think.”*

*Not Gryffindor.*

*“Not Gryffindor,”* Harry agrees. Saying it out loud – *admitting* it to someone beside himself and his familiars – is like lancing an infected wound: a sharp, burning burst of pain and pleasure followed by nothing but the heavy weight of relief.

*So, then, where do I put you this time? You know the value of hard work and your loyalty – you have done some great and terrible things in the name of loyalty, Mr. Potter. But it has been stretched too far, I think. No – Hufflepuff is not for you. Let’s see. You’ve a decent mind and your newfound thirst for knowledge is commendable. In Ravenclaw you would get to stretch your wings. Be given a chance to explore new depths without quite so many people taking notice. Oh yes, you would do quite well there. On the other hand, I stand by my first assessment: you could be great in Slytherin and there, I think, you’ll find true friendship.*

Draco’s face swims before his eyes as it is now: young and soft faced with just the evidence of the devastatingly sharp cheekbones and chin that he’ll grow into in the coming years. They’ve always been something, he and Malfoy. Two sides of the same coin. Reckless, snarling rivals who promptly lose all sense in the face of the other. He knows how to be the other boy’s enemy. It’s easy. Like breathing. Harry wonders if being his friend will be the same way.

*...and I don’t just mean young Mr. Malfoy. Or even the other denizens of the snake den.*

A pertinent reminder, Harry knows. It's hard to shake those first impressions, those certainties formed at eleven when the world is black and white and simple. Or, at least he has always found it so. Is finding it so.

*"Figured it out then? Where I'm going?"* He's not sure how long he's been sitting on the stool with the Sorting Hat perched on his head but it's been long enough that he can hear the Great Hall growing restless. Even McGonagall is shifting. He can't hear her, mind, but he can see the bottoms of her robes twitching just enough to make him think that she's shifting from foot to foot in quiet concern. Or anticipation. Everyone expects Gryffindor after all.

*Mr. Potter, I knew where you were going thirty seconds after I sat on your head. After all, there's only one place for someone with enough ambition to remake the world to suit his desires. Better be...*

"...SLYTHERIN!"

The roar of the Sorting Hat silences the Great Hall. For an entire minute no one speaks. No one moves. Harry's beginning to suspect that no one is even *breathing*.

Bloody hell.

And then, just as he's setting the hat back on the stool – because McGonagall utterly fails to take it out of his hands when he offers it to her – a single, steady clap shatters the stillness and makes McGonagall visibly start at the noise. Harry's lips curl up in a small smile at Draco's politely restrained enthusiasm. Neville applauds as well, though the pudgy faced boy looks a bit like someone has hit him between the eyes with a hammer. From there it ripples outwards until most of the students are at least attempting to be polite about the whole thing, though Harry is pretty sure he hears Ron let out a strangled *"What?!"* from where he's waiting for his own turn beneath the hat.

"You're going to be trouble, aren't you Potter?" Draco drawls as Harry sits down next to him and Harry can't help but laugh.

"Probably," he admits honestly and Draco lets out a laugh of his own.

"Let me introduce you," he says and begins with Crabbe, who is sitting on the blonde's other side.

By the time he is done Harry has officially met the rest of the first year Slytherins (Zabini slides onto the bench and holds out his hand just as Draco drawls his name, perfectly composed and like the whole thing had been choreographed) and several of the older students. Most of them survey him with the cold, unfeeling politeness that had driven him mad over the past seven years but only two of them eye him with the open hostility that he's expecting. Harry remembers nothing about Cassius Warrington besides the fact that he had joined the Slytherin quidditch team as a Chaser in Harry's third year but the enormous third year, with shoulders nearly as broad as Harry is tall, glares at him from underneath thick brown eyebrows and refuses to speak to him. Pansy acknowledges him with a clipped "Pansy Parkinson" and more or less looks like he's a steaming pile of hippogriff shit that's been shoved onto her plate. Or maybe that's just her nose. Regardless, she clearly has no idea how

to react to the fact that he's sitting across from her – or, more accurately, sitting *next* to Draco who is treating him as if he's known Harry his entire life instead of just the one day.

The welcoming feast is both the same and different than he remembers it. Dumbledore gives his welcome speech complete with his ridiculous, curiosity inspiring warning about the third floor corridor. Harry refuses to look any higher than the wispy, fluffy strands of the man's beard. The food is as fantastic as Harry remembers and while he's not quite the starved child that he had been last time it's been months and months since he had a warm meal of this magnitude and he lets out a nearly indecent groan at the bite of roast that practically dissolves on his tongue. Merlin, that's the best thing he's tasted since... since Bill and Fleur's wedding, if he's being honest.

"So this must have been a shock," Zabini observes and Harry blinks.

"What's a shock?"

"Being sorted into Slytherin. Your parents were Gryffindors," the other boy points out and Harry finds himself blinking again, confused at the bluntness.

"I've never known my parents," he finally answers because he can't tell them that he had been sorted here on purpose, can't tell them that he all but *asked* for the snake pit. He can't tell them that he's not a Gryffindor – because he is, *was* – or that he's so, *so* done with viewing the world through a lens decided by an enchanted hat and the brain of a nervous eleven year old but that he's not sure he'll be able to stop himself from doing it either. He can't tell them that the bravest man he's ever known is a Slytherin and that the most manipulative, cunning man he's ever met is a Gryffindor – or that both of them are sitting at the staff table. He can't tell them that, the opinion of the Sorting Hat aside, he'd have picked Slytherin because a Slytherin Boy-Who-Lived will create the biggest uproar. That he's here because even a month later he is so *angry* that he can hardly think sometimes and that this – this most unexpected of happenings – is his silent, two fingered salute to Albus Dumbledore and to the whole of the wizarding world for spending the last ten years (*the next seven years*) building him into some sort of savior and spinning fairy tales around his name while he starved in a bloody cupboard.

Harry takes a deep breath and forces himself to stop thinking. To stop *remembering*.

"I don't even know what they look like," he admits to cover the long period of silence. It's not even a lie. The real eleven-year-old him had never seen a picture of them or been able to remember their faces. Just their screams and the color of the curse that killed them. "Or I didn't until I read about them in *Important Wizards of Witches of the Twentieth Century*. There was a picture."

Beside him Draco stiffens and across from him Daphne Greengrass stares at him, brows furrowed. "What do you mean you..." she begins but then stops, her jaw snapping shut with an audible click as she glances furtively at the hall around them. "I will have to write to my mother," she says instead. "My parents were in different houses and a few years ahead of yours but at the very least there will be pictures in some of their yearbooks – or the society papers from when their engagement was announced and from their wedding."



Harry nods numbly. Gratefully.

*Society papers?* He echoes internally. Why would their engagement and wedding be in the paper? They weren't anything special. They weren't...

...but they were, weren't they? Or his father had been, at least. Not a member of the nobility, Urggrat had told him, but still the only child of a wealthy and ancient line. Still the son of a respected and influential family.

It's weird to think of any acclaim attached to his name that isn't part of the Boy-Who-Lived nonsense. It leaves him wrong footed – unsettled and vulnerable. It's become a familiar sensation, one that inevitably sweeps over him nearly every time he opens up a damn book and deigns to learn something more than the minimum needed to pass his exams. He definitely owes original Hermione an apology. Or something.

"I'd be grateful."

"Do you really not know?" Pansy hisses across the table, ignoring the steely looks that Draco and Daphne promptly turn on her.

"I didn't even know my dad's name until this summer," he hisses back and that actually stuns her, he thinks. It certainly does everyone else. He's careful not to draw attention to the Ravenclaws sitting behind Pansy who suddenly has eyes the size of dinner plates. "I don't know anything about them," he repeats more calmly because he's not that person anymore. *He's not*. He's not going to blow his top every time he gets frustrated or annoyed. He's not, he's not, he's *not*.

Maybe if he repeats it enough he'll actually remember it.

Unlikely, but he can hope.

"Most of what I know I read in a book," Harry returns his attention to Zabini, "So you'll understand that it's hard to be shocked for failing to meet an expectation that I didn't even know existed."

The dark eyed boy shrugs. "That's fair," he agrees calmly, though Harry is not dumb enough to think that Zabini's done with him yet. "Pass the potatoes?"

And Harry does, content to fade into the background and listen to the familiar – if different – hum of the Great Hall ebb and flow around him. Inside, he breathes a small sigh of relief. Things are far from over yet – he hasn't even made it through the first *day* – but he's here. He's in Slytherin. Things are different.

They have to be.

*They will be.*

He lets his eyes flicker to the staff table, to the man sitting next to Snape's familiar form with the ridiculous purple turban that is almost garish next to the potion master's unrelieved black. Quirrell meets his gaze and for a moment, *just a moment*, the scar on his head burns. Once he

thought it pain but he's felt true pains since then. He's broken and regrown bones. He's nearly had his soul sucked out. He's been tied up and maimed. He's felt the cruciatus curling through his veins and ripping at his muscles. He's watched loved ones die. He's been betrayed. He's died. So today, this time, it doesn't hurt. It doesn't hurt at all. This time he feels the warmth of it all the way down to his bones.

Harry smiles.

*Different*, he promises and with a nod of his head he goes back to his pot roast.

## Chapter End Notes

Since I've had some questions on whether this fic will include character bashing I thought I would address this here: the short answer is "no". The longer answer is "it depends on what you, personally, qualify as character bashing". For instance, I have a very love-hate relationship with Ron. On a personal, fundamental level I quite dislike him. Based upon the qualities that I value (demand?) in my personal friendships (chief among them: loyalty and a certain level of understanding/empathy/open mindedness) he makes a poor friend. Where I Harry, I would have dropped him utterly and irrevocably as a friend after his reaction to my being entered in the Triwizard Tournament (and that's only if flares of bigotry and jealousy hadn't made me snap and strangle him in his sleep before then). On the other hand, I love Ron because I think he is one of the most realistic, unerringly *human* characters of the entire series.

So no, there will not be any blatant (as I think of it) character bashing but Harry is no longer canon!harry and he's going to think both badly and well of canon!characters (even himself). He's slipped out of this idea of light vs dark, good vs bad, white vs black mindset and is settling deep into the murky grays of ambiguous morality.

Also, Harry's default state is still currently "when in doubt, do the exact opposite of what he did before". He knows he doesn't like how things already played out but realizes that he lacks the knowledge (and the practiced cunning) needed to manipulate things toward a specific end. Especially because he's not all sure what specifics he wants to end up with. At this point he is trying to find himself, recover from the trauma of the past sixteen years, and - more than anything else - break the patterns that form the life he has already lived.

# Seven

## Chapter Notes

This chapter is 80% pure self indulgence, 17% Harry freaking the fuck out, and 3% Harry freaking out other Slytherins.

Back in his second year when he and Ron has snuck into the Slytherin common room disguised as Crabbe and Goyle he hadn't really paid attention to the décor. It was the Slytherin common room, right? Located in the dungeons, at least partially under the Black Lake, it had been cold, dark, and dim: the perfect nest for budding dark wizards with lots of green, silver, and snakes. It hadn't been worth noticing. Not when they were there to prove that Draco was the Heir of Slytherin and doing his fucking best to attack and kill muggleborns.

Except Draco hadn't been the Heir of Slytherin.

And the common room is nothing like he remembers it.

Well, no, that's not quite true.

It is located in the dungeons and it is at least partially under the lake. There is a lot of green and silver (but, to be fair, the Gryffindor common room is a lot of scarlet and gold) and there are some decorative snakes here and there.

But that's the extent of the similarities between reality and his memory of the place.

"Wow." Harry pauses just inside the common room entrance and stares. It is bigger than the Gryffindor common room, perhaps closer to the size of the great hall, and the bulk of the wall opposite the entrance is taken up by a floor to ceiling window that looks out into the depths of the lake. The ceilings are taller than he remembers them but not so tall as to make the room seem cavernous and the walls are painted a soft gray. There are plush rugs in green and gray laid across the cold stone floors and fireplaces flanked by staircases on the walls perpendicular to the entrance. Sofas and elegant, if comfortable looking, armchairs in black leather and green velvet are arranged in small groupings around the room. Several tables fill the space between the entrance and the window, chairs neatly pushed in and several books sit on a small raised shelf in the center of the table.

All in all, it is a comfortable space – airy and warm and cozy and Harry thinks it is quite possible that he might never want to leave this room again. The Gryffindor common room had been pleasant and comforting in its familiarity but it had also often felt packed beyond capacity with no place to escape to. Here, Harry is barely five feet in the door and already he can spot several promising hiding-in-plain-sight spots.

For someone who has never quite gotten over ten plus years of being shoved into dark spaces and told that he didn't exist it's remarkably reassuring to have places to hide.

Gryffindor had been that favorite sweater that is loved because of all the good memories it holds but it makes you itch when you put it on. Maybe Slytherin will be something better. The Sorting Hat had seemed to think so.

It will be different, at least, and that alone makes something ease in Harry's chest.

"Brilliant, isn't it?" Draco grins as he catches sight of Harry's face.

"Yeah," Harry agrees. "It really is."

Once all of the first years had stood around and looked at the common room for several minutes the fifth year prefects led them further into the room until they all huddled together like little lost ducklings waiting for directions. Which, Harry supposes, is true enough.

"Alright first years, gather round and listen up," one of the prefects instructs as he leans against the back of a black leather couch, one arm crossed over his chest and the other lazily waving in the air to indicate where they're supposed to go. Beside him the other prefect, an attractive girl with dark chestnut hair done up in a series of complicated looking braids and dark brown eyes, smiles kindly at them.

"First of all," she begins, "welcome to Slytherin House. My name is Gemma Fawley and I am one of the fifth year prefects for this year. My counterpart here is Maxen Travers. Our head of house is Potions Master Severus Snape and he will join us shortly to give his beginning of the year speech. Before he does that though let us go over some of the basics, shall we? This, as you might have gathered, is our common room and will be your home here at Hogwarts." She motions to the room around them. "Boys dormitories are on the south wall, to your left, and girls dormitories are on your right. Both are accessed by the staircases to the west side of the fireplaces..."

"... that's the side closest to the windows," Travers interjects, apparently having caught Crabbe and Goyle's rather blank stares.

"... and your belongings have already been taken to your quarters. Of the other staircases this one," Gemma points to the staircase on the other side of the fireplace next to the girls' dorms, "leads towards the Depository. You are welcome to make use of the resources there while working on homework and personal projects but the books are not allowed to leave the room. In fact, they are charmed and hexed not to and any attempts to do so will be met with increasingly nasty consequences..."

Harry feels the corner of his mouth twitch involuntarily. That sounds more like the Slytherin that he knows. The small dose of expected viciousness is steadying. The whole day has been terrifying and exhilarating; gut churning and heart wrenching. This little bit of normalcy is... well, it reminds him that he hasn't fallen sideways into some backwards dimension.

Though, given how little (nothing, absolutely nothing) he knows about this whole time travel mess that he's stumbled into he supposes that such a thing could be a distinct possibility.

But he's assuming not. Because assuming not means that his head hurts less.

"This staircase," Gemma continues as she turns to point at the final staircase, "is access to Professor Snape's office. In addition to his public office hours he holds additional hours in the evenings and on the weekends for members of his house. There is also a private potions lab that is used for additional tutoring and can be reserved by individuals or groups for work on various projects. In case of an emergency, there is a portrait at the end of the hall that has a duplicate hanging in the professor's personal quarters so that we might contact him during the off hours."

Harry stares. He's staring. He knows he is. He's staring and it's obvious and someone is going to notice and...

He inhales sharply and offers Draco a reassuring smile when the platinum haired boy gives him a look that is somewhere between concerned and suspicious.

Harry is pretty certain that the number of times he has seen McGonagall in her capacity of Head-of-House can be counted on one hand with numerous fingers left over. In fact, he can think of exactly two times: when he was given a spot on the Gryffindor quidditch team and when he met with her during his fifth year for his career counseling. And honestly, he'd kind of always assumed that that was the way it was for all the houses.

If he'd *had* to pick a Head of House for a "Most Likely to Act Like an Actual Parent" award he would have probably picked Sprout... because Hufflepuff. He certainly wouldn't have picked *Snape* of all people.

*Because clearly you knew Snape so well*, he mutters to himself and barely manages not to roll his eyes.

That would be a bad first impression to make on the rest of his new House.

"Now if I might direct your attention behind you," Travers drawls, oblivious to the fact that he and Gemma Fawley are kicking the foundations out of Harry's world just as surely as Snape and Dumbledore had done six weeks ago. As one the first years turn and find themselves staring to a large cork board hung to the left of the common room entrance and divided into two sections by what Harry suspects is an actual silver frame. "This is the bulletin board. The large section on the left is for student led announcements: the formation of study group, the quidditch schedule, classified ads, and party announcements – that sort of thing. The section on the right is reserved for notifications to the entire house: official communications like exam schedules, and messages from Professor Snape. This is where you will find the password that allows you entrance. It is changed every two weeks. You are not to give it out or write it down. If you cannot remember it, seek out one of your housemates or one of the Slytherin Prefects. Students that are not members of Slytherin are not allowed in at any time. If you have siblings in other houses there is a sitting room that is available for that purpose just down the corridor and to the left." Travers motions at the common room entrance.

"Besides the password, the other important thing of note up there currently are the sign-ups for the beginning of the year physicals. These are mandatory so make sure to sign up..."

“...because if you don’t, Professor Snape will drag you out of your bed in the middle of the night to make sure it gets done. You won’t like it, he *really* won’t like it and you’ll find yourself scrubbing cauldrons quicker than you can say ‘quidditch’.” Travers’ voice has a distinct *ask me how I know* edge to it.

Several of the first years shift uncomfortably around him and Harry can’t decide if they’re apprehensive over the idea of scrubbing cauldrons like a mere muggle or the idea of having to have a physical.

Oh, Merlin. He’s going to have to have a physical.

Bloody, bugging *fuck*.

If he’d been sorted into Slytherin the first time around this announcement would have terrified him down to his very bones. Because people would *know*. They’d know how the Dursley’s treated him. They’d see the bruise on his arm from where Vernon had dragged him around. They’d have been able to count his ribs rising like mountains from beneath the too pale stretch of his skin.

(They’d know. They’d know he was a *freak*. That he was *worthless* and *good for nothing* – *just like his parents!*)

Fuck, he’s still terrified. In no small part because he can hear six years of Snape berating him for being like James overlaying ten years of being told his father had been a worthless drunk who had gotten he and his equally worthless mom killed in a car crash. *Unnatural. Worthless. Freak*. He can still hear the words beating a staccato around the inside of his skull.

But his unfortunate treatment at the Dursley’s hands are, he feels, the least of his problems in this instance.

The goblins had known.

The goblins had *known*. It had been in his blood, in his magic, that he had traveled through time. Would it show up on whatever tests Madam Pomfrey – he assumes, anyway – subjects him to? Will his real age show on her scans? Will there be the evidence of basilisk venom and phoenix tears in his blood? Will this all be over before it begins?

Oh, Merlin, if Dumbledore knows... *If Dumbledore knows...* well. If Dumbledore knows Harry is reasonably sure that he can kiss all chances of freedom goodbye. Because if the Headmaster knows that the answer to defeating Voldemort is – both literally and figuratively – inside of Harry’s head he won’t stop until he’s forced it from Harry. *For the greater good*.

Harry thinks he’s going to be sick.

He inhales sharply and shoves the whirling panic from his mind.

*Clear your mind*, he tells himself. *Be different. Don’t just react. You can’t do anything about it now and freaking the fuck out will not help you.*

He exhales slowly.

“Does anyone have any questions?” Fawley gives them a few minutes before she nods her head decisively. “Then please give your attention to Professor Snape.”

Harry blinks.

Snape is here?

He looks around the common room, searching for the familiar black clad form. He’s not the only one. Draco is practically standing on his toes as he searches for his godfather.

“Thank you, Miss Fawley,” Harry freezes as Snape’s deep voice whispers around the edges of the room. With the unerring precision of someone who has spent years subconsciously tracking the other man he turns just in time to watch the Potions Master materialize out of the shadows in the corner near the entrance to the Depository.

If he thought seeing Ron and McGonagall had been weird, if he thought walking into the Great Hall would bring him to his knees suddenly finding himself face to face with Severus Snape is so, so much worse.

Merlin, he’s so young. So *healthy*.

When he’d really been eleven he’d thought the dark wizard pale and ugly, sickly and mean looking. A vampire that never saw the sunlight. A man who felt nothing, who never smiled.

But this, this Snape is only thirty-one years old. This Snape is pale but there’s color there in his cheeks and his lips. This Snape isn’t smiling but there’s a quiet gleam in his eyes: the spark of intelligence and passion that drove him to create spells and potions before he even took his OWLs, the fire of genius that not even guilt and grief and a decade shackled in a job he must hate can extinguish. His back his straight, his shoulders squared, his head held high. He always was graceful but there’s a fluidity to his movements now that Harry realizes he hasn’t seen since Voldemort’s resurrection.

This is a man whose life has been as painful as Harry’s. As painful as Tom Marvolo Riddle’s. This is a man who has been beaten and chained and weighed down; who has been spit upon and reviled from all sides and yet he’s still standing, still fighting.

He’s a mean bastard; a nasty sonofabitch. Life hasn’t given him much chance to be anything else, Harry thinks.

Altogether, that might even be why and how Snape is still alive.

For a moment their gazes catch across the Slytherin common room and the cognitive dissonance of seeing those black eyes stare back at him while his mind replays the man’s last moments – sick and weary and alone in all the ways that count as he bleeds to death on the floor of the Shrieking Shack – is enough to make Harry’s hands shake as his vision whites out and his blood roars in his ears.

*Look...at...me...*

“Welcome to Slytherin, the house of ambition and cunning.” The smooth strength of Snape’s baritone is enough to break him from his memories, a lifeline thrown into the dark whirlwind of his thoughts and he clings to it more than he’s ever clung to anything in his entire life.

*Breathe*, he tells himself. *Breathe and exist. Don’t react.*

Harry opens his eyes.

He doesn’t even know when he shut them.

“You are here,” Snape continues, “because you have drive, because deep within your hearts beats the desire to prove yourself and to succeed. Our alumni are numerous and their accomplishments are many. From Salazar, to Merlin, to half of the Wizengamot, more than half of the Ministry’s Department Heads, and the last twelve Ministers of Magic – we are those that shape the nation and our society; we are those that discover new magics and preserve the old ones. I expect great things from each and every one of you. The fact that you are here proves that you have the potential for them. Never let anyone tell you otherwise.”

Snape’s dark eyes sweep over them, lingering slowly on every face.

“And they will tell you otherwise,” Snape continues, the richness of his voice dropping, morphing into something slow and mournful that makes Harry’s heart hurt with the clear inevitability presented in it. “You will not only be looked down upon and reviled by many of your classmates and their families but such behavior will quite possibly be encouraged with varying levels of subtlety by the other professors. The world is unfair and you will be treated unfairly because nearly everyone else has lost the ability to differentiate between ambition and evil.”

If Harry had ever thought what sort of speech Snape might give to the snakes on their first night at Hogwarts... this would not have been it.

For one thing, he would have expected a great many more insults. Or *any* insults, for that matter. But this is a terrible, gentle thing. If he hadn’t seen the man’s memories Harry wouldn’t have known that Snape even knew how to be gentle.

“Because of this there is one rule that I expect you to follow above all others: Slytherin stands together. While you are here at Hogwarts these rooms are your home, these people your family. Within the safety of our quarters you are free to have opinions and disputes amongst yourselves but once you walk out that door *you will stand united* regardless of status or blood. Do not go anywhere alone. Be respectful, complete your work, and follow the rules. If you are attacked you are *legally* allowed to defend yourself but get away as soon as possible. Report all such instances to me. Within these halls and in absence of the presence of your parents or guardians I *am* your legal guardian. You are entitled to my presence and protection during any meeting with other members of the staff. The headmaster will have little respect for your worries and complaints. If, for some reason, you find yourself in a situation where rules must be... bent... *do not get caught*. Is that understood?”

“Yes, professor,” Harry finds himself murmuring along with all of the other first years.



“Good. Ten points to Slytherin for your ability to listen to instructions,” Snape drawls and Harry catches the small upturn of the corner of his lips. “Miss Fawley and Mr. Travers, as well as the other prefects, are available to you should you have any questions. If you are not comfortable approaching them feel free to make use of my office hours, which will be posted on my door, or speak with the portrait at the end of the hall. Do not forget to sign up for your physicals and I will begin handing out your time tables in the Great Hall tomorrow morning at precisely eight o’clock. Do not be late.”

For a minute, it looks like Snape will leave it at that, dismissing them to go unpack their things and get settled before their first day of classes but instead he pauses and looks back, “Mr. Potter, a word.”

Harry swallows nervously and nods, following the other man as he sweeps away.

He doesn’t go to his office, as Harry is half expecting, but instead leads Harry away from the first years and the scattering of older students – not nearly as many as Harry expects, he knows Slytherin has more students than this– to the center of the expansive window where he stops, staring out at the lake.

Harry nearly walks into him.

*Brilliant.*

The look Snape gives him is disdainful but having seen the man in the throes of a complete fury it is kind of hard to take the average sneer seriously. But he should probably try, shouldn’t he? If only for appearances. He shifts a little nervously on his feet and carefully doesn’t look the man in the eye.

“I know this is not what you were expecting Mr. Potter but since the unthinkable has happened it falls to me to inform you that you will just have to deal with it.”

Harry blinks. “...er, deal with it?” he repeats, baffled.

“Yes. I will not tolerate any whining or histrionics about the supposed unfairness of the situation. Complaining about it will not do you any favors.”

Well, if nothing else is the same it’s clear that Harry will always have Snape, sniping after him for some Merlin perceived offense. Fuck, but he’d been hoping that they would avoid this. He doesn’t *want* to be at odds with the other man. He’d hoped that because he doesn’t look exactly like James and he’s in Slytherin...

*Oh.*

Harry’s brain abruptly grinds to a halt.

It *can’t* be that simple. Can it? *Is* it?

“... what situation?” he asks before he can stop himself, eager for confirmation. “Sir,” he adds rather quickly because he doesn’t want to be rude.

Snape looks at him like he has all the intelligence of a flabberworm. Harry nearly bites his tongue in half to keep from beaming back at him, *thrilled* at the familiarity of it all and the growing surety that *it is that simple*. Snape lets out a long-suffering sigh. “*This* situation, Mr. Potter – or did you imagine somewhere in that mess between your ears that you could just waltz right up to the Headmaster’s office and demand to be resorted to your proper place?”

Not smiling is the hardest bloody thing Harry has ever done in his life.

And *yes*, he is including hunting horcruxes and breaking into Gringotts in that comparison.

“Why would I demand to be resorted?” Harry asks innocently, desperately trying to think of every moment that he’s ever been confused in his life. There are... more moments than he’d like to admit. A lot of them even include interacting with Severus Snape. Like his first day of potions class. That’s a good memory to think of.

Though he has spent a month practicing – and a great deal of time before *that* in that stupid, fucking tent – he still has issues clearing his mind. Understandable, he thinks, when he’s constantly thinking at least five different things and trying to self-correct all of the Gryffindor ingrained behaviors and trying to figure out what he’s going to do... But remembering? He’s gotten really good at that.

And so he does.

He remembers how excited he had been (potions sounded like cooking! And Harry was at least decent at that. The Dursleys had made sure of it) and how it had felt sitting in the cool, artificially lit potions lab. He remembers the way that excitement had taken a sharp nosedive beneath the rapid fire questions coming out of Snape’s mouth and the mixture of confusion and humiliation at the questions that he didn’t know the answers to.

Snape sneers. “Mr. Potter, are you so befuddled that you do not know where you are?”

“No, professor. I’m in the Slytherin Common Room,” Harry shoots back, unable to take back the slight upturn of his lips. “I am a little confused about this conversation, though. Sir.”

“Confused?” Snape repeats, hissing so sharply that it almost sounds like parseltongue. “You are *confused*? You are the Boy Who Lived! If I were to stand here and enumerate the reasons why you are in the wrong place we would be here until dawn!” The dour man looks like he’s about five seconds away from throwing up his hands and screaming.

“Oh,” Harry says after a lengthy pause. “Is this because of my parents? Blaise thought I might be disappointed in my placement because both my parents were Gryffindors. I hadn’t known. Is there something wrong with being in Slytherin?”

Snape stares.

And stares.

...and stares.

He stares so long, in fact, that Harry begins to legitimately worry that he's accidentally broken the potions master. And then...

Snape lets out a shaking breath and his shoulders slump. Well, not really, not enough that anyone who doesn't know him will even notice but Harry knows him – or his body language, at least, if not the man himself. For good or ill, he's spent a lot of time watching Snape. But it's enough for Harry to almost see all the fight suddenly just drain out of the man.

"No, Mr. Potter," Snape answers quietly. "There's not."

Harry finally lets himself smile. It's too sharp, he knows, and too wistful - too aware of a world that actively believes that there *is* something wrong with being in Slytherin.

"I don't think so either," he says softly and part of him can't help but wonder how things might have turned out if he'd learned that sooner.

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When he and Ron had smuggled themselves into the Slytherin dorm they'd never made it further than the common room. Something that is probably a good thing because Harry's reasonably sure that if he knew that they had dormitories like this he would probably have done exactly what Snape had just accused him of plotting – namely, done his best to get resorted – the next time the crowded tower room had become too much. He's not even sure that the prejudices that had clouded his mind would have been enough to distort this memory enough to make it seem like the distasteful nesting ground of the Bad Guys.

Also, now he's pretty sure he knows why the common room had been oddly empty.

The staircase from the common room empties onto a large landing at the center of a large spiral staircase. Across the landing, on the other side of the landing is a large door labeled with *Class of 1997* in a flowing, silver plated script. After glancing around and finding a directory posted on the wall to his right Harry takes a deep breath and heads down the wide steps. The landing one floor down has a door labeled *Class of 1998* and is open enough that Harry can just walk right in.

The room itself is probably the same size as the Gryffindor common room and there's an enormous fireplace on the same wall as the door, flames crackling merrily and shedding a golden glow on the rest of the room. A thick green rug and a small seating area consisting of a sofa and two cushy, velvet chairs nearly large enough to be sofas themselves are set in front of it. Across from the fireplace is another massive window out onto the depths of the lake that stretches nearly from the floor to the ceiling, though the expansive view of this one is marred by a handful of partial walls that neatly divide the area into six equal cubicles, which seem to be as close to individual bedrooms as they can get without the walls going all the way up to the ceiling and there being a door at the entrance.

There is a plaque next to each opening, though, and Harry walks down the line past *V. Crabbe, G. Goyle, D. Malfoy, T. Nott* to *H. Potter* with *B. Zabini* on his other side as well as a door that Harry assumes leads to the bathroom and showers. The little cubicle-room is enough to make him pause in the doorway and take a deep breath, something tight and aching in the center of his chest. The room itself is about the size of Dudley's second bedroom – maybe a little smaller. It's actually hard to tell with the way the water covered window distorts his perception. The stone floor is laid with rugs thick enough to swallow his feet up to his ankles. These ones are a very soft gray. Or a really pale, silver-green. He's actually not quite sure. He blames the lake window.

Directly in front of him sits a small bookcase and a decent sized personal desk – with chair – and wizarding lamp sitting on the corner. A full sized, four-poster bed hung with thick green curtains sits in the corner diagonal from the entrance and at the foot of it is a fancy looking screen sectioning off a portion of the room for privacy. A quick look behind the screen reveals his trunk and a modestly sized wardrobe to hang some of his clothes in.

"Bloody hell," he mutters and sinks into the chair pulled up to the desk. He's pretty sure he's found the source of all the anti-Slytherin sentiment. Everyone is just pissed that the snake's quarters are ten times the size of the others.

"So what did Uncle Sev want?"

Harry very nearly jumps out of his skin.

"Uncle Sev?" he repeats, just to buy himself some time to reign back the magic that's already through his lips and itching into his wand. "He lets you call him that at school?"

"Only when we are in the Slytherin dorms or his private quarters," Draco says, and Harry can absolutely tell that he's reciting a rule that has been relayed to him more than once in recent memory. "So what did he want?"

Harry shrugs. "He seemed to be under the impression that I was going to throw a temper tantrum over my sorting."

"Oh, I bet somebody is throwing a tantrum," Draco nods sagely. "I thought the Weasley's head was going to explode. Pity that it didn't. McGonagall seemed rather shocked too. She's the head of Gryffindor, though. I imagine she thought you'd end up a lion."

Harry shakes his head rather vehemently. "Nope. The Hat and I agreed that Gryffindor would have been a terrible option for me. It thought Ravenclaw might have worked but we decided that Slytherin was the best choice."

Draco gives him a surprised look. "Really?"

"Really."

"I bet Dumbledore is having kneazles right now," the blond boy smirks gleefully and Harry can't help but laugh because he wouldn't put it past the old man to be sitting in his office quietly freaking out – and quite possibly berating the poor Sorting Hat – over Harry Potter

being sorted into Slytherin. “Anyway, since you missed it, I just wanted to let you know that everyone is taking a few minutes to change and then we’re going to have some tea and get to know each other over in the sitting area.”

Harry’s pretty sure that the other five boys probably know each other at least passingly so what Draco means is *get to know you* and he swallows, suddenly nervous.

*Don’t fuck this up. You’ve got a plan*, he tells himself firmly and offers Draco a small smile. “Sure, just let me get Inigo.” He can always unpack later. He’s not even sure how much he wants to unpack, wary of exposing his belongings to the moods and whims of others without being able to ward the hell out of them. And wards strong enough to withstand a pack of Death Eaters would probably (definitely) be noticed in the First Year dorms.

“Inigo?” Draco asks, intrigued. Harry just smiles and disappears behind the screen, half surprised that Draco doesn’t follow him. A propriety thing perhaps? Ron wouldn’t have hesitated to bumble along behind him, poking and prodding into his things. Of course, that means he should probably be less surprised by Draco’s actions.

“I’ll just be a minute,” he calls, before he begins unlocking his trunk.

The trunk apartment is exactly as he left it and it takes just a moment to swap his school uniform and robes for a butter soft, emerald green jumper and a set of the lightweight, open front black robes that he’s found himself preferring. Once changed, Inigo is happy to leave his warming rock to slither up Harry’s arm and drape himself around his neck and shoulders like some sort of living scarf.

“*Doing okay?*” he hisses, stroking a finger down the back of his reptilian familiar’s head. “*You didn’t get jostled around in here, did you?*”

“*The day was boring*,” Inigo reports. “*The mouse was stupid and the big nest stayed still.*”

Harry laughs softly. “*I am glad that you were not hurt or startled but I am sorry that your day was boring. I missed you.*”

“*I missed you too. You are much nicer for napping than the warm rock.*”

“*Well you can nap but if you want there will be another, even bigger nest to investigate as well as more people that I should introduce you to so that they don’t accidentally hurt you.*”

“*A bigger nest?*”

“*It is a communal nest for several humans. We have a small part of it that will just be for us but we will still keep this as our Home Nest*,” Harry explains as he climbs out of the trunk.

“*That is a lot of nests*,” the snake muses. “*Will there be other Speakers?*”

“*Just one but it might be some time before we can speak with him. He is very dangerous...*”

“*...and you are just a hatchling. I know.*” Harry bites back his laughter at the sulky tone and instead offers more scratches at a point that has been particularly itchy for the past few days

as mollification.

“That’s a snake!”

Harry looks up to find the rest of the first year boys looking at him.

“Um... yes?” He motions at his familiar. It’s kind of hard to mistake Inigo for... well, anything else. But it is Crabbe speaking so certain allowances should probably be made.

“The rules state that a student can only have an owl, cat, or toad,” Nott remarks coolly. He’d been polite, if distant, in the great hall but there’s a marked coldness to the brown-haired boy now that they’re in the dorms. It’s not unexpected. Nott’s father is not only a Death Eater but he had been one of the very first, one of the Dark Lord’s followers back when they were still school boys together and Tom had just begun to use the name by which he would be feared.

“Oh, I know,” Harry agrees calmly, “but I had Inigo before I got my Hogwarts letter. I’m not about to give up my familiar because of a rule that I didn’t know existed. But because he isn’t a typical familiar, I thought it best to introduce him so that he didn’t startle you. Everyone, this is Inigo. He’s a boa constrictor and not venomous so you don’t need to worry. *Inigo, these are my new nest mates. Say hello. Make it obvious.*”

Indigo lets out what can only be described as a chuckle-hiss and raises his head up next to Harry’s, his tongue flickering in-and-out as he tastes the air. “*Hello, fellow nestmates,*” he greets as instructed. “*The big ones taste like prey,*” he adds after a moment.

“*The big ones are not the most intelligent of nestmates,*” Harry tells him seriously. “*But I think they are under the protection of the skinny, pale-headed one. That’s Draco. I’ve told you about him. I think we might be friends?*”

“*Ah, he is one of the ones whose sire belongs to the other Speaker.*”

Harry beams at the snake – and at his year mates who have all gone gratifyingly pale at the hissed conversation. He may not have much of a plan quite yet (or much idea of how to implement it) but this part is easy. The original exposure of his parseltongue ability had instantly earned him derision and suspicion from the other three houses. He’s willing to bet it will have a much more pleasant response in Slytherin – especially because he hasn’t already spent an entire school year antagonizing them.

Is he cashing in on the fear and respect that Voldemort has built up surrounding it to make an obvious point that he's not the little golden lion that everyone obviously expected? Yes. Yes, he is.

“You can speak to snakes?” Draco looks like he’s about to vibrate out of his skin. Theo Nott looks like he’s been slapped. “Why didn’t you tell me?” It’s practically a wail.

Harry blinks. “...tell you?” he repeats innocently. “You mean you can’t?”

“No!”

Harry blinks again. “Oh. I thought it was a wizard thing.”

Blaise drops to the couch and buries his face in his hands. “*Merda*,” he mutters.

“It’s not!” Draco practically screeches and Harry’s suddenly confronted with an uncomfortable reminder that Draco is as much a Black as he is a Malfoy. “I mean, yes, it is... but...! But it’s not common. At all. It’s really, really rare. Only the descendants of...”

“*Merda*,” Blaise repeats, with feeling.

“...Salazar Slytherin can speak it!”

Theo Nott goes even paler. Harry’s slightly concerned that he’s about to fall over.

“Draco,” Harry says patiently. “There’s nothing stopping you from speaking to my snake. Inigo would understand you. *Wouldn’t you?*”

*“I would understand that the non-Speaker is talking to me but I only know a few of the word noises that he makes.”*

Huh.

“...*Can I teach you the word noises?*”

*“Yes. I cannot make them myself but I could at least understand what your nestmates say.”*

“...like have Blaise go on a rant in Italian and expecting you to understand what he’s saying!” Draco is all but shouting in the background. “You don’t speak Italian, do you?” Draco stares at him, a little wild eyed as if he expects Harry to suddenly announce that yes, he speaks Italian and any other language Draco can care to think of.

“...er, no,” Harry replies.

“But you speak parseltongue.”

“Um... parsel-what?”

Blaise swears again. Nott actually whimpers.

“Parseltongue,” Draco enunciates slowly. “The language of snakes.”

Harry blinks and tries to look as bewildered as he had felt the first time Ron and Hermione had explained this to him. Minus the whole fear and dread of being vaunted as Slytherin’s Heir. Because he is, actually, Slytherin’s Heir.

The irony is still not lost on him.

“You mean I’m speaking another language?” Across the room Crabbe and Goyle both nod in over enthusiastic synchronization.

“Yes,” Nott replies tightly, his normally tawny skin as pale as parchment. “You are.”

“Oh. Sorry about that,” Harry shrugs. “It just sounds like English to me.”

“Merlin,” Draco mutters as he staggers over to a chair and drops into it, still staring at Harry.  
“Just wait until my father hears about *this*!”



# Eight

## Chapter Notes

First of all, WOW. I am absolutely blown away by the response to the last chapter. And this fic in general, actually. As of this moment it has passed 5k kudos and I can't even. Thank you for all of your support and especially for your comments. I love each and every one of them.

Second, just a friendly reminder to not copy my works to other sites. I post fanfiction exclusively on AO3 so if you see this somewhere else it is there without my consent.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Harry spends his first week at Hogwarts feeling like a quaffle being thrown from one side of the quidditch pitch to the other. In the rain. Because on one hand so many things are the same and the backdrop is a place that he knows better than the back of his own hand. By the end of the second day of class he has had to stop himself from taking a secret passage or route seven times, has garnered attention for his astounding, effortless ability at avoiding trick steps and predicting the movements of the staircases, accidentally led the entire class of Slytherin First Years to Transfiguration, and given a panicked third year instructions on how to find Trelawney's tower. He tries to play the latter two incidents off but he's not sure that anyone but Crabbe and Goyle buy his excuses of memorizing a route out of nervousness and parroting instructions he heard from a fifth year, respectively.

Slightly odd and hopefully inexplicable behavior aside, the first week is a study in being swung from the familiar to the new and back again until Harry is convinced that his head is going to explode from the sheer effort of trying to keep everything straight. Writing things down in his journal helps but even that is reduced to a further mess and Harry predicts that it will take several hours to straighten out the tangle of notes and questions hastily scribbled on the thick parchment pages. Merlin knows when he'll find the bloody time.

Clearly, organization is not his strong point.

He should probably do something about that.

He makes a note of it.

Like before, whispers and pointing follow him everywhere: three quarters of the student body reduced to nothing more than vicious little gossips following around an eleven-year-old school boy. Harry is torn between being amused – like when Ernie Macmillan is so busy staring at him that he walks straight into a banister before tripping and stumbling down half a flight of stairs – and a cold, bubbling sort of anger that fizzles through his blood and makes

his lips press together into a thin, white line when people sashay up to him and bat their eyelashes or sneer at him when he walks back, all but spitting his name at his feet.

The Slytherins, Harry has to admit, follow Snape's rules and reserve any gawking or spite for the safety of their quarters in the dungeons. It's slightly galling. It also amazes him how little of the latter there is and he's not sure if the lack of antagonism is down to the fact that he's a parselmouth – a fact that he hears whispered between a fifth year and a sixth year huddled together in the main common room as he passes through on Wednesday so he *knows* that just about everyone in the snake pit has heard – or because he is on friendly terms with Draco and, at this point, he's yet to meet anyone in Slytherin that wants to get on Malfoy's bad side.

Probably a bit of both, he thinks.

---

The whiplash of his life continues through the actual classes. His very first class is Herbology and it throws him more than he thought it would to take it with the Ravenclaws instead of the Hufflepuffs but Mandy looks thrilled to see him when the eagles come bursting into the greenhouse and plops down on the bench across from him and Draco without hesitation.

“Enjoying everything as much as you'd hoped?” she asks him without preamble and he wobbles his hand back and forth.

“The castle is brilliant,” he tells her honestly. “I've never felt so at home somewhere but I could do without half the student body stalking me and asking to see my scar.”

Mandy wrinkles her nose. “Merlin, that sounds awful. You should complain to the professors.”

Somehow, Harry doesn't think that will be very helpful and he tells her so. She looks like she's about to object some more and probably rope Draco into trying to persuade him so he changes the subject quickly by asking, “How is Ravenclaw?”

“Well enough,” she finally replies after staring at him for a minute. “And Slytherin?”

“I like it,” Harry says after a second of thought and beside him Draco deflates like a balloon. He hadn't even realized that the other boy had been tense. “It's nice.”

Now there's a sentence he didn't ever think would come out of his mouth.

---

Charms is with the Hufflepuffs instead of the Ravenclaws and it is a relief to walk into the classroom and be greeted by Hannah's frantically waving hand and Susan's half-assed attempts at reigning her bubbly friend in to more manageable levels. Draco rolls his eyes and lets out a put upon sigh but he's pleased too. Harry can tell by the small smile pulling at one

side of his mouth. They haven't even had a chance to sit down at nearby desks before Hannah is pressing chocolate into their hands and launching into a story about how she accidentally charmed her lips *orange* and had to go to the hospital wing to reverse it on the first day of school.

Flitwick still lets out an excited squeak and topples off the top of his stack of books when he reads Harry's name from the roll. Honestly, it's not as if Harry's presence here is a shock. Everybody in the whole of wizarding Britain knows that he's at Hogwarts this year. Ignoring that, Flitwick had been at the bloody Welcoming Feast so Harry is not entirely sure why the professor is so surprised.

Part of him is entertained and part of him is just pissed off – pissed off enough that his *lumos* nearly blinds the entire class.

Bollocks.

“Very impressive, Mr. Potter!” the diminutive professor proclaims, all the while blinking rapidly to try and refocus his vision. Behind him Blaise swears and next to him Draco stares, round eyed and stunned. Hannah beams and gives him two thumbs up.

Harry sighs.

---

History of Magic remains the most boring class to have ever existed and *yes*, he is counting Umbridge's Defense lessons or Hagrid's overcautious use of flabberworm care.

“But why is the teacher a ghost?” Harry asks, still completely baffled by the fact. In the beginning, the idea of having a ghost as a professor had been awesome. It had been very affirming as far as *yes, you are a wizard and you do go to a magical school*. But even starry-eyed Harry had only been impressed by Binns for the first half of the first lesson. After that, each class had never been anything more than an exercise in trying to stay awake. After six years under the man – er, ghost's – tutelage Harry can say that he literally knows nothing about magical history.

Well, no. That's not quite true.

He can wax poetic about the Goblin Wars of 1497. And really, he can only do that because the Goblin forces had been led by a general known as Pilcox the Thruster and the third year Gryffindor boys had spend an entire evening bursting into giggles every time Hermione had tried to pound Binns' monotonous lecture into their skulls through sheer force of will.

But other than that? Nothing. Everything he knows about Britain's First Wizarding War he learned from Tom Riddle's diary or Dumbledore's pensieve. Everything he knows about Grindelwald he knows from Rita Skeeter's book about Dumbledore. Everything he knows about the founding of Hogwarts, the school itself, and its founders he learned from the Sorting Hat, the Marauder's Map, and Hermione's rants. Everything he knows about their

governments he knows from his own narrow perspective and Ron repeating things he'd heard from his dad.

So, in short, he knows nothing.

And on the heels of... *everything* it's beginning to make him really, really annoyed.

"Dumbledore," Nott replies shortly, sounding very much like he's staring at something foul stuck to the bottom of his boots.

"Father has been trying to get him replaced for ages," Draco adds and for once in his life Harry whole heartedly agrees with Lucius Malfoy. It makes him feel kind of slimy and in need of a scalding shower.

Still, the man has a point.

It's galling.

---

Galling, galling, *galling*.

The whole fucking week is galling.

Bloody hell.

---

Harry makes it all the way to his first Transfiguration class before he has the urge to just *fuck everything up*.

Which, if he's being honest with himself, is longer than he thought he would make it.

Still, it's not until he's sitting in a desk halfway up the raised seating in the Transfiguration classroom, staring at a very red-faced Ron Weasley and the stern, tartan clad woman who had moments before been a tabby cat sitting on the desk at the front of the classroom that he feels the *rush*. The urge. The overwhelming brashness to just leap in like a rampaging dragon. The result of seven years of conditioned, bullheaded *Gryffindorness*.

His hand is in the air before he even realizes what is going on.

"Yes, Mr. Potter?"

“Can everyone do that?” his mouth asks, completely independent of his brain and his hands motion vaguely at her and her desk to help the question along.

It’s like playing quidditch, some part of his mind notes distantly. It’s like the beginning of a big, important game and he’s been circling high in the air. He’s been stuck watching while the other players clash below him and now, now he’s spotted a glimmer of gold out of the corner of his eye and he’s diving without any thought or real intent.

Bugger.

“No,” McGonagall replies, turning her attention to him and Ron takes the opportunity to scamper off to one of the available seats near most of the other Gryffindors. “Becoming an animagus – a wizard or witch that can transform between a human and animal form – requires an innate grasp of self and mastery of Transfiguration. Very few ever manage it. It is a highly dangerous endeavor and closely monitored by the Ministry. There are currently only seven animagi in Britain, of which I am one.”

*Registered animagi*, his brain corrects.

There are only seven *registered* animagi in Britain. He knows of at least three others, currently living. One of them is even in this room.

Not looking at where Scabbers is almost surely sleeping away in Ron’s pocket is one of the hardest things he’s ever had to do.

“Oh,” Harry murmurs and does his best to look both crestfallen and fascinated at the same time. “Is there a way to tell if someone is an animagus?”

McGonagall purses her lips together and gives him a look that leaves him feeling rather like she’s reached into his brain and spread all of his thoughts out on a table before nailing them down just so she could study them without interruption. “All animagi are required to register themselves with the Ministry. Failure to do so carries a five year sentence in Azkaban,” she replies almost stiffly, “but yes, there are a series of spells that are complex variations on a standard *revelio* that can be used to identify whether a person is an animagus or if there is one in the same room as you. Is that all, Mr. Potter?”

Harry opens his mouth...

... and for just a moment he can see it. He can see himself asking for a demonstration. Curious Harry Potter who wears the shadow of James, who had been one of McGonagall’s favorites, on his face. She might agree, might deviate from her lesson plans, for him. And Peter Pettigrew would be exposed for the sniveling, traitorous, cowardly little rat that he is in full sight of almost two dozen school children and a woman who remembers every student she has ever had.

It’s a pretty future, floating there just in front of him with delicate, fluttering wings.

And then he pulls himself out of the dive.

The game has just started and he has no idea what he's doing or even a hint of how things would play out for him if the truth of that Halloween night came out today.

Now is not the time for action. Now is the time to be stealthy and hidden. Now is the time to be a snake in the grass.

"Yes, professor," he says, giving the woman a small smile. "Thank you."

*Sorry, Snuffles.*

"W-w-what w-was that a-a-about?" Neville stutters out quietly once McGonagall has turned her eye from them and launched into her first year transfiguration speech.

"A third year followed me into the loo this morning," he mutters back and the sad thing – the really, horribly sad thing – is that he's not even making it up. He's not that good of a liar, for one. "To get a better look at the great *Harry Potter*," he spits his own name like a curse. That is certainly what it's felt like these past few years. "Wanted to know if I need to be worried about every animal I see too."

Neville's eyebrows disappear into his hair. "R-really?"

"Really."

"Complain to Snape and hire a solicitor," Blaise murmurs from the seat behind him. "That is bloody ridiculous."

Harry blinks... why would he...? Snape, he understands though he doesn't know what Blaise expects the professor to do about everything (and experience tells Harry not to expect anything good to come from him bringing up issues with *popularity* and *fame* to Snape) but why would he need a solicitor?

If he didn't suspect that McGonagall would turn the full force of her displeasure on him if he dared to turn around he absolutely would. Instead, he makes a note to ask Blaise to clarify that later this evening when they're all in their private common room. And then to ask Susan the next time he sees her because she'll give it to him straight. That way he gets both advice and to see if Blaise is trying to fuck him over.

Surprisingly, he thinks it unlikely but still... better to be certain.

---

Defense Against the Dark Arts is just as disappointing the second time around as it was originally. The first time he had been disappointed because he had been looking forward to the "*cool*" sounding class. Vampires, werewolves, curses – it had all sounded so brilliant, especially to a boy who had spent ten years tossed around and bullied by his relatives.

This time he's disappointed because he knows what remains of the main portion of Tom Marvolo Riddle – of *Lord* Voldemort, madman and genius - is on the back of that stuttering imbecile's head and he's stuck listening to Quirrell mutter about garlic and vampires.

*Again.*

Harry doesn't slam his forehead into his desk to save himself from the misery of it all but it's a very close thing.

---

By the time Friday rolls around Harry has learned a not inconsiderable number of things. Absolutely none of it pertains to the actual classes that he's sat through in what can only be described as a fit of nostalgia. Or an act of self- torture. Or both. Probably both.

He learns that Draco Malfoy has all the grace and coordination of a newborn hippogriff before he has a cup of coffee in the morning. And that his hair sticks up like a peacock's feathers until he wrestles and charms the fine platinum locks into submission.

He learns that the smell of Draco's coffee brewing in a press that he keeps in his cubicle-room is the only alarm that Crabbe and Goyle need to get up in the morning.

He learns that Theodore Nott rarely speaks outside of Slytherin's quarters – and when he does, his words are usually short and clipped, even when he's speaking to a teacher.

He learns that this rudeness is nearly enough to make Hermione Granger leap out of her seat and demand he apologize in the middle of Transfiguration. *Nearly.*

(He also ~~learns~~ suspects that Nott has even less respect for authority than he does. Or at least the authority represented here.)

He learns that Blaise swears. A lot. Usually in Italian. And that even though the mocha skinned boy is only a first year, in his first week of classes, he already seems to know *everyone*. And everyone seems to owe him favors. How or why, Harry has absolutely no idea. He's not sure if that is something he wants to know.

He learns that while the Slytherin quarters have always been a little larger than the other houses by virtue of their location their current massive, sprawling size only came into being when Snape became their Head of House.

He learns that Crabbe has a gift with animals that rivals Hagrid's and that his familiar is a little gray and white mouse named China. (Harry promptly instructs Inigo that he is *absolutely not to eat the pretty snack*. Inigo pouts.)

He learns that Goyle can barely read but that he can *weave*. Like with a loom and everything. Which is certainly interesting but he's not quite sure why everyone else seems so awed by it.

Or why Nott spends the entire night watching Harry warily the first evening Goyle brings his lap loom into their sitting area.

And, by the time Friday arrives, he learns that he is exhausted.

Harry is exhausted and he has only just *begun*.

It's exhausting thinking things through and sticking to the plan. Or a plan. Or a thought that might someday be a plan. Keeping track of what he says and how he acts... Merlin, it's exhausting. How do people do this all the time?

The need to act, to do *something* is like a hum in his veins. He busies himself with homework (easy) and extracurricular reading (not so easy) and talking to his housemates and more or less trying not to murder, maim, or inadvertently give away the fact that he knows the castle better than he should in his attempts to avoid a significant portion of the student body. And bloody hell, he hopes that tapers off quickly. He's pretty sure he's given himself a headache trying to remember exactly when people had stopped following him around in herds during his first year.

More than that, though, is the uncomfortable double vision of living through the same events twice but from a slightly different position. How had Hermione managed that as she ran all over the place in her third year?

Probably with a color-coded schedule, carefully highlighted route through the castle, and meticulous notes that say things like *only use the loo on the third floor; second stall from the right* and *don't smack into Malfoy when he goes stomping around the third corner coming from the Potions classroom*.

Harry sighs.

"You alright?" Draco's voice pierces through the fog of his thoughts. Harry blinks and gives his head a little shake to clear it before offering the other boy a small smile.

"I'm fine," he assures and Draco narrows his eyes suspiciously.

"You do that a lot," he finally says, leaning forward and keeping his voice low so that the others don't overhear. Harry doesn't have it in him to try to lie. They both know that Harry's disappeared inside of his head – *inside of a memory* - quite a few times this week. Frankly, it's a bloody mind trip to see how concerned Draco gets over him when it happens. He understands, objectively. This version of Draco didn't start out their relationship with a bad, snooty impression and a bit of bullying. This version of Harry didn't slam the proverbial door in Draco's face. Objectively, he gets that without that initial conflict they are both very different people and their relationship is something completely different.

Plus, you know, he's actively trying to befriend Draco.

Still, it's confusing.



Because every time he sees Draco worry over him he also sees the other boy trying to knock him off his broom, or sabotaging his potions, or petrifying him and stomping on his face, or...

Well.

It's just bloody exhausting.

"I'm fine, Draco," he repeats, feeling an unexpectedly fond smile tug at the corner of his mouth. "It's just... it's been a long week. Everything," he waves a hand in general indication of the castle around and above them, "is a bit much to take in. It's brilliant," he hastens to add at the further furrowing of Draco's forehead, "but it's a lot. And so much more than I'd ever thought I'd see."

His words don't have the reassuring affect on Draco that he'd hoped. Instead, the other boy only stares at him even more closely, his lips pressed into a thin white line. "You didn't eat much at breakfast," he finally mutters and shoves something into Harry's hand, "eat this so you don't fall over again."

Harry blinks and looks down.

It's a chocolate frog, somewhat squished from being shoved into a pocket or the bottom of a bag. Harry sighs. He can't even grumble about it because he literally fell over and had spent five minutes curled up into a ball and hyperventilating into his knees during their first practical Astronomy lesson.

Professor Sinistra had wanted him to go to see Madam Pomfrey. Harry had argued that his blood sugar was just low and that he needed a snack because what else was he supposed to say? *Oh, don't mind me. I'm just remembering how Professor Snape had to kill the Headmaster while I hid under an invisibility cloak and watched.* Yeah. No. Sinistra hadn't looked like she believed him but she had given up on making him leave after a worried looking Hannah had shoved half a cauldron cake into his hands.

He rather suspects that all of their little train compartment formed group now carries small snacks and sweets shoved in their pockets (see: the chocolate frog currently clutched in his hand) and Harry can't decide if it is sweet that they care or annoying that they think he's going to collapse at any bloody moment.

Probably a bit of both.

"Thanks."

Draco shrugs. "Please, if I let you fall over then people would say it was my fault and that I'd tried to murder the Boy Who Lived."

Harry would laugh except for the fact that the rumor mill has churned out the idea that Draco – or his father, Harry really isn't quite sure – has Harry under an *imperio* and that is why he is in Slytherin.

“People are idiots,” he mutters and tears open the packaging.

“Of course, they are,” Draco agrees blandly, sticking his nose in the air like the proud little ponce that he is. Harry smiles at the familiarity of it and then nearly walks into a wall at the warm fondness that curls through him at the gesture instead of the typical flush of annoyance and anger.

*Mental*, he thinks as he waves off Draco’s concerned hands. *I’ve lost my bloody mind*.

He bites off the head of the frog and then hastily shoves the rest of it into his bag. He knows better than to have food out in Snape’s classroom and he’d really rather get through his first potions class without dying, thank you very much.

Harry makes sure to smile and wave to Neville as he sits down at the worktable across the aisle from the round-faced boy, completely unsurprised as Draco slides into the seat next to him. Hermione is already sitting next to Neville. She’s got a stack of books, her wand, her potions kit, and a sheaf of parchment with a quill already laid out in front of her.

“Put your wands away.”

The whispering curl of Snape’s voice around the classroom is enough to make the entire Slytherins side snap to attention, their wands already safely secured in their bags, and send the Gryffindor students scrambling to do as asked. The door at the back of the classroom slams with an ominous *bang* and Snape sweeps down the center aisle in long, graceful strides, his robes fluttering behind him.

Harry bites down to keep from smiling.

“Now,” he says once he has taken roll – without any snide comments, Harry is pleased to note, “You are here to learn the subtle and exact art of potion making. As there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic. I don’t expect you will really understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through humans veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses...” he trails off for a moment and lets his dark gaze move over the students who are all staring at him like a frightened rabbit might watch a hunting dog– with the exception of Hermione, who is busy writing down every word he says, *for Merlin’s sake* – and lets his focus stop on Harry.

Harry swallows and very, very carefully looks just to the inside of his eyes instead of meeting that cutting, all seeing gaze.

“I can teach you how to bottle fame,” Snape murmurs and Harry catches the faint curl of amusement there at the corner of his mouth, “brew glory, even stopper death...” And Harry feels the words like a punch to the gut because he *didn’t*. He didn’t put a stopper in death. He died, died practically in Harry’s arms with everyone thinking him a traitor and a coward and...

Harry shuts his eyes and takes a careful breath.

“ – if you aren’t as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach,” Snape drawls.

... and there he is. Harry nearly laughs in relief.

He doesn’t but it’s a close thing.

“Mr. Potter!”

He tenses in his seat. “Yes sir?” He says cautiously.

He’d expected this, of course, but he’d hoped...

“What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?”

Harry swallows the lump in his throat even as part of him laughs at the sight of Hermione’s hand shooting into the air. “The Draught of Living Death,” he answers carefully. “It’s a sleeping potion.”

Snape lifts an eyebrow. “Correct,” he murmurs silkily, sounding surprised and... pleased? Harry blinks. He doesn’t think Snape has ever been *pleased* with him before. Not unless he’s counting the time the professor thought he would get to expel Ron and Harry for driving a car into the Whomping Willow, which he doesn’t. “Two points to Slytherin. Mr. Malfoy,” he continues and Harry sighs in relief as the attention of the brilliant, cutting professor turns elsewhere. “Where might I find a bezoar?”

Draco smirks. “In the stomach of a goat, sir.”

A smirk of his own curls across Snape’s lips.

*Huh*, Harry thinks. *I see it now*.

“Correct. Two points to Slytherin. And what does a bezoar do, Miss Greengrass?”

“It is a general antidote to most poisons.”

“Very good. Two more points to Slytherin. Mr. Weasley,” Snape whirls on the other side of the room with a snap of his robes and Ron flinches back so quickly that his seat rattles and nearly falls over. “Tell me, if you can, what is the difference between monkshood and wolfsbane?”

“Um...” Ron squirms in his seat. “Um. One is a piece of clothing?”

Oh, Ron.

Beside him Draco coughs to hide his laughter and Snape sneers, “Five points from Gryffindor for not preparing for class.”

“But...”

“...and five points for talking back to a teacher,” Snape continues on with that crook of his eyebrow and set of his jaw that says that he can do this *all fucking day, just try me*. Ron, purple in the face but clearly seeing the wisdom of keeping his mouth shut, flops down into his seat with a huff and glares at the table in front of him. “Now, can anyone else tell me what the difference is between monkshood and wolfsbane? Or are you all complete nitwits?”

Hermione, by this point, has her hand raised so high in the air that Harry’s surprised that she’s not levitating, vibrating at the edge of her chair in her effort to gain Snape’s attention. When he’d been her housemate Harry had just wanted the man to call on her. Obviously, she knew the answer and if Snape would just *ask her* then he’d stop picking on Harry. But looking at her now, from the other side of the room he almost wants to curl up under the desk from secondhand embarrassment.

Look. Hermione *had been/is/would be, maybe* his friend. She hadn’t always been a very good one, though she definitely tried, and their priorities are wildly different but she’d been loyal (which is more than he can say for Ron) and she’d saved his ass enough that he probably, technically, owes her a slew of Life Debts. But she’s also desperate: desperate to fit in, to prove herself, to be the best and brightest and have everyone acknowledge her brilliance. And she is brilliant, she *is*, but she’s also arrogant and brash and so fucking stubborn that it makes Harry’s teeth itch.

And really, Harry calling someone stubborn is like the ocean describing something as wet.

All in all...it’s not a great combination for a twelve year old. And Harry would know.

So watching her squirm in her seat with her hand shoved in the air until she resembles a half-grown puppy trying to perform a sloppy rendition of *sit-lay down-roll over* for every person it comes across in the hopes that said person will throw it a treat (or a piece of dryer lint, or something, *anything*) is not just mortifying but it actually *hurts* to watch.

He makes a note to talk to her. If he can. If for no other reason than past-future Hermione would have loved to have someone speak to her and help her fit in.

Snape spares her a glance and she practically falls off of her seat in excitement. He sneers, his eyes flicking to the side. “Mr. Longbottom?”

Neville freezes and turns a truly impressive shade of white.

*C’mon, Neville*, Harry thinks, caught in the kaleidoscope vantage of seeing his entire world, his entire *life* spiral into something completely different if he but nudges the trajectory.

“M-monkshood a-a-and w-wolfsbane are the...the s-same thing,” Neville stutters out without looking up. “It’s...it’s h-highly t-toxic and a-also called a-a-aconite.”

For the second time in five minutes Harry gets to see Snape look surprised and *pleased*.

First at him, now at Neville.

This is how the world ends. Harry is sure of it.

“Well, at least one of you is not completely incompetent,” Snape drawls, his pointed glare to the red and gold side of the room leaving no room for misinterpretation. “One point to Gryffindor for actually managing to open the correct book. Now, why isn’t everyone writing this down?”

The rest of the class is uneventful. Snape spends the hours swooping and prowling from one side of the classroom to the next, barking out corrections and awarding and detracting points for a handful of successes (Slytherin’s) or failures (Gryffindor’s) and Neville... Neville doesn’t melt his cauldron. Or make anything blow up. His Boil Curing Potion is definitely not perfect – Harry would rather swim naked in the Black Lake in February (*oh, wait...*) than put it on any part of his body – but he does actually have a finished product that he can put in a potions vial and bring up to the front of the classroom to place on Snape’s desk.

Harry beams at him and Neville turns pink but smiles in return as he stands off to the side, waiting while Harry turns in his own potion.

“Mr. Potter,” Snape’s drawl makes Harry pause and look up at the man now seated behind the desk, a quill filled with familiar red ink held in his hand and the carnage of some other year’s first week’s essays sitting in front of him.

“Yes sir?”

“Do not forget our appointment this evening.”

Harry swallows nervously because he’d really, *really* rather forget about the whole thing but he’d taken Travers at his word (not that he’d needed to. He has six years of experience to show him just how bad of a plan pissing off Snape is) and obligingly signed up for his beginning of the year physical.

He’d picked the very last slot available but still, inevitably, the day had arrived.

Merlin, he’s going to be sick.

“Of course,” he agrees, hoping that he isn’t as pale as he suddenly feels. “Eight o’clock at the Infirmary. I remember.”

“See that you do,” Snape agrees and with that, he slashes a big red line through a full foot of parchment and writes a big, glaring T at the top of the essay.

It’s all a little too foreboding for Harry’s nerves so, with a respectful dip of his head, he turns tail and flees.

And by flees, he means he lets Neville and Draco herd him to lunch.

True story: as a card carrying member of the Know-It-All Club (my nickname in elementary and middle school was Miss Encyclopedia) I found Hermione's behavior in their first potions class so embarrassing and cringe worthy that I had to put the book down and walk away. I was 10 years old and that was the first time I'd had such an emotional reaction to a book/ fictional character.

I absolutely head canon that Slytherin (and probably Hufflepuff) would naturally have larger quarters than Gryffindor and Ravenclaw by virtue of not being trapped in a tower. In my personal hc for this 'verse Snape expanded Slytherins rooms even further after he was given control of them because as someone extensively bullied both inside and outside of his house he wanted to make sure that his students always had a safe place to escape to.

See you next chapter!

# Nine

## Chapter Notes

This is a chapter that so many of you have been waiting for so hopefully I do it justice.

I also want to draw your attention to the fact that this fic is now part of a series. There is now a second fic in the series (titled "Harry Potter and the Peanut Gallery") that contains alternative POV drabbles/chapters. If there are any particular scenes/prompts/POVs that you'd like to see please let me know!

Thank you for all of your comments, kudos, and support. I remain forever amazed by the love this fic gets and I treasure every bit of it!

*You voluntarily walked to your death*, Harry reminds himself as he stares at the double doors leading into the hospital wing. *You have thrown yourself headlong into dangerous, potentially fatal adventures with little thought. It should not be that hard to simply walk in there and get this over with.*

Initially, he had put his name down for the very last appointment slot on the signup sheet simply because he wanted as much time between him and this moment as possible. It had seemed like a smart idea at the time. It, supposedly, gave him time to think and prepare himself. Really, it just meant that he'd spent the entire week quietly freaking out. Part of him is worried about being discovered. The goblins had known that he is a time traveler. His temporal displacement had been written in his blood for everyone to see. Had it just been goblin magic that allowed them to discover it? Or is it going to show up on whatever Madam Pomfrey does to him? He doesn't know enough about magic to *know* and if it shows up... well. He has no illusions that it will end well.

So there's that.

But if he's being honest with himself, he's mostly just scared that people will *know*.

He'd only ever really told one person in his first life, besides Dumbledore, how the Dursleys had treated him. The Weasleys had suspected, he is sure, especially when he had gathered up the courage to ask if they would send baskets of food during the summer. Still, almost all of what had arrived had been treats – candies, cakes, and cookies – so he doubts that Mrs. Weasley ever realized that *he wasn't being fed*. She probably just assumed that his relatives were health nuts like Hermione's parents or something. Fred and George had definitely realized something was up but they'd also had to break bars off of his window and pick locks to get at his school things, which had resided in the cupboard under the stairs where there had still been a faded, worn sign proclaiming it "*Harry's Room*".

Even Dumbledore had gotten the watered-down version, just enough for Harry to feel out if the Headmaster would consider taking him from there. He wonders if the Order members that had been assigned to watch over him the last few years ever realized anything was wrong. Or if they, like the Headmaster, had thought it an acceptable price to pay for whatever protection the blood wards gave him.

He had only ever told Hermione. Even then the confession had only come out in bits and pieces as they huddled together in the tent with a painful gnawing in their stomachs.

And now others are going to know. *Snape* is going to know.

Oh, Merlin, he's going to be sick.

Somewhere in the room behind them a clock begins to strike the hour and Harry sighs. If he doesn't go in now Snape will filet him and use his entrails for potions ingredients. Probably. Or at least stick him in detention for the rest of forever.

Gathering the frayed remnants of his Gryffindor courage he takes a deep breath, squares his shoulders, and walks through the doors.

The hospital wing is silent.

Harry supposes that's a good thing. Silence means that there isn't anyone else here. It means that there won't be a new wealth of rumors following him around school tomorrow. It means that there isn't anyone to notice if things go terribly, horribly wrong in the next five minutes.

He goes straight to where Snape is standing at the foot of the bed directly next to Madam Pomfrey's office, arriving just as the clock strikes eight.

"Mr. Potter, so pleased you could join us," Snape drawls, crooking an eyebrow that tacks the word *finally* onto that statement so loudly that Harry swears he can hear it. It's then that he notices Madam Pomfrey is standing somewhat behind him and to the side of the bed. She's got a file open and is writing something on a piece of parchment.

Harry swallows and twists his hands in the folds of his robes. "Sorry for keeping you waiting, sir," he murmurs and the look Snape gives him at *that* is slightly incredulous but he's too nervous to point out that he is, in fact, exactly on time. He's too nervous to do much beside stand there in front of his head of house, who – in his swathe of black robes and unamused looking face – looks rather like how Harry might have pictured Death, and try to not shift pathetically from one foot to the other.

Madam Pomfrey looks up at the sound of his voice, a welcoming smile lighting up her face. It's a new experience for Harry. He's not sure he's ever seen her smile at him like this. Usually, depending on the situation, she looks at him in distress or with fond exasperation. Both of which are followed up by the inevitable, stern, no nonsense *you will stay in that bed Mr. Potter, so help me* look when he insists that he's fine, *really*, and can he go back to Gryffindor tower?



“There you are Mr. Potter,” she greets cheerfully as she bustles around Snape. “It is a pleasure to meet you. I’m Madam Pomfrey and I’m the mediwitch here at Hogwarts.”

“Er... hello.”

“Now, I notice your file is empty. Did you have any paperwork from a private healer to give to me?” She asks politely and gives him an expectant look.

Harry swallows roughly. Opens his mouth. Shuts it. Swallows again. “I’ve never been to a healer,” he finally gets out.

The matron stares at him for a few moments before understanding flashes across her face. “Of course, dear, of course,” she says, bobbing her head and motioning him closer to the bed. “The Headmaster said that you had been raised by muggle relatives.” Beside him Snape goes unbearably, unnaturally still and it takes everything Harry possesses not to turn and look at the man’s face, curious at the reaction. Did he not know? Surely, he had to. Who else could Harry possibly be living with? All of his other relatives are dead. “But did your doctor send anything? Or will your relatives be sending it later?”

“Er. No. They...”

“Oh, that’s fine dear,” she continues over top of him, though now there’s a pinched look on her face that makes Harry think that no, it’s really not all that fine. “Do you happen to remember when you had your last vaccination? Even just knowing the month would be enough. Some of those muggle vaccinations can be aggravated by certain magical procedures and...”

“I’ve never been,” Harry breaks in, unable to take the kindly prattle for another second. Bloody hell, he’s never heard the woman talk so much in his life. Of course, he’s only ever seen her after perilous situations when she’s busy saving his arse and/or regrowing his bones. “To a doctor,” he adds, in case that isn’t obvious.

To his surprise it’s Snape’s silken drawl that demands an answer. “What do you mean, you’ve never been?”

Taking a deep breath, Harry tips his head and looks up at Snape. The man’s mouth is pressed into a thin, unhappy line and he looks about as pale as the last time Harry had seen him in his first life. Which, considering the potions master had just had his throat torn out and he’d hemorrhaged all over the Shrieking Shack’s floor, is pretty damn pale.

*Think, he reminds himself, don’t just react.*

So he looks Snape in the face (focuses just at the edge of his eyebrow as it dips towards his nose) and tests the waters, “Aunt Petunia said that fr...people like me didn’t need doctors.”

And it had been true enough, after a fashion. His magic had seen to that.

As a child, before Hogwarts (before he knew he was a wizard) he had thought it completely normal to be able to live for a week (or more) with only a single bottle of water to drink. As a

child, he had thought it normal that he never got the flu, that he never had a fever, that despite the fact that he wasn't fed or clothed and had never owned a proper coat in his life that he never got so much as a sniffle or anything more than a slight scratching sensation in his lungs. It had been normal, for him, to cry himself to sleep with a dislocated shoulder and wake up with it popped back into place. He hadn't thought it odd that no matter how much something hurt or how empty his stomach was that he could get up and keep going.

Well, no, that's not true. It *had* been odd. Abnormal. *Freakish*. And he had known that.

But he is a Freak, so freakish things were to be expected.

Or so his five-year-old self had reasoned.

Snape's face – well, just his eyes really and the corners of his mouth – goes through a whole range of emotions faster that Harry can process. “She did, did she?” he murmurs in a voice cold enough to make steel snap and Harry shivers, wincing beneath the weight of memories that it brings bearing down on him.

“Yeah,” he says, because he gets the feeling that the question isn't rhetorical – questions from Snape rarely are. “She did.”

“I see.”

Snape and Madam Pomfrey exchange glances over his head that he pretends not to notice. They're the type of looks that are entire conversations contained in nothing more than flickers of eyelids and twitches of lips. The sort of conversation that go over the heads of most children. Both literally and figuratively.

At the end of it Snape rather looks like he had that night on the Astronomy Tower in those last, terrible minutes as Albus Dumbledore had commanded his own death.

*Severus...please.*

Harry nearly jumps out of his skin when Madam Pomfrey's hand lands on his shoulder and she retracts it almost immediately with a gentle apology.

“On the bed, Mr. Potter.”

Harry jerks his head unsteadily and takes another deep breath as he moves for the bed. His hands are shaking, just a little, as he sets them on the familiar crisp white sheets. “Do I need to take off my clothes?”

“That won't be necessary Mr. Potter. I will just be performing a basic diagnosis charm. It can take a minute or two so you might as well be comfortable,” the matron explains, giving the bed a little encouraging pat.

“Okay.”

*Godric would have liked you, Harry reminds himself with a mental slap, and you spent six bloody years being the best lion you could be so get up on the bloody bed!*

Once he's on the bed, fingers clenched in his lap, Madam Pomfrey casts the diagnostic spell in two short flicks and a jab of her wand. The magic of it tingles against Harry's skin, millions of little pinpricks leaving his entire body feeling like a limb regaining blood flow.

"Hmm, a little anemic," the mediwitch murmurs to herself, "and..." she trails off. Lips pressed tightly together she shoots Snape a look that he's pretty sure eleven-year-old him is not *supposed* to notice.

Beside him Snape drifts closer to the bed, a living black wall that towers over him. It should make him feel afraid, he thinks, or at least nervous. Snape spent six years of his life being an absolute bastard to him, spent six years doing his seemingly level best to make Harry absolutely miserable. He's ripped his way inside Harry's head and, even before that, he knew exactly how to find the pressure points, the cracks in Harry's armor and press them until they bleed. So the fact that he's looming at Harry's side with as much subtlety as an unhappy dragon should probably make Harry at least a little nervous. And it does, somewhere, he's sure. But Snape is also the man that threw himself between Harry and a freshly transformed werewolf. He's a bastard, yes, but he's also a man who probably knows the mix of fear and hope and shame churning in Harry's gut and is probably smart enough to spot it.

So instead of tensing in fear, instead of shrinking away, Harry feels something calm at the man's presence. Some tight, coiled thing unrolling in his shoulders and easing down until he no longer feels like he's about to snap like an elastic stretched too far.

Snape will probably always be a bit of a bastard. He's earned that right, Harry thinks. But he's also the man who continually lied right to Voldemort's face, lied about everything he is, and *got away with it*. Harry doesn't regret – and hasn't regretted – his choice in that wispy, beard-white limbo but if he regrets one thing, just one, it's that he never got to throw Snape's brilliance in Voldemort's face. He never got to stand there and rip the mask away, never got to tell what remained of Tom Riddle that Snape had always been Dumbledore's man (that he'd always been *Harry's*). He never got to see the Dark Lord's face as he realized that Severus Snape had *bested* him.

It would have been something to see, Harry is sure of it.

So regardless of what is happening or what might happen in the next two seconds Harry trusts that, one way or another, Snape will protect him.

The realization is enough to make Harry quietly ask, "Is something wrong?" as Madam Pomfrey makes some sort of complicated twirl with her wand that ends with her jabbing the tip in the direction of the parchment she had been writing on earlier and words bloom across its surface.

"There's a few unusual readings, dear. I would like to do a more in-depth diagnostic," she tells him and tries to smile reassuringly but it is thin and flat and really not very reassuring at all. "May I?"

Harry just gives her a jerk of his head, not trusting himself to speak.

Another flick of her wand and the tingling sensation is back, buzzing in his ears and making his tongue tingle as the magic of it presses in on him.

Madam Pomfrey looks decidedly displeased with whatever the spell is telling her.

Harry swallows.

“Well,” she says after a moment. “There are some... complications.” And Harry feels his stomach sink.

“Complications?” Snape repeats and Madam Pomfrey appears just as aware as Harry that his words are a demand and nothing less.

The matron looks at Harry, staring at his face with her lips pressed into a thin, unhappy line and her shoulders slumped. She doesn’t want to tell him, he realizes suddenly. She doesn’t want to say whatever it is out loud.

“Madam,” Snape prompts sharply and the Matron jumps ever so slightly before turning to the Potions Master.

“He is anemic and showing a severe deficiency of Calcium, Vitamin D, and quite a few other necessary things – all of which are indicative of severe, chronic malnutrition. He is exhibiting beginning signs of organ failure. His bones are brittle and there is obvious stunting to his growth, though not as much as I’d expect, and a slight curvature to his spine,” the mediwitch rattles off tersely. “Bone restructuring indicates multiple healed fractures in both of his forearms and wrists. There is evidence of frequent, repeated dislocations to his shoulders and multiple concussions. His eyesight is terrible and he is exhibiting a twenty-three percent hearing loss in his left ear.” She stops and inhales sharply, shooting Harry a horribly sad, apologetic look. “It’s... it is a miracle that he’s even walking, Severus,” she finally exclaims before she turns to Harry and adds, “And I apologize, Harry for speaking to Professor Snape instead of you. It is your body and your health and you deserve the respect of me addressing *you* about it.”

Harry blinks.

“Er... that’s alright.”

The matron reaches out like she wants to pat Harry’s knee – like another version of her has many, many times before – but stops herself before her hand can actually land. “It is not, Mr. Potter. Your medical information is yours and you should expect your privacy on the matter to be maintained.”

He blinks some more, feeling more than a little off-balance at Pomfrey’s words. Because, well, honestly he’s familiar with the whole doctor-patient confidentiality thing. Objectively. He’d had it waved in his face when he’d tried to get status reports on various friends and pseudo family members over the years but, like so many other things, it had seemed to be something that only applied to *other* people. It certainly had never applied to him before.

“Now, forgive me Mr. Potter, but I must be blunt,” she says and pauses, waiting until he nods unsteadily before she continues. “These are some very serious health issues. Your body is very, very unwell and has been for quite some time. Normally, I would need to contact your guardians but you are exhibiting several common indicators of abuse.” The mediwitch pauses and takes a deep breath. “Mr. Potter, do your guardians mistreat you?”

Yes.

The obvious, correct answer is *yes*. Yes they do bloody well *mistreat* him.

But...

But... *do they?*

Harry stares at the mediwitch, at the woman that has nursed him through comas and regrown his bones, and is absolutely flummoxed by the simple question.

Because they do. Mistreat him. Of course, they do. Harry knows that. Harry knows that throwing a child into a dark, stuffy cupboard and making them go days without food or only giving them stale bread and making them cook your breakfast and clean your toilets and dragging them around by their arms and screaming at them until you're purple in the face is *bad*. He knows. He knows that that isn't the way children should be treated.

But...

That's the way that Harry has always been treated.

That's the way that everyone treats Harry because Harry isn't a child. Harry has never been a child. Not since his parents died, anyway. He has always been The Boy Who Lived and sure, yes, it's fine to send him Christmas gifts and birthday presents. It's good to include him on a family holiday or invite him over from Christmas dinner but when it's all done, when the moment is over then they just put him back in his place (put him back in the cupboard) until the next time they want to trot him out again.

Because it doesn't matter. *He* doesn't matter, does he? He's just the Boy Who Lived, the Chosen One. He's a weapon to kill Voldemort and that's the only use anyone has for him. He's not a person. He's an icon. He's public property. He doesn't even belong to himself.

And Harry...

He's been abused. He knows, objectively, he knows. He's been abused and mistreated his whole life and all he has to do is open his mouth and say it. In some distant corner of his mind he can feel himself screaming it over and over and over: *Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes!* But his mouth is frozen, his tongue is fuzzy, his throat is swollen and he can't... he can't...

Snape lets out a loud sigh that sounds mysteriously like, “*Honestly, Poppy*” and Harry jumps half a foot in the air and nearly falls off the bed only for Snape to stop him with a quick flick of his wand that sends him back to the safety of the mattress.

“Mr. Potter.”

Harry turns to look at him and for a moment, just a moment, he stares the man straight in the eyes. “Yes sir?” he manages to make the words come out.

“I am going to describe a scenario and I want you to tell me – yes or no – if that is how your homelife is like. That is all. Just yes or no. I do not want to hear any other words coming out of your mouth right now, is that clear?”

Harry nods. “Yes sir.”

Snape eyes him for a moment and Harry doesn’t understand the look on his face. Snape has never looked at him like that before.

No.

That’s a lie.

He looks at Harry like he did when he was dying. After he had given his memories, after his last duty had been discharged, after he had given it his all – he’d looked at Harry and Harry had thought that this, *this* was the first time that Severus Snape had ever looked at him properly.

“There is a boy who lives with his family. Not his mum and dad like most kids, but with his aunt and uncle. They do not like him very much. They yell at him, sometimes, and call him names. They get frustrated when he doesn’t do what they want or when he gets in their way. They don’t want to wait. They like to grab him by his arm and yank him around so that he moves faster, so that he gets out of their way. Sometimes they throw him instead of pull him. Yes or no?”

Harry swallows.

“Just a yes or a no,” Snape reminds him firmly, if more gently than Harry is used to. “Or if that is too difficult for you to manage simply nod or shake your head.”

Harry inhales sharply.

“Yes.”

“This boy doesn’t get to eat very much. Other children get three meals a day but not him. He knows what it is like to go to sleep with his stomach twisting in his gut. He knows what it is like to be so hungry that his body just gives up and doesn’t feel hungry any more. When he gets food he eats as much as he can but it makes his stomach hurt too. If he eats too much, too quickly he throws it up.”

Harry nods, blinking back the burning feeling that’s beginning to gather at the corner of his eyes. “Yes,” he whispers.

“This boy, he knows that sometimes other people don’t have enough food to have three meals a day. He’s heard about them at school or on the telly but it is not like that at his house. At his house it is only he that goes hungry. Everyone else gets to eat every day. His aunt and uncle tell the boy that he can only have food if earns it but no matter how hard he tries he almost

never succeeds. His aunt and uncle might throw away more food than he ever gets to eat. Yes or no?”

“Yes,” he finally answers after a long, heavy pause. He stares at his lap, unable to look either adult in the face.

The room is silent except for the sound of his own blood rushing in his ears.

“Thank you, Mr. Potter,” Snape tells him and part of Harry wants to laugh. It figures that the only time Snape would thank him is now, after he’s as good as told the man that his relatives like to starve him and toss him around like a rag doll. “I know that must have been difficult for you.”

It’s not a slight against his intelligence, Harry realizes after a rather muddled moment. Snape actually means it.

“I should inform the Headmaster...”

“No.” Harry speaks before he thinks, an instantaneous, knee-jerk reaction to Madam Pomfrey’s proposed course of action. “No,” he repeats, shaking his head frantically as something wells up inside of him. Like watching water boil it begins with one bubble, and then another, rising, faster and faster and faster until he can feel his heart pounding with it. “You *can’t*.”

She can’t.

And suddenly, instantly, Harry is very, very *angry*.

So angry that he is filled to the overflowing with it. So angry that he can feel it like an electrical shock in his fingertips. So angry that all he wants to do is open his mouth and scream and scream and *scream*...

In his fifth year, he had looked Dumbledore in the face and been consumed with such a rage that he thought he might actually reach over and wrap his hands around the old man’s throat and *squeeze*. At the time, he hadn’t the foggiest idea where it had come from but now, he thinks, *now* he understands. And there’s a part of him, a crazy, irrational part that wants to turn and flee – a part of him that wants to go bang on Professor Quirrell’s door and yell at the face on the back of the man’s head. He wants to throw his hands up and scream to someone that *understands*.

“Mr. Potter, school policy recommends that I inform ...”

“No!” Harry cuts her off again and just like that he feels all of his hard-won control lost, all of his calm rationality shattered and he has to get up, he has to move. He can’t take it again. He can’t take standing in front of Dumbledore and being told that it’s a necessary evil. That his safety from Death Eaters and Voldemort’s wraith is more important than his day-to-day physical wellbeing. He’s up out of the bed before he can stop himself, fingers fisted so tightly in the front of Snape’s robes that his hands ache from the tension. “You can’t tell Dumbledore,” he begs of the other man. “You can’t!”

“Mr. Potter...!” Madam Pomfrey sounds like she’s about to order him back to bed and Snape is going to yell, Harry just knows it. He’s going to call Harry a selfish, arrogant dunderhead and take off a hundred house points...

Except he doesn’t.

Snape is as still as a statue as he stares down his nose at him, eyes widened in surprise at Harry’s sudden and unexpected assault. “And why not?”

“Because he’s the one who left me there!”

Oh, Harry thinks distantly as he stares at the line of buttons down the front of Snape’s robes. *Oh.*

He had spent the last month coming to terms with the knowledge that Albus Dumbledore had constantly kept him in the dark, that the man had manipulated his life or failed to step in when he should have in an effort to pit Harry against the Dark Lord again and again and again. He’s tried to come to terms with the fact that the man he had once viewed as a surrogate grandfather ultimately not only orchestrated his death but set it up in such a fashion that he knew Harry would have no choice but to go to it.

He’s tried to make his heart understand that Dumbledore might have cared about him but that ultimately, he cared about beating Tom Riddle *more*.

Dumbledore had rebuked the Dursleys only once for their treatment of Harry. Even then it had only been after his time there was up, in the moment before Dumbledore had whisked him away to entice Slughorn out of retirement. Only in the final hour, after their purpose had been nearly exhausted, did the Headmaster retract his tacit permission for the way they treated Harry.

Prior to this moment he had never thought to address the fact that Dumbledore had placed him with the Dursleys, that he had sent him back there again and again. That... that might have been a bloody big oversight on his part, a detached part of Harry admits.

The moment Harry had woken up on Dudley’s birthday for the second time and then walked out the door of Number Four Privet Drive he knew he would never be going back. He hadn’t been sure how, exactly, he would manage it, but he knew he would never go back there. There isn’t a force on this earth that can make him darken the doorway of Number Four ever again so it hadn’t occurred to him to think about the years that he had already spent there.

But now he is.

Bollocks.

“He left me there,” Harry repeats and sucks in a shaky breath, trying to calm the spike of rage that he can feel like a literal spear shoved up his throat until it pierces the roof of his mouth. Distantly he can hear the sound of glass breaking and he knows that’s him. That’s the force of his anger and his hurt moving through the room like a separate, living thing. Harry sucks in another breath and tries to walk himself through the breathing exercises that Hermione had



drummed into his head while trying (and mostly failing) to teach him to meditate. He realizes that he's still got his hands fisted in Snape's clothes and that's... awkward. And grounds enough for Snape to quietly plot his murder. Which he'll get away with, of course, because he's Snape. He lets go abruptly and stumbles backwards, fingers still curled into tense little talons.

"When I was a baby. He left me on the doorstep with nothing but a blanket and a note and Aunt Petunia didn't know a thing until she opened the door in the morning and found me lying there." It all comes out in a terrible rush. He can't get the words out fast enough. He can't bear the idea that they don't believe him or – possibly worse – will let it be swept under the rug again.

Because that had to have happened, he realizes. He has never been in the Hospital Wing for something as mundane as a *physical* before but he had been a semi-regular fixture in this vaulted, airy room for the duration of his stay at Hogwarts and he wonders, now that he's thinking about it, why no one has had this discussion with him before.

Probably because in absence of a responsible adult Madam Pomfrey took her concerns to the Headmaster as school policy apparently dictates. The manipulative bastard.

"You can't really suggest that he just..."

"It's not a suggestion!" Harry barks out, hands clenching into uncomfortable fists as he glares at the matron. "I'm not lying! Aunt Petunia likes to tell me all the time about how I ruined their perfect, normal life by being dumped on their doorstep with nothing but a note!"

He backs into the bed hard enough to rattle it and the sound is enough to make him jump, wincing away from an attack that never comes.

Merlin, he's losing his mind.

Harry inhales until his chest burns with it and lets it out slowly.

Once.

Twice.

Thrice.

*Think, don't just react*, he tells himself and scrambles for the threads of his control. He can't let it all come undone now.

"I'm not lying," he repeats lowly, fiercely. "I'm not."

"I know," Snape replies instantly, his voice filled with a quiet defeat.

He can't bring himself to look up, can't bring himself to see whatever might be written on either of their faces but that doesn't stop him from quietly begging, "Please don't tell him."

"I won't."

Harry swallows harshly and stands next to the bed in the infirmary feeling rather like a drowned kitten, the blinding panic and rage rushing away in the face of Snape's acknowledgement. Suddenly he wants nothing more than to go away and hide. He wants to crawl inside of his trunk and into his nest of blankets and curl of with Inigo. He wants the world to go away. He wants to pretend that it doesn't exist.

He wants to pretend that *he* doesn't exist.

Blinking rapidly against the sudden well of tears threatening to spill down his face Harry hunches his shoulders and wraps an arm around his stomach.

"Neither will I," Madam Pomfrey's voice is soft and reassuring. He doesn't trust it, not when less than five minutes ago she had jumped straight to thinking he was lying to her because his story disparaged the Headmaster but it's reassuring all the same. "School policy strongly recommends that I take any concerns to the Headmaster but legally, I am only required to submit my suspicions to your Head of House, which I have done so. The next course of action is up to him." She takes a deep breath and looks at him. "Forgive me, Mr. Potter. Once again I find myself distracted when I should be focused on doing my job." Harry must look as confused as he feels because she once again reaches out like she's going to pat him but stops, her hand hovering awkwardly in mid air before she pats the bed next to him instead. "Healing," she says gently, "and discussing your treatment plan."

Treatment... plan.

Harry stares.

He is staring.

He doesn't... he doesn't understand.

Which can truthfully be applied to a lot in his life. Really. But this seems rather straightforward and it just...

"Treatment plan," he repeats carefully, hoping that it will make more sense if he says it out loud.

It doesn't.

"Well, yes," Madam Pomfrey replies, sounding perplexed. "You can't have thought I would just leave you like this?"

Harry doesn't answer that because he thinks the question is probably rhetorical but also because, yes, he had. What is there to do? He's scrawny and underfed. That will go away, eventually, with regular meals and the exercise of moving around a place larger than the yard of Number Four. He doesn't have any injuries for her to heal as he made his escape from the Dursleys before Uncle Vernon could get particularly angry again and drag him around a bit before throwing him into his cupboard. Honestly, the largest hurt he's suffered since he woke up in this life was the ache in his arm from the not-scuffle with Ron in the entrance hall – and that had gone away by the time he went to bed!

He also has no intention of joining the quidditch team as a first year, confronting the troll, or battling a possessed Quirrell for the Sorcerer's Stone so he had expected his interactions with the mediwitch to be minimal this year. In fact, where it not for this mandatory physical he would not have expected to see her at all.

Madam Pomfrey sighs loud enough to draw his attention from his thoughts. "As I said before, you are very ill. To put it bluntly: your physical body is literally being powered by your magical core. You have severe vitamin and mineral deficiencies. Your bones are brittle. You are in the beginning stages of organ failure. You are lucky that you appear to be so powerful because you have a great deal of magic to devote to perpetually healing and supporting yourself. I do not want to scare you but I must make clear the seriousness of this situation: without your magic it is likely you would have died some time ago."

He knows this, of course, had even thought it as he walked through the infirmary doors but it's one thing to know it and another to have the mediwitch that's put him back together at least a half dozen times say it to him.

Even then though...

Everything feels simultaneously fuzzy and crystal clear, his focus narrowed to the words coming out of Madam Pomfrey's mouth and the way Snape stands next to him: not close enough to feel threatening but close enough that Harry can feel the heat of him against his clammy skin. Everything else is just... there. A mix of blurred lights and colors and noise revolving around the fixed point of his position. An entire existence whirling around him while he stand there, empty.

He had felt this way when he walked into the Forest, never to walk out again.

"Thankfully, much of what is wrong can be alleviated or reversed through a specially formulated diet, some regular physical therapy, and a rather extensive potion regimen," she continues, shooting a look at Snape who nods in response to her unasked question.

"Provide me with a list and I will see that it gets made... and taken," the look they both give Harry makes it clear that neither one of them will hear protests on this subject. Not that he is going to offer them. For starters, he's not that stupid but mostly he's not sure he could open his mouth even if he wanted to. His mind may still be running a thousand miles a minute beneath his unruly thatch of hair but his limbs are like lead. Even the barest of movements seems like too much effort and truthfully, he doesn't want to move. He wants to hold still, to curl up, to cease to exist.

To hold so still that everything passes him by, never to bother him again.

"It will be unpleasant," Madam Pomfrey tells him frankly and the sound of her voice is like an explosion going off in his ears. He flinches, minutely, but he knows that Snape sees. "You will need to take specially formulated nutrient potions, bone strengthening solution, muscle regenerative, an appetite stimulator, and a stomach soother just to start. The bone strengthening solution in particular will likely cause cold sweats, body aches, and headaches so you'll likely need to take Pepper Up and Headache Relief in moderation. The muscle regenerative will cause spasms and a frequent tightness. A daily exercise regime and soaking

in a warmth bath will help, as will the salve I'll give you. I will give you a mild Pain Relief Potion if it is needed but it mixes badly with the appetite stimulator so I would rather you hold off as much as you can."

Harry wants to tell her that it's not going to be a problem. He's had a bloody basilisk fang through his arm and spent years with Voldemort trying to make his head burst like a melon, not to mention been under the man's very heartfelt Cruciatus. Mere muscle tightness and pain is nothing. That's just what follows an Oliver Wood run quidditch practice.

But he doesn't.

Too much effort.

But he thinks she probably gets it anyway.

"So all that," he says slowly, once it becomes painfully, glaringly obvious that she expects him to actually say something, "and I'll be... fixed?"

Harry can't help sounding skeptical. It's not that it sounds like an *easy* fix, exactly, but it's certainly not a *difficult* one and while he realizes that Dumbledore ultimately probably didn't give a flying fuck about Harry's state of health (so long as he was alive to walk to his fate and die at the right moment) he can't believe that no one *else* thought to suggest... well, any of it.

Or maybe he can.

"Relatively," she tells him briskly. "You will probably always be a little smaller than you would have been and your immune system will never be as strong as it could be – you'll get sick easier than most people so you will have to be especially careful of your health during cold and flu season."

Harry wants to scoff at that. He's never actually been sick a day in his life.

He doesn't.

It doesn't matter.

"But other than that, yes, you will be 'fixed'. Better than, in fact," she assures him with a smile that he tries to return. "You'll need to be careful of your magic usage during the initial dosing period. Though, as you've not had any problems yet and more than one professor is well content to sing your praises, I don't anticipate any of the first year spells overtaking you but do limit your spell practice sessions to no more than a quarter of an hour at a time so that you don't overextend your magic. Picking up the habit of utilizing short, intensive practice sessions will also help you remain in control as you regain your magic."

Harry blinks.

Once.

Twice.

Thrice.

“...what?”

Madam Pomfrey looks at him, not unkindly, and he suddenly hates it except he doesn't have the energy to hate it. Instead, he's focused on her words, the implications of it chasing around and around in his head. Surely, she couldn't mean...?

“Your magic, dear,” she repeats. “I told you that it is keeping your physical body functional, didn't I? Once it no longer needs to do so it will return to you and be available for you to utilize elsewhere. It will be quite a bit of power too, I daresay. It's always hard to tell for certain with a core that hasn't fully developed yet but I estimate that running your body is consuming approximately half of your magical core. Possibly more.”

Half.

*Half* of his bloody magic tied up and unavailable to him.

Half.

Harry wants to cry. He wants to run. He wants to collapse onto the floor and wrap his arms around his knees. He wants to disappear to the rooftops or jump out a window. He wants... he wants...

A short, bitter laugh bubbles up Harry's throat and out of his lips as he shakes his head back and forth.

Half.

He had faced Voldemort – *more than once!* - with half of his magic. He had fought Death Eaters and fought for his life, seeming constantly, with *half of his magic*. Or less.

He laughs again.

Beyond him, beyond the bubble of his thoughts, he can hear the concerned tones of Madam Pomfrey and Snape's answering rumble.

How...? How had he survived? How had he managed? How had...

He had always thought himself an average student, an average wizard. Had always thought the idea that he is *Boy Who Lived* and *The Chosen One* to be utterly ridiculous because, prophecy or no, he's just Harry. Just an average, teenage wizard with no special training and no special abilities.

But now that's not true, is it?

He *had been* an average, teenage wizard with no special training and no special training – or as average as Harry Potter could possibly get. But really... really he had been operating at half of his potential.

Half.

It seems ridiculous. Absurd. Fucking *impossible*.

And yet...

He had once driven hundreds of dementors back, including one mid-way through administering the Kiss, with a single patronus.

He had locked wands with Lord Voldemort himself, arguably one of the most powerful wizards in centuries, and *forced his wand to submit*.

(In his head a little voice reminds him that he alone, out of the thousands that have tried, managed to unite the Deathly Hallows and conquer death.)

He doesn't realize that he is being moved until he stumbles out of a fireplace and lands flat on his face. The floor is hard and cold beneath his cheek, the stones worn smooth by nearly a thousand years of being walked upon.

He wonders what it's like to be like the stone: enduring and uncaring of all that passes over it.

"Merlin, Potter," Familiar black wool fills his vision along with the toe of a polished dragonhide boot and Harry blinks as Snape carefully slides an arm under his shoulder and helps him sit up.

"I hate the floo," he mutters, closing his eyes against the ash that is falling from his hair. "Never manage to keep my feet."

"Well at least you're talking again," Snape's voice rumbles near his ear and Harry blinks as the ash vanishes from his hair and clothes with a flick of the potion master's wand. He's standing now though his legs are liquid and the only reason he's not back on the floor is Snape's arm around his shoulders.

"I..." he begins but Snape interrupts with a familiar tightness to his thin lips,

"You're experiencing a bit of shock," the man tells him. "Why don't you..."

The next time Harry blinks he's sitting in one of the chairs opposite the desk in Snape's office with a mug of steaming, cream dotted hot chocolate clutched in his hands and a thick, green knit blanket draped around his shoulders. There's a fire roaring in the grate. Harry didn't even know the man's office had a fireplace. And there has to be a cushioning charm on this chair because it is significantly more comfortable than he remembers it being.

"Umm..." he begins and then stops because he has no idea where to begin.

"You had a shock, Mr. Potter," Snape informs him, looking up from where he is sitting next (*next!*) to Harry, one leg crossed over the other with a stack of parchments balanced across his knee and a familiar, red-inked quill held in one hand. "Madam Pomfrey and I thought it best that you retire to somewhere a little less threatening than the hospital wing. I will go

over the details of your treatment plan with you once you have had the opportunity to... collect yourself.”

Harry blinks again because he is pretty sure that Madam Pomfrey has never voluntarily let someone leave her domain, which means... Snape must have made her.

“Thank you, sir,” he whispers roughly. “And I’m sorry...”

“Don’t be an idiot, Mr. Potter,” Snape interrupts with a sneer. “You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“But...”

But if he had just been stronger, if he hadn’t been so *weak*...

Snape pins him in place with a glare that is probably meant to be threatening – first First Year Harry had been positively cowed by it, he remembers – but really, Harry just finds the familiarity of it to be a warm, comforting weight and his protestations die in his throat. “You have nothing to be sorry for,” Snape repeats slowly, but firmly. “None of this is your fault.”

Harry hears the words and he knows – he *knows* – that Snape is right.

It doesn’t feel that way though.

It’s never felt that way.

Snape sighs, long and drawn out. There is a shuffle of parchment, the dry leaves rustling against each other as he sets them on the corner of his desk and lays the quill that has cut better students than Harry into naught but bloody ribbons down on top of them. He watches the man carefully from the corner of his eyes as he sips at his hot chocolate. Its rich and creamy, sliding down his throat with ease, but there’s something odd about it. A slight, vaguely floral coolness that curls around in his mouth as he swallows.

Calming Draught.

He might complain under other circumstances but considering he can’t actually remember leaving the Hospital Wing Harry is inclined to let the incident pass without comment.

“When I was three years old my father hit me with bottle of whiskey. Broke my nose,” Snape tells him and there’s a tightness in his fingers as he laces them over his knee, knuckles going white as he speaks. “Then he belted me across the face with his fist for being such a pathetic baby. It is my first vivid memory: the pain of it and the way the blood tasted in my mouth. That, and wondering what I had done wrong. It was quite a few years before I realized that he didn’t treat me that way because I had done something wrong but because he was a pathetic, piss-poor excuse for a human being and decades before I realized that him treating me that way didn’t mean that I was weak. It meant that he was.”

Harry stares over the rim of his mug and tries to make sense of the man sitting next to him. Tries to reconcile the Snape sitting there with white knuckles and viciously squared shoulders with his lips pressed so tightly together that they’ve practically disappeared with the Snape

who spent six years berating Harry and telling him how stupid and arrogant and *useless* he was.

How much of it had been an act? How much of it had been real?

Is Snape the fiercely brave, stalwart spy or the vicious, bullying bastard?

Perhaps they are just two faces of a lonely, bitter, deeply remorseful man forced into a life he would have rather not lived, seeing one of his own tormentors come again in a child's face.

He takes another sip of his hot chocolate and lets the frantic beating of thoughts drain away to be written out and mulled over later.

"They kept me in the cupboard under the stairs," he says suddenly, unable to stand the strained, uneasy silence that has settled over them with Snape's confession. "I've never had a real, proper room of my own even though my cousin has *two*. I don't have a bed or even a mattress and when I'm not doing chores I was expected to lay in there and pretend I didn't exist. If I made any noise then I didn't any food for the day. A lot of days I didn't any anyway, because they could feel my *freakishness* ruining their perfect life."

Snape's lips twist in a hateful sneer. "Petunia always was a spiteful bitch," he mutters so quietly that Harry barely hears him and thinks that he wasn't supposed to hear him because Snape's next words are noticeably louder. "You will never have to go back there."

"But Dumbledore..."

"I have already stated that I do not intend to tell the Headmaster anything," Snape reminds him. "I am a man of my word. This will not be the first time that I have had to make alternative arrangements for one of my students and I doubt it will be the last."

Harry fidgets, tapping his fingers restlessly against the side of the mug. "It's not that," he mumbles, staring at the dregs curling around the bottom of the cup, though honestly that doesn't surprise him at all. "It's just..."

"Yes?" Snape prompts.

"In the letter. Dumbledore... he said that I had to stay there. That something my mum did provided me with protection so long as I stayed with family and that it would also protect them from wizards that might come hunting them because they were related to me." Harry shrugs. "So I have to go back."

"Mr. Potter," Snape lets out a long sigh. "If you think for one moment that I will send you back to an abusive environment when I have the power to prevent it, then you are an imbecile."

Harry's brow furrows in consternation. "But my relatives..."

"Their well being is not more important than yours, especially against an insubstantial and imprecise threat."



“Oh,” says Harry quietly, because he doesn’t know what to say. Doesn’t know how to respond to the blasphemy of Snape’s words. A significant portion of Harry’s life has revolved around those blood wards, around ensuring that they were maintained no matter the cost. He doesn’t know how to react to the idea that they are not worth the price being demanded.

At the idea that maybe, just maybe, *he* actually matters more than the protection in his blood. More than what he can do.

Now that is a terrifying thought.

That he, as a person, might *matter*. Might be entitled to something silly like security.

“Oh,” he says again and he hates how broken and *lost* he sounds to his own ears.

Snape’s hand on his shoulder is... gentle and unthreatening, nothing but a solid, warm weight to keep him tethered in his skin. “I promise you, Harry, you will never have to go back there again.”

And Harry believes it. He has to.

Because he knows just how far Severus Snape will go to keep his word.

He nods once in understanding, a jerky, ragged thing as he stares unseeing into the mug still clutched in his hand, tears pricking at his eyes and splashing down his face.

For the first time since he arrived here –

No.

For the first time since he left Dumbledore’s pensieve he doesn’t feel so utterly, terrifyingly alone.

# Ten

## Chapter Notes

There's a much longer author's note at the end but I wanted to thank you for all of your support and patience as I fit writing in around my crazy life (I really did not mean for there to be so long between this update and the last!). This story just passed 8,000 kudos and I am literally screaming into a pillow (and my 10 year old is laughing at me).

You all are the best.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Harry's second week back at Hogwarts is both better and worse than the first.

His return to consciousness on Saturday morning is a slow, heavy thing. At first, he doesn't want to wake up. He is warm and comfortable and he still has the traces of Dreamless Sleep swimming in his veins. And it's a Saturday. All bloody good reasons to turn over and nuzzle into the clean, faintly lavender scented softness of his pillow.

So he does.

*"Stop moving,"* Inigo orders from beneath the covers. *"You're disturbing the nest."*

*"Sorry,"* Harry hisses reflexively. The snake shifts around between the sheets, his tongue flickering against the inside of Harry's arm. There's no accompanying squeeze so he figures it's more of an acknowledgement than anything else.

For an indeterminable amount of time the two of them lay curled beneath the duvet and warm flannel sheets: warm and heavy, floating on the cloud that is a Hogwarts mattress. His makeshift bed of blankets and a pillows in the trunk had been comfortable enough. Even without a mattress it had been an improvement over the worn, spring-broken things on the bunks in the tent and is certainly miles better than his ratty blanket and equally ratty mattress in his closet. Honestly, it's such a bloody improvement that Harry has woken himself up more than once over the past week because his unconscious brain cannot wrap itself around the strangeness of the comfort and warmth surrounding him.

It's only when he's definitely more asleep than awake, drifting off into a dark, dreamless oblivion that it all comes screaming back.

Hogwarts.

The Hospital Wing.

Madam Pomfrey.

His body.

His *magic*.

*Snape*.

“Oh, fuck.”

Harry sits bolt upright in his bed and blinks against the unexpected grainy dryness of his vision. His contacts. He must have left them in. He must have left them in because... because...

Last night is about as blurry as his vision. He doesn't remember leaving the Hospital Wing or how he got back to Snape's office but he remembers drinking hot chocolate laced with calming draught, which was probably a good call on Snape's part, all things considered. He remembers Snape telling him something about how his dad hit him. He... oh, shit. He told Snape about living in the cupboard under the stairs. That's... he can't believe he did that, actually. Or maybe he can.

It's a terrible, awful feeling.

He feels raw and wounded, scraped out and hollow. He wants to pull the covers over his head and curl up and hide. He wants to never see another person again. He longs for his invisibility cloak, for the ability to slip it over his head and run away – to disappear within all the twists and turns and secrets of Hogwarts' walls.

But it's also a relief.

It's a relief that someone knows. Someone who isn't Hermione. Someone who has the experience to understand him. Someone who doesn't look at him with pity, who doesn't stare at him like he is breakable and *weak*.

The fact that it is Snape – *Snape!* – who had offered him calming draught and nonjudgmental understanding is enough to make him laugh a little hysterically as he rubs at sore eyes and winces at the fresh reminder that he hadn't taken out his contacts.

Because Snape had all but tucked him in bed and tipped Dreamless Sleep into his mouth.

He blinks some more, swearing as he very carefully removes them and holds them carefully in one hand while searching for their case on the bedside table. He finds it, but not before he nearly knocks over a potions vial and feels a piece of parchment slip from beneath his fingers.

Bloody hell.

Swearing under his breath and feeling rather like he's sprinted all the way to the quidditch pitch and back, he manages to put his contacts away and slip his glasses onto his face without falling out his bed. Once he can see more than vague, blurry light and dark shapes he summons the piece of parchment from the floor.

*Mr. Potter,*

*This is your first dose of your prescribed nutrient potion. Make sure to eat something within 30 minutes of ingesting it.*

*As we neglected to go over your treatment course in any detail last night please report to my office at 2 o'clock this afternoon.*

*Professor S. Snape*

Harry stares at the parchment for a moment and then turns to eye the potions vial laying on its side from when he knocked it over. The liquid inside of it is a deep, rich brown flecked with pale green and a pearlescent sheen that ripples as the potion moves back and forth in small, rippling waves. It's definitely one of the prettier potions he's had to take over the course of his life and not what he expected at all. For some reason, when faced with the thought of nutrient potions the only thing he could imagine was the vile, bubbling swamp-mess of Polyjuice. This definitely looks better.

Hopefully it ends up tasting better, Harry thinks as he gathers his courage, tenses his stomach and tips the contents of the vial across his tongue.

Huh.

It does.

Taste better.

Marginally.

It's thick and chalky on his tongue and hard to swallow but it tastes like over steeped tea and oranges and salt. Harry swallows several times and finds himself rubbing his tongue across the bottom of his teeth, trying to scour away the odd feel of it from his mouth.

"*Well that's going to be pleasant,*" he mutters to Inigo, not at all sure if he's talking about the sheer number of potions stretching before him or his after lunch appointment with Snape. Inigo offers no clarity and only gives a slight flick of his tail to indicate that he is listening. Nestled in the warmth of the soft flannel sheets, the gold and rose of his scales practically glows in the filtered light coming in through the lake. Harry stares at him fondly and rubs a gentle finger across his scales, searching for dry patches. "*How did you get here, anyway?*" he asks as the serpent winds up his arm and presents his head for scratches.

Normally, every night once he's decided that he's done with the school outside of Slytherin's dormitories he descends into his trunk and fetches Inigo from his expansive terrarium to keep him company while he works on homework, continues his research into the magical world, and gets to know the other members of his dorm and his house. He enjoys the unjudging companionship, the company of someone whose only expectations run more towards fat

mice, warming charms, and using the superiority of his fingernails to scratch at itchy, too small skin.

It's nice. Grounding.

Also, his dorm mates, despite acting like everything is perfectly normal, still look a little wild around the edges of their eyes and Harry has noticed Draco, Blaise, and Theo all staring at him in various levels of shock, awe, disbelief, and thoughtfulness when they thought Harry didn't notice them. Greg and Vincent just flat out stare.

Harry wonders what it says about him that he finds the whole thing rather gratifying.

Still, last night he *hadn't* taken Inigo from inside his trunk because he had had his physical. And then he had gone to Snape's office. And then Snape had all but put him to bed and...

Harry scrunches his brow in thought.

*"You came and got me from the tiny nest. I had to wait a long time. You were cold,"* Inigo replies almost hesitantly and Harry's fingers go still on his scales. He hadn't been aware that snakes could sound worried. By default, snakes seem to sound rather demanding and blunt. Their world is very straightforward, Harry thinks.

But Inigo sounds worried.

*"Was something wrong?"*

*"You were cold and too fastslowstill. Like a mouse that manages to wriggle its way free but then stops. I didn't like it. You scared us. I could taste it."*

*"Was someone there?"* He adds after a second, Inigo's odd phrasing catching his attention and still trying to piece together exactly what had happened. He'd like to blame the Dreamless Sleep, he really would, but he's familiar enough with shock to know that it's not the potion's fault. At least not entirely.

*"A fullgrown. Tall. Very quiet. He smelltasted of green things and quickhotcoldsharp. Like many things. All different. All at once."*

Snape, he thinks. He imagines that his daily contact with dozens upon dozens of different potions ingredients muddled Inigo's senses.

*"Helped close up the traveling Home Nest. Helped us into new soft nest."* Inigo, despite the earlier concern, clearly approves. Harry decides to take it all as a sign that him having a somewhat secret apartment hidden in his trunk isn't going to pop out and bite him right on the arse during his meeting with the Potions Master later. Even though it probably is. Harry is expecting an eyebrow of disdain at the very least.

The plaintive gurgling of his stomach interrupts his thoughts and Harry sighs.

"Right," he mutters, swinging his legs over the side of his bed. "Breakfast."

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“See, I told you he was fine,” Blaise says as he slides onto the bench opposite Harry. Harry blinks and looks up from his breakfast – simple porridge and fruit– to find a very pinched faced Draco staring at him over Blaise’s shoulder as the other boy begins to fix his own breakfast.

“Uh... good morning?” he offers hesitantly. He’s not unfamiliar with being pinned by Draco Malfoy’s stare but usually it’s a bit colder than this. And Harry usually has some idea about what he’s fucking done to provoke it.

He’s not sure what he’s done – existing, maybe? But that seems very first-life Draco and not second-life Draco. Maybe he snores? - but Draco is definitely glaring, his nose halfway to the ceiling and his arms crossed over his chest.

“You didn’t come back last night!” Draco finally hisses as he sits next to Blaise. He’s so quiet that Harry can hardly hear him over the soft rumble of the students having a lazy Saturday morning breakfast.

Harry protests almost instantly, “I did!” Because second-life Draco might not realize the importance of this but *Harry has not broken curfew*. He has been back at Hogwarts for an entire bloody week and he has not stayed out late, he has not snuck out, he has not spent hours in the middle of the night wandering drafty, magical halls. And even though part of Harry realizes that Draco knows none of this and has exactly zero context to understand why it’s a big deal his first reaction is still a sharp, bright burst of offense.

Draco scoffs.

“I did,” Harry repeats stubbornly, unable to hide his hurt and confusion. “My physical ran long. Snape brought me back. Everyone was already asleep.”

Draco stares at him for what seems like an impossibly long time. Next to him Blaise rolls his eyes so hard that it’s a miracle they don’t fall right out of his head. Harry would be kind of impressed if he wasn’t so baffled by Draco. After what feels like forever, Draco’s shoulders slump and his entire body... well, it doesn’t really *relax* but he no longer looks like he’s about to start screaming. Or reach across the table and strangle Harry.

Nah, that’s too muggle. He’d definitely curse him.

Harry bets Draco already knows at least a handful of curses.

“That’s really long,” Draco finally points out. “Are you...no.” He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath, straightening his spine and squaring his shoulders just enough that he no longer looks relaxed but all... proper. Like he should be walking around a room with books balanced on head. “My apologies. I am glad that you made it back safely.”

Harry blinks.

“...er,” he finally says because if he doesn’t say something he’s probably going to sit there with his mouth hanging open. “Don’t worry about it,” he dismisses with a small smile but Draco doesn’t look at him, focusing instead at the platter of pastries resting between them.

Harry sighs. He doesn't want to watch Draco disappear behind that overly formal mask and there's only one thing to prevent that.

He waves his spoon in the other boy's line of sight.

"It..." he pauses as suddenly as he began, pressing his lips together. He doesn't *want* to tell Draco about how his body is so fucked over by a lifetime of abuse that if he weren't so bloody powerful he'd have been dead and in the ground a long, long time ago. For one, he doesn't need that sort of thing bandied about and Draco is a bit of a gossip. Plus, Harry rather imagines that even if he kept his mouth shut at school he likely tells his parents *everything*. It's too much of a liability – both his weakness and his strength contained in a single story. Especially if that story is being given to Lucius Malfoy. But he does want to tell Draco something. He doesn't want to hide from his friends. He's *never* been able to hide from his friends. At least not well. "It's just some old injuries that didn't heal right," he settles for saying. "They're a little tricky. And I haven't had any of my magical immunizations. I have a meeting with Snape this afternoon to sort it all out."

All true, strictly speaking.

"See," Blaise drawls again, nudging at Draco with his elbow until the platinum haired boy relaxes again. "I told you he was fine."

Draco lets out a breath Harry hadn't realized he had been holding. "I can't believe you've never had your immunizations," he huffs, finally selecting a flakey offering and transferring to his plate.

Harry shrugs and goes back to his oatmeal. "Never been to a healer," he answers and that's that. They spend the rest of breakfast discussing their plans for the weekend.

Harry feels Blaise's gaze on him the entire time, eyes thoughtful.

---

After breakfast they spend less than an hour in the library before abandoning their homework and, joined by Neville, Mandy, Susan, and Hannah depart on an expedition to explore the halls and grounds of their new home. They barely scratch the surface of the expansive estate and they definitely don't go anywhere that Harry hasn't been before but it's fun to run around and act like a child discovering something new. It's nice not having to worry about anything beyond the occasional group of eager fans that spot him hiding amidst his friends and try to follow them.

Keyword being *try*.

Harry may, as subtly as he is capable of, utilize his extensive knowledge of Hogwarts to allow him and his new friends to slip away from them.

Marietta Edgecombe's face when she finds herself stuck up to her knees on one of the trick stairs is absolutely worth the act of nearly tripping over his robes and actually banging his elbow on the bannister. Harry resists the urge to smirk back at her as Hannah flutters around him.

Blaise practices no such restraint, glaring up the shifting staircase to where the second year is moving up towards the fourth floor. “Are they still harassing you?” he asks once Hannah is assured of his well-being.

“Yeah. I suspect it’ll take a few weeks before it begins to die down.” Or, that’s about how long it had taken last time. As far as he can remember.

“Have you complained to the professors?”

“What are they going to do? *Tell* people to leave me alone?” Harry scoffs and shakes his head at the thought.

“Well, yes. To start.”

“Because *that’s* going to work.”

“I-i-it m-might,” Neville points out.

“Not if Professor Sprout is the one saying it,” Susan concedes after a moment. “She’s too nice.”

“...but she’s not your head of house!” Hannah points out excitedly as they spill out of the main doors and out into the rays of Scottish sunshine. “Professor Snape is loads scarier. He’d probably relish the opportunity to take points from other houses.”

That’s... that’s rather accurate, actually. Especially considering Hannah has only had to sit through a single Potions class and ignoring the fact that even mentioning the words *fame* or *fans* to severe Potions Master is liable to get his head bitten off. Quite possibly literally. If nothing else, Harry thinks that the other professors might possibly be more helpful of his situation simply to stop Snape from taking away every single point their houses have ever earned.

Provided that he didn’t kill Harry first.

Or laugh him out of his office.

That’s what he’s really afraid of, he knows. He and Snape are... something. Not enemies. Bonding, maybe? The events of last night have turned his entire world on end again and he’s grateful – so bloody, desperately grateful – for every scrap of kindness and support the man gives him that he’s exceedingly wary of upsetting their current interactions.

Snape is seeing *Harry* and the very, *very* last thing Harry wants to do is to accidentally make him see *James* instead.

“You said you’re meeting with him this afternoon,” Draco points out unhelpfully.

Harry sighs. “I’ll think about it,” he promises and Draco’s eyes light up, pleased.

Bollocks.



Now he's really going to have to bring it up because if he doesn't Draco probably accidentally-on-purpose *will*.

---

In the light of day Snape's office is much more how he remembers it.

Cool and dim with a carefully orchestrated gloomy air obviously meant to scare the pants off any poor dunderhead who dares to brave the Dungeon Bat's Den. Instead of being slightly terrified of the whole situation Harry – with six years of questionable instructions, the scribbled notes of the Half Blood Prince, and having actually bothered to *read* several texts on the subject of potions and potions ingredients – is more than a little intrigued by the ingredients and rarities on display. His desk is the enormous scarred monstrosity that it has always been, its surface littered with various stacks of parchment, a plain black mug filled with quills, an entire line of inkwells, and a box by his elbow containing potions samples. The fireplace that he had never noticed before is empty and cold on the wall across from his desk and looking like it hasn't been lit since Tom Riddle arrived at Hogwarts for the very first time.

"Mr. Potter, sit," Snape instructs without looking up from where he's once again marking essays, though a quick flick of his wand as Harry sits down cushions the spindly chair into the almost comfort that Harry remembers from last night. "Did you take the nutrient potion this morning?"

Harry nods. "Yes, sir."

"Good. Any dizziness, nausea, or blurred vision?"

"Um...no?" Or if there had been any he hadn't noticed, which isn't as impossible as one might think. Harry is well versed in ignoring what his body tries to tell him.

Snape nods his head absentmindedly, clearing off most of the parchment from his desk and replacing it with a handful of vials and a stubby little salve pot. Harry recognizes the nutrient potion that he had taken just this morning and the bright cherry red of the headache relief potion as well as the opaque, effervescence of the Pepper Up potion. The others are a mystery but Harry's willing to bet that he's going to have to take every single one of them.

Brilliant.

Over the next hour Harry gets to listen to Snape explain the basic, stripped down necessities of his potion regime for the next several months. Though Madam Pomfrey is the one that is officially in charge of his prescription Snape is the one doing all of the brewing and thus will be distributing them to Harry with the help of house elves to see that the doses are available to him at the appropriate times.

The nutrient potion, as already seen, has to be taken every morning and followed up with a suitable breakfast within half an hour. Both the headache relief and the Pepper Up potions will only be available on request. It's obvious, to Harry at least, that Snape rather expects him to request them a lot. The appetite stimulator – a small vial filled with a pale, pastel yellow

liquid – should be taken then as well. Snape spends fifteen minutes alone going over the list of foods Harry should have and those he should avoid.

“I will be watching and if selecting your own meals is too much for you to handle the house elves will be making a plate up for you and you will not be permitted to touch anything else,” Snape tells him sternly and if he has the elf elves on his side then he’ll definitely be able to enforce his threat. Merlin’s beard, he’d probably be able to enforce it anyway. Harry inwardly resigns himself to months without treacle tart and nods his head.

Oh.

He's going to have to think of a good excuse to not take every piece of chocolate that Hannah cheerfully shoves at him every time she sees him. A good one, so that he doesn't break her helpful little heart.

Bugger.

He's bollocks at excuses.

There's a larger bottle of the stomach soother that Harry will be permitted to carry around in his school bag that Snape assures him that he will be in need of – if not from recovering from prolonged malnourishment then almost definitely because of the way several of the other potions will make him feel.

The bone strengthening solution also must be taken in the morning. “After you have eaten or else you're liable to start spilling your guts all over the floor,” Snape cautions and Harry eyes the unassuming little bottle with no small amount of trepidation after that. Of course, Snape's comments following the introduction of the muscle regenerative are even less reassuring.

“It must be taken at least eight hours before or eight hours after the bone strengthening solution or they react negatively with each other in a way that I believe you would not appreciate being detailed. Suffice to say if for some godforsaken reason you cannot adhere to simple instruction you will spend several days in regretful, painful contemplation. Am I clear?”

Harry swallows. “Perfectly, sir.”

“As you did not take a bone strengthening solution this morning I would like you to take the first dose of the muscle regenerative now.” Snape pushes the appropriate vial across the desk with a slender, stained finger and waits until Harry picks it up.

\*It's a standard potion's vial – nothing too large or too small and filled with a violet colored liquid. Harry stares at it, brow furrowed, trying to figure out why Snape would insist on him taking it *now*. It's not poisoned. He's pretty sure, anyway. If Snape were to actually poison him he imagines the man would have done so long, long ago.

Still, Snape does nothing without a reason and the reason for this particular act eludes him. Out of all the potions why *this* one? Why right now?

Harry sighs. What is he doing? He's too bloody tired to try and figure out what Snape is thinking. Frankly, he's not sure he will ever be awake enough to try and out think Severus Snape.

He drinks the potion.

Snape watches him for a moment, dark eyes fixed on Harry as if he expects him to explode and drift away in tatters and ribbons. "Hmm," he hums after several minutes have passed.

"Sir?"

"The muscle regenerative contains whole blooms of digitalis, more commonly called foxglove," Snape answers, seemingly random. Harry bites down on several retorts all amounting to *that is not what I asked you* and waits. "Your mother was highly allergic to the plants. If you were going to swell up and go into anaphylactic shock from ingesting the potion, I would prefer it be in front of me, where I can help, instead of alone in your dorm."

Eyes widening, Harry stares down at the vial held in his hand. It suddenly feels so much more important than a tempered glass tube with the dregs of a potion clinging to the bottom curves. It feels like a *link*. Like something real. It's the same sort of feeling he gets when he holds the Marauder's Map or the invisibility cloak. Not the same, not exactly, but something close. His mum hadn't made this vial. She hadn't used it, hadn't touched it with her own two hands. The connection is there, all the same, and perhaps even stronger because of how little he knows about his mum.

*Talented. Beautiful. Uncommonly kind.*

The words he has heard to describe her flit through his mind and make his heart clench. They are all he has of her – a few paltry words, the green of her eyes, and the power of her sacrifice swimming in his veins trying to protect him from all the harm that might find him. It's all so little, so sparse a memory for the woman who defeated Voldemort.

*Your mother was highly allergic.*

He files this knowledge away with all of his other carefully hoarded facts and just for a moment he wishes that he were highly allergic to foxglove blooms. Just so that he could have that with her. Share that with her. Have proof that he just didn't exist. That he had a mum, once upon a time, who loved him and who was alive and human and *real*.

"*Oh*," the soft word is punched out of him as his fingers close around the vial. "I didn't know."

Snape raises an unimpressed eyebrow in a silent *obviously* but Harry can't bring himself to mind. He smiles at the vial.

"No one ever talks about her," he says. "I saw her wedding picture in a book but I've never..." He's never seen a picture of her as a child. The album that Hagrid had gifted him with had included pictures of her, of course, but they were all from once she was older. Once she had started dating his dad. He had never known what his mum as a child had looked like

until he had fallen into Snape's memories and even then it had been Petunia's easily recognizable presence that had clued him in to her identity more than anything else. "It's nice to hear about her," he finally settles for saying his voice catching in his throat. "Did you know her, sir?"

On the other side of the desk Snape's face is almost perfectly blank. If Harry didn't know him he would have missed the sudden signs of tension but Harry does know him. Well, as much as anyone can know a man like Severus Snape. He knows him and so he catches the tightness there at the edges of his mouth and in the way he folds his hands on top of his desk.

Harry has the sudden urge to kick himself. Why would he ask such a thing? It's not like Snape will tell him. Bloody hell, maybe he *can't* tell Harry. Or maybe he thinks he can't. But now that Harry has asked, now that he's opened the door, Snape is going to lie to him. Harry just knows it. Just like he knows that it is going to hurt when he does.

"We were in the same year at school," Snape says unexpectedly. "Different houses, of course, but we shared the same Potions class and partnered together for five years. The first class in which we used foxglove blooms was... memorable." The drawl of his voice drips with amusement but there's a flash of something else in his eyes, there and gone almost too fast to track: a remembered terror.

Harry is suddenly reminded that Slughorn had been Snape's professor. Slughorn, who had stood to the side and panicked while Ron convulsed on the floor in front of him.

"Thank you, sir," he says and pretends that it is for the small story, the small kernel of knowledge Snape has gifted him. And it is, mostly. But it's also for probably saving his mum's life.

Snape inclines his head ever so slightly. "Now that we have determined that you are not in danger of dying dramatically every evening, let us move on."

Harry nods and listens but he also still holds on to the potion vial, sitting with it clutched in one fist until his time with Snape is done and he lays it on the scarred, polished surface of the desk.

It's harder than it should be to let it go.

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The next morning there three vials sitting on his bedside table when he wakes and propped against them is a single photograph. It is a muggle photo. The corners are curled slightly with age. The subject is unmoving and sepia toned but still clear and identifiable.

The face of a girl with sleek red hair and shining green eyes stares back at him, face split in a grin so wide it looks like it hurts as she stares straight into the camera. She's bundled up in a standard black cloak but there's a Gryffindor scarf wrapped around her neck and one hand is raised and blurred as if she were waving when the picture was taken. On the back in a familiar – if more childish than he is used to seeing – spikey handwriting is the description:

*Lily's first quidditch match. Gryffindor v. Ravenclaw*

November 6, 1971

Harry sits on his bed with the picture held carefully in his hands and Inigo curled up his arm and cries.

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“See, I told you he would appreciate the chance to take points!” Hannah sounds entirely too excited over the fact, especially considering that it is two poor unsuspecting Hufflepuffs that Snape has swooped down upon and is berating with an expression on his face that might be called gleeful on any other person.

“Y-y-you sh-should have s-seen h-him th-this mor-morning,” Neville stammers, a pleased little smile on his rounded face. “He t-t-took fifty p-points f-from G-gryffindor!”

Harry turns to his friends, eyes round. He hadn’t known about *that* incident. Ever since he had mentioned – grimacing and staring determinedly at the floor as to not see the scorn on his professor’s face – that he was maybe, possibly feeling more than a little harassed by three quarters of the school trying to follow him into bathrooms and more or less trailing after him like a horde of hungry baby dragons Snape has been taking points and assigning detentions left, right, and center. If it weren’t for the occasional tighter and darker than usual glare on the man’s face Harry might have thought that Christmas had come early for the Potions Master.

(*“Harry Potter...our new celebrity.”*)

He shakes his head.

“Merlin, everyone is going to hate me,” Harry breathes, torn between burying his face in his hands and grinning like a loon. Later, he will probably laugh more than a little hysterically at the whole situation.

“Well, not everyone,” Mandy corrects with a consolatory pat to his back.

Harry groans.

“You should still get a solicitor,” Blaise remarks from Mandy’s other side. The other boy has seamlessly made himself part of their little group since his inclusion in their Saturday explorations.

“What is it with you and...”

“No, he’s right,” Susan interrupts with a bob of her head, ponytail swinging. “Now that there are punishments on record for harassment of a student you have the grounds to prosecute for harassment and stalking of a minor if they continue.”

“But I don’t want to prosecute anyone!” Harry protests, slightly horrified at the thought. Would he like people to stop following him around? Yes, of course he would but that’s not a realistic expectation and he certainly doesn’t want to make a fuss over it. Even this... this point taking is too much. Mostly. Eventually the furor will die down – for the most part,

anyway. At least until he does something noteworthy or completely unexpected. Again. He's eventually going to be making a lot of waves. Waves that will garner him a lot of attention. It seems unnecessary to curb a bunch of school children when there are bigger threats out there.

Everyone gives him a pointed look. Even Neville.

"...right?"

Mandy pats his back again.

"Harry," Susan says, not unkindly but in a voice that Harry recognizes as a rather no-nonsense, listen-to-me-you-idiot tone. "You are being stalked and harassed. You're eleven! If you let it go now what are people going to do when you're a little older? Photographs and libel in the paper? Love potions?"

"At the very least," Blaise agrees seriously.

"... yes?" Harry agrees, baffled. Because that is exactly what had happened. People take his picture and write about him because he's the Boy-Who-Lived. People send him gifts laced with love potions and try to kill him. It's just how it works. He's not a naïve idiot. Not anymore. Harry knows what to expect. He's ready for it this time.

The look on Neville's face is enough to make Harry take half a step backwards. "T-t-that's n-not okay," he gets out between gritted teeth, his friendly face fixed into something determined and ferocious. For a minute Harry feels like he is staring in the face of man who would fight Death Eaters face to face and dare to defy Snape and the Carrows, running a resistance right under their noses. This is the face of the boy who could have been the *Chosen One*, the one who has the potential to be the Dark Lord's equal for all that there is no scar on his head or horcrux wrapped in his soul.

"The use of love potions on a minor is a felony offense," Susan adds grimly. "If it's anything other than a Class I it's an automatic year in Azkaban. And that's in addition to any charges of assault or line theft."

Harry stares, opening and closing his mouth several times before he finally just settles on staring at them because that... that can't be right? Fred and George had sold love potions in their shop... hadn't they? And no one had made a big deal over Romilda Vane's gift of love potion laced chocolates.

Though, Harry admits above the static in his head, that may have been because they were more worried about *Ron being poisoned*.

"If you don't put a stop to this now everyone will think they can walk all over you," Draco adds, his face pinched with worry.

"I'll ask my aunt about solicitors," Susan promises him and when he opens his mouth to protest again she adds, "It's not a big deal." Like she expects *that* to be the problem he has with all of this.

“And I’ll write mother. I’m sure your aunt will make good recommendations,” Blaise hurries to assure Susan, though the girl doesn’t look offended. “But given the situation Harry might appreciate someone more...aggressive.”

Um. No. No Harry does not think he will appreciate someone more aggressive. Harry does not even think he understands what is going on. How did they get here? Why are they having this conversation? Hadn’t they been working on their Transfiguration homework? *How do they even know all of this?*

He must have said the last bit out loud because both Blaise and Susan answer at the same time:

“My aunt.”

“Mother.”

“My father,” Draco adds when Harry looks at him. "Mother too."

Neville hunches a little but adds, “G-gran.”

Hannah, thank Merlin, just gives him a shrug that he takes to mean “Don’t worry, I have no idea what’s going on either.”

“I read,” Mandy deadpans when Harry turns his gaze to where she is sitting next to him. She doesn’t even look up from her book. “You might as well let them,” she adds, with another half-hearted pat to his back. “They’re probably going to do it anyway.”

“We are,” Blaise and Susan voice together.

Harry feels rather trapped. Cornered. He doesn’t... he doesn’t want *this*. This is too much. Too... something. *It’s unnecessary*.

He’s nobody special. Really. He’s Harry, *just Harry*, and making a big deal out of nothing isn’t going to do him any favors.

Still, there’s a peculiar warmth in the middle of his chest that he can’t quite manage to ignore.

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When Madam Pomfrey and then Snape had warned him of the almost certain side effects of his potion regimen Harry had privately scoffed. He has spent years fighting dizziness and nausea because he is constantly hungry. He has nearly been Kissed. He has been tied up, cut open, and tortured. He has been possessed. He has *died*. Really, the idea of a headache and maybe an upset stomach being enough to cause him any issues in his day to day life is *laughable*.

An opinion that is proven true for the first few days. The muscle regenerative makes him a little dizzy but as he takes it later in the evening, when he is getting ready for bed, he doesn’t find it to be much of a problem. The bone strengthening solution, on the other hand, is revolting and it sits heavily in his gut, churning his stomach for hours. Still, Harry is used to being nauseated and a few sips of the stomach soother usually bring it down to bearable

levels. Not even his first physical therapy appointment with Madam Pomfrey on Tuesday evening is as awful as he expected it to be. Sure, his muscles are sore but even in the height of his quidditch playing days – or his running from Dudley playing Harry Hunting days – did he move and stretch his muscles quite like that. He'll get used to it, he's sure. The muscle salve helps considerably and within a week or so the exercises won't be such a strain to his muscles.

Wednesday he wakes up with a headache. It's not bad, certainly not the worst he's ever had – there's no Dark Lord trying to crawl inside his head and his scar certainly isn't bleeding – but it's insistent, pounding away at the curve of his skull until he feels faintly sick with it. Until he wants to claw his own skin off to escape it.

Harry grimaces and takes one of the headache potions he has stashed in flat's bathroom. It won't be as effective as one of Snape's but the idea of going to Snape – or even Pomfrey – and asking for a potion is enough to make his stomach turn before he even takes his morning potions. It's only the fourth day. He can't believe how weak he is.

He makes it through Wednesday but by the end of the day the headache has moved down his spine and into his ribs, making his entire body hurt. He barely manages to fetch Inigo from his cage and collapses face first into bed, the boa constrictor sliding around on his sheets and hissing.

His head hurts too much to understand.

Harry sleeps.

Thursday, the headache is still there but it's duller at least. He doesn't want to eat breakfast but he makes it through by sheer force of will. He will not give Snape or Pomfrey reason to think that he's neglecting his health. He *wants* to get better. He's tired of hurting. So bloody tired.

Perhaps it's for the best though.

The churning in his gut and the aching that has now spread from his head to his torso to his limbs is enough to keep him from showing off during their flying lesson. He still earns a comment from Hooch about being a natural, just like his father, but he doesn't go careening wildly after a thrown Remembrall. Instead, he flies in lazy circles around his classmates a scarce ten feet up in the air while Draco coaches Neville through not falling off his broom and Hooch tries to convince Hermione to go a little higher. Hermione doesn't, of course. She only manages to get high enough into the air for her feet to brush the top of the grass and even that only happens because Hooch threatens to take points if she doesn't make a sincere effort.

"I liked it," Harry tells Draco with a grin when the other boy asks what he thinks of flying. "I felt... free." He's always felt free on a broom. In the air is the only place he's ever truly felt like himself, like he isn't some stranger masquerading as someone everyone else knows.

"We should come out and go flying on the weekends," the blonde replies and Harry has never seen such a big, genuine smile on Draco's face. "I want to try out for the quidditch team next



year. Father says if I make it he'll buy the entire team new brooms."

"Which means you will automatically make the team," Blaise points out in an easy drawl. Draco actually looks offended at the insinuation.

"I'll have you know I'm an excellent flier!" he retorts snootily but Blaise just laughs and slings an arm around Draco's shoulders.

"I know you are. I've watched you fly since we were little. But do you honestly expect that Flint will turn you away from the team with the tease of new brooms for everyone if you get a position? It doesn't matter how good you are, he probably won't even make you try out."

"I might try out too," Harry adds, hoping to derail the tantrum he can see brewing on Draco's face. "I like flying. I don't really know much about quidditch, though."

And that's enough of an opener to keep Draco waxing poetic about quidditch and his favorite team for the rest of the day.

Friday, the world spins so badly when Harry opens his eyes that he promptly shuts them and holds as still as he can for several long, agonizing minutes until the urge to be sick all over his bed has dulled from *near certainty* to *it could happen*.

*I just have potions today*, he tells himself, not even able to muster the energy to complain to his snake. *I just have to make it through potions*.

The thought of being surrounded by potions ingredients and potions fumes is enough to make him clench his teeth and swallow back bile that burns at his throat.

With the help of another headache potion and generous, frequent sips of stomach soother – an act that leaves him feeling more and more like he's pretending to be Moody with every passing hour – he makes it through breakfast, potions, lunch, studying in the library with the rest of their group, and then dinner.

He even musters up the strength to make it through his second physical therapy session. It hurts more the second time and leaves him clammy and shaking as he holds on to the edge of the bed.

"Doing alright, Mr. Potter?" the mediwitch asks him gently.

"Yeah," he manages to get out. "Just tired and a little dizzy."

Or a lot dizzy. The entire hospital wing is spinning.

Madam Promfrey clucks over him as she bustles around, putting away the bands and balls and implements of his most recent torture. "Wait one moment dear and I'll get you something for that."

The Pepper Up helps the dizziness but does nothing for the bone deep throbbing and he is still steaming from his ears when he manages to stumble into his dorm.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” he waves off the concerned words from his roommates. “I just got a little dizzy.”

“A little dizzy?” Draco repeats rather shrilly while Blaise observes,

“I’ve seen drunks with more control.”

Which is true. Harry has too. Right now, even with the Pepper Up, he feels somewhere between *newborn hippogriff* and *Mundungus Fletcher falling off a bench*.

“I just need to soak in a bath,” he tells them with a wave of his hand. “Seriously, I’ll be fine. Are we still going flying tomorrow?”

“Sunday,” Draco finally answers. “A couple of the teams had the pitch booked for tomorrow.”

But Harry doesn’t go flying on Sunday.

Instead, he collapses before they even make it out of the common room.

---

“...otic boy.”

The timbre of Snape’s voice pulls him into wakefulness. Or mostly. His eyes are heavy. Everything is heavy. It’s not worth the effort to open them. It’s not worth the effort to move.

Harry wants to go back to sleep.

“I thought I told you to come to myself or Pomfrey to help manage the side effects or is your skull too thick for simple logic to penetrate it?” The words are harsh, classic Snape, but there’s a softer thread there that pre-death Harry had never heard before. He’s not sure he would believe that Snape is actually *worried* worried about him – there’s nothing to be worried about – but... passingly concerned, maybe? It’s probably bad for the Boy Who Lived to collapse in the middle of his common room.

Bloody hell, Harry hopes this isn’t something that needs to be reported to Dumbledore. Or Pomfrey. Or anyone.

“You’re lucky that Draco and Blaise brought you to me instead of hauling you up to the hospital wing,” the man continues as if expects Harry to hear him. Maybe he does. He’s probably one of the strongest – if not *the* strongest - occlumens alive. It stands to reason that he’s at least a passingly talented legilimens. Past horrible occlumency lessons aside. “I imagine that putting you in a public place where your fans can gather around and gawk at you like a carnival sideshow would not be helpful.”

No, Harry agrees. No, it wouldn’t.

“I have administered a pain relief potion. I imagine you will sleep for most of the day but when you finally grace us with your glorious presence again we will be speaking about when

it is and when it is not appropriate to take potions to manage the symptoms provoked by your treatment. Am I clear?"

His head is too heavy to nod but he rather thinks Snape plucks the desire to do so from his brain anyway. It's not like he has a choice in the matter.

"Good." It almost feels like an admonition in and of itself, the crack of a whip contained in a single word, but Snape's hand is a warm and gentle weight upon his head. "Sleep," he commands.

And Harry does.

## Chapter End Notes

When I first started this fic on sleep deprivation, stress, and a whim back in June 2018 I didn't really have any plans for it. By the time I finished that first chapter I had some vague idea that I might write an amusing, trope filled crack fic about Harry trolling the entire Wizarding World and accidentally falling in love with Voldemort along the way. Obviously it has morphed into something so much more - and so much more serious, even if Harry still delights in trolling those around him - and I fully intend to see it through.

Regarding scope and pacing: Even though it has been a while since my last update I have been busy! I now have an outline that varies from "rough" to "moderately detailed and half written" for the rest of the fic. (Seriously, this chapter sat half finished for forever because my muse got distracted and I wrote close to 10k that'll take place during Harry's 4th year.)

Right now I intend for all 7 years of Hogwarts to be contained within the main fic of "Harry Potter and the Greatest Show". Certain years will have more chapters than others so there's not going to be a whole lot of consistency there. Off the top of my head (and based upon my current outline and notes) we'll be spending a longer portion on years 1 and 4 than, say, year 3. I anticipate 4 more chapters, at the very least, for First Year but as my muse wouldn't know "short" if it walked up and bit her on the ass 6-8 chapters is probably much more realistic.

In addition to the companion piece ("Harry Potter and the Peanut Gallery") that has already been started I have a few ideas for potential "shorter" stories that take place within this 'verse after Harry's graduation from Hogwarts. Whether those will ever actually make the cut and be written, I am still not sure.

Regardless, I have zero intentions of abandoning this fic. No matter how long I go between updates unless there is a notice at the end, from me (or my husband, I suppose, in the case of my untimely death) saying that it has been abandoned then rest assured

that there will be another chapter posted. Eventually. Life is crazy and I love it... but I also wish I could simultaneously live in a remote location and do nothing but write.

And, because I cannot possibly say it enough, thank you for your support. For your kudos and your comments. I read and delight over every one of them.

# Eleven

## Chapter Notes

So the world has gone insane.

I'm fortunate enough that my day-to-day has not been hugely impacted but my kids are starting to climb the walls with boredom (sometimes a little more literally than I would like!) and I completely lost the will to write for nearly a month. But the creative juices are flowing again so here we are. This chapter just kept going (and going and going...) but at the end I couldn't bear to cut more than a few things from it so here is the chapter that, in my head, I refer to as "the chapter of many small things."

Wherever you are I hope you're safe and well and I hope that this somehow manages to bring a smile to your face in these crazy, uncertain times.

There is something wrong with the ghosts.

Harry doesn't notice at first, lost in the odd duality of his new life and well, he's self-aware enough to know that he's not the most observant fish in the lake. In fact, if he's being honest with himself, he's the fish that is so busy watching all the other fish that he doesn't realize something is actually happening until the giant squid has snuck up behind him and has Harry halfway into its mouth.

He should... he should probably work on that.

He hadn't noticed the first week back but he thinks that this lapse of his observational skills can be excused. The week had been really fucking trying and the ghost that he'd had the most interaction with in his first life doesn't really have any need to speak to him now, does he? Nearly Headless Nick is friendly and outgoing but he's the Gryffindor ghost and while Harry can remember him occasionally interacting with a stray Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff he doesn't think that his enthusiastic attitude extends to the Slytherins. If for no other reason than he seems properly terrified of the Bloody Baron.

Harry hadn't noticed anything off with the Bloody Baron because, well, he's so used to *not* interacting with the grisly ghost that it didn't occur to him until several weeks into the year that he probably *should be*.

Binns certainly hasn't been acting strange around him but then again, Harry's not really sure how aware the ghost is of the classes that he teaches. After six years of listening – or vaguely attempting to listen – to the professor drone on and on and *on* about the bloody goblin wars he's more than half convinced that if they simply moved the History of Magic class to another room they would never have to deal with painfully boring ghost ever again.

And Peeves, with few notable exceptions, has never really harassed him.

So really, Harry thinks, it is perfectly acceptable that he doesn't notice anything is off that first week.

Or the second week, for that matter, given that he spends the entire week dizzy, sore, and going after stomach soother and headache potions like Trelawney after bottles of sherry.

The third week isn't much better. Under Snape's stern gaze he takes his prescribed potions and eats his meals and goes to physical therapy but he also takes the headache relief that the man – or a house elf named Tippy – hands him three times a day as well as the pain relief potion that he inevitably needs. The pain and the symptoms are better. He doesn't collapse again, which counts as a definite win in Harry's book, but with a Potions Master keeping him dosed to the gills he spends the better part of the week feeling like he is going to float right out of his skin if he moves too fast. It's preferable to feeling like he's been trampled by a herd of angry hippogriffs but still, Harry doesn't like it.

No.

He hates it.

He hates that his thoughts and reactions might be compromised.

Still, if nothing else, he trusts that Snape wouldn't want a Potter running around the castle with even fewer braincells to rub together than normal. So even though his tiny little potion high makes him a bit uncomfortable and sets him on edge until he constantly feels like a cat walking around with its tail ten times its normal size and its back arched he trusts that whatever mix of magical ingredients he has swimming in his system they don't actually impair his mind.

Probably.

Merlin's arse, he almost misses the pain.

It hurts but that's okay. Harry knows how to deal with hurt. It's familiar.

This... this is not.

And that, more than anything, makes him dig in his heels and go along with it.

*You can take the boy out of Gryffindor but you can't take the Gryffindor out of the boy*, he muses to himself.

Twice, when the pain in his bones grows to the point that he wakes, whimpering, he finds the stern man sweeping into his room and administering a sleeping potion. Not Dreamless Sleep because he still dreams – hazy fractured things that are half memory and half not, slipping through his fingers like blood or grains of sand, but still something strong enough to pull him under, to let his body grow still and rest like it desperately needs.

With that in mind, Harry thinks that he can be excused for not noticing the third week.

In the end, it is the Fat Friar that clues him in to the idea that something is wrong.

Of all the ghosts in Hogwarts Harry has spent the least amount of time interacting with or even thinking about the Fat Friar. He's a fat, jolly ghost who waxes poetic on the subject of forgiveness and helpfulness and perpetually seems startled to realize that there are *living people* wandering around the castle he has called him for a millennium. Harry has never spoken to him or really paid him even the smallest amount of attention. Peripherally, he's aware that the ghost is helpful: guiding and clucking over his Hufflepuffs like a distractible mother hen – and that? That is how Harry knows that something is up.

Because on his fourth Tuesday at Hogwarts, Harry rounds a corner on the second floor and nearly runs right into a Hufflepuff that he is pretty sure he has never before seen in his life. She's an older student at least, fourth or fifth year, so he thinks he might be forgiven for not even thinking that she looks familiar. He's not sure why she's stopped in the middle of the corridor, exactly, except for when she turns to look at what hit her from behind and he's already stammering out an apology for practically hurtling into her like a rogue bludger her eyes are red and puffy and she's got her arms crossed in front of her chest.

Which isn't really important.

What's important is that the Fat Friar is on the other side of her. "...promise, my dear, if you just..." he's saying but then as the girl moves the ghost catches sight of Harry and goes utterly still.

Like, petrified still.

Harry hadn't been aware that ghosts could pale, but the Fat Friar does, his entire being seeming to shrink in on himself as he stares at Harry.

And then, without another word, he turns and floats right through the wall.

Harry doesn't have to draw on any of his Slytherin guile to look as confused as possible when the Hufflepuff turns her attention to him.

He is confused.

So. Bloody. Confused.

"Is something wrong?" he manages to make himself ask and hopes that he looks at clueless as he feels. He should. He has always been awful at controlling his face.

The Hufflepuff blinks. "I... don't know?" she replies after a moment. "He's never done that before."

"Oh," Harry says. "Okay."

Later that night as he lays in bed he carefully, painstakingly goes over the last three and a half weeks of his life and realizes that at no point in the past month has any ghost acknowledged or interacted with him in anyway.

And that... that bears investigating.

Sneakily. Carefully.

Like a Slytherin.

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“Here.”

Harry looks up from where he’s been staring, unseeing, at his charms text for the past twenty minutes. He doesn’t feel too guilty about it because he’s already read it – twice, technically – but he really should finish it up and go over the short essay Flitwick had assigned before he lets his mind wander too much. It’s too easy to get lost in all the thoughts of “What if?” and “If I do x, does y happen?” and frankly, if he doesn’t stop thinking about it *all the bloody time* he’s going to lose his fucking mind. Or lose it more. Really, if he has walked willingly to his death, died, and then been reincarnated into his body of seven years prior does he really have any mind left to lose?

Eh. He’s not sure.

Daphne Greengrass is standing next to the table where he, Draco, Blaise, Crabbe, and Goyle are all working on their homework with a thick, creamy envelope in her hands.

“This is for you,” she adds, holding it out a little more obviously. Harry takes it slowly, confused.

“Um... thanks?”

The girl rolls her eyes and flicks her long blonde hair over her shoulder. “I wrote my mother, asking if she had any photos or articles about your parents. She sent a few things,” she nods at the envelope still held carefully in his hands and Harry stares down at it, racing mind slamming to a standstill. “I imagine she will send more. Mother has a bit of a passion for such thing and will enjoy the challenge of ferreting out information that you haven’t seen before.”

*I’ve never seen any of this before*, Harry wants to tell her because he hasn’t. He hasn’t ever seen anything about his parents except for the pictures that Hagrid gathered for him and he’s pretty damn sure that Daphne’s mum isn’t going to have any of those.

“Thank you,” he repeats more carefully and places the envelope carefully on top of his homework so that she can’t see it shaking in his hands. “I...*thank you*.”

Daphne offers him what can only be called a bow even if she doesn’t move anything below her shoulders. “Of course,” she says simply and returns to table where she and the rest of the Slytherin first year girls are gathered working on their own homework. Pansy says something – probably something nasty going by the look on her face – and then shoots him a vicious glare around the curve of Daphne’s shoulder.



Honestly, Harry's more than a little surprised that the pug faced girl hasn't tried to hex him yet. Or at the very least cornered him to tell him how unwelcome he is here in the snake pit. In his first life Draco and the girl had practically seemed to be joined at the hip but he hardly sees them interact these days. He wonders if that is because of him or if they had always been far less chummy within the safety of the Slytherin common room.

As is, he still has her name as well as Warrington and a seventh year named Jugson on top of the list of people most likely to try and curse him when his back is turned.

Still, his safety has been far less precarious this past month than he expected it to be. He puts it down to Lucius Malfoy's – and thus Draco's – influence and Snape's subtle but iron control of his students. Also, the open secret of his parseltongue abilities most definitely helps.

Or maybe everyone is simply waiting. Waiting to see how he acts. Waiting for the best opportunity. Waiting for the excitement around his presence to die down, for the spotlight on him to dim – or dim as much as it ever does.

That seems like something true Slytherins would do. And Harry is becoming more and more aware with each passing day that the concept of *Slytherin* that he has built up in his head, built on the backs of radical Death Eaters and the raving actions of a shattered madman, is twisted and flawed. Unforgivables, public torture, and dark, flashy attacks are all well and good but they're not Slytherin, no matter how much his mind had classified them as so.

Slytherin is the subtle influence and guile that got Hagrid expelled. Slytherin is the careful orchestration of an international event to ensure Harry arrived precisely where and when he was needed for an obscure piece of necromantic magic. Slytherin is a poor, half-blood orphan able to call more than half of the old, powerful pureblood families not only to heel, but to abasing themselves at his feet. Slytherin is a man able to insinuate himself so firmly in the Dark Lord's clutches that he rises to the position of Voldemort's most favored while keeping his true loyalties hidden. Slytherin is the subtle guidance of a child's entire life so that, at the end, he does not even stop to think before walking willingly to his death.

And if he is going to somehow change this life for the better, he's going to have to bloody remember that.

Harry returns Pansy's stare coolly before carefully arching a single eyebrow in his best impersonation of Snape's *Did you need something, you fucking dunderhead* look. The girl blinks in surprise, her face paling slightly before bright splashes of color grace her cheekbones.

Feeling satisfied with himself, Harry turns back to the table and the subtle – or not so subtle in the case of Crabbe and Goyle – attention of his dormmates. The envelope is sitting where he left it, heavy on top of the open pages of his charms text with *Mr. Harry Potter* written in an unfamiliar, looping hand across the center of it in shimmering indigo ink.

“Well, are you going to open it?” Draco asks after several long moments of silence.

Harry picks up the envelope and turns it over in his hands a few times. “No,” he shakes his head. “I think I'll wait until later.”

“But...ow!” Draco breaks off and glares across the table at Blaise who looks up, innocence so thick it can’t possibly be true spread across his face.

“I’ll show you later,” Harry offers, having figured out that – more than anything – Draco hates being left out. He is *Malfoy*. Malfoy’s are meant to be in the thick of everything. The realization had been like shining a lumos on their entire previous relationship. “I just... I want to look at them by myself first.”

“Oh.” Draco is quiet for moment. “Yes. That would be fine.” He concedes and first life Harry would have taken offense at that, would have snapped and snarled and swelled up like an angry cat at the perceived condescension. At the *insult* of it all, the insinuation that Draco is better than everyone around him. Better than *Harry*.

But Harry is not that boy anymore, desperate to prove that he is somebody, that he is a person. That he *matters*.

Well. Mostly. It’s a work in progress. He’s *trying*.

But now that he has the benefit of seven years of dubious maturity and a bloody war to temper his reactions, he can recognize that Draco is just a child trying to prove his worth.

Just like Harry.

“Thanks,” he tells his friend and is rewarded with a small, genuine smile. On the other side of the table Nott lets out a long, pointed sigh and Harry takes the hint, slipping the envelope into his bag and returning to his homework.

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Once Harry is reasonably sure that the rest of his dormmates are asleep he removes the envelope from his school bag. Briefly, he considers sitting on his bed, huddling beneath the weight of the duvet and opening the packet in the glow of his lamp and the movement of the lake but he it still feels too exposed. Instead, he descends into his trunk and locks and wards it behind him, the familiar sweep of magic making something loosen in his chest.

“*Are we not sleeping in the soft nest?*” Inigo hisses from where he’s curled around Harry’s shoulders.

“*We will,*” Harry assures. Inigo is very fond of the soft nest and the way the sheets and the warming charms that Harry suspects are set on the beds themselves collect and store warmth next to his scales. “*But the home nest is more secure and I am not likely to be interrupted here.*”

“*Home nest is safe,*” Inigo agrees and winds his way down Harry’s arm. “*Mouse?*”

Harry tears his eyes from the envelope and looks at the yellow triangular face staring up at him in what can only be described as a hopeful manner. He didn’t know a snake’s face could even look hopeful. Maybe he’s projecting. “*You’re not due a mouse until tomorrow.*”

“Hungry,” Inigo informs him and coils into an expectant ball on top of the blanket bed spread neatly on the floor. “Am getting itchy,” the snake adds petulantly and for that, Harry can’t blame him. Shedding seems to be a special sort of hell.

“Fine,” Harry gives in almost immediately even though he knows that Inigo is not technically due to shed his skin for at least another two weeks. He’s willing to give the snake the benefit of the doubt. The animal might be an ordinary muggle snake but he’s been exposed to magic for most – if not all – of his life. Harry’s pretty sure that could change *something*. As far as he knows Nagini had started her life as a non-magical viper. Of course, he’s also pretty sure that Tom helped her on her way to what she ended up as so maybe there hadn’t been any passive magical augmentation.

Of course, all of that is meaningless in the face of the fact that Harry is incapable of saying no to a creature insisting that they’re hungry. Especially when it’s probably true.

With a flick of his wrist he summons a dead mouse from the cold box full of them that he had bought two months ago in Diagon Alley. He heats it through with a warming charm and then, still using his wand, dangles it above the head of his snake. Inigo has gone taunt, coiled in on himself like a loaded spring and utterly still save for the way his head follows the movement of his prey.

Harry jiggles the mouse enticingly, skirting it a little closer to the boa’s nose and smiles at the sudden, if expected, strike. Inigo lashes out in a blur of yellow and red, snatching at the rat with his jaws and twisting his powerful form around it, squeezing it tight. Harry gives the rat one more wiggle, just to make sure that Inigo’s got it, before he stops levitating it and gives it over to the snake completely.

“Don’t make a mess,” he admonishes to the lump of scales and fur and returns his attention to the letter.

*Dear Mr. Potter,*

*My daughter Daphne wrote me that you possessed little knowledge of your parents before their untimely demise, or even their likenesses. As I possess some small passion for the ongoing history of the great wizarding houses and our society, I delight in the opportunity to present you copies of the scraps of knowledge and documentation I have in my possession.*

*Sincerely,*

*Aveline Greengrass*

Harry carefully sets the letter to the side and stares at the small stack of parchment and paper resting in his lap. The first thing is a newspaper clipping, though whether it is from the Prophet or another publication he is not entirely sure. It is a picture of a man and a woman,

both probably in their late thirties or early forties. The woman is seated on a plush looking chaise, the identifiable form of a swaddled infant held in her arms while the man stands behind her.

The picture moves slowly – a result of the copying spell perhaps, or simply the age of it. A scrunch of the child's face, rosy lips round with a noise of some kind. The brilliant spread of the smile across the woman's face as she bends over to brush a kiss against the child's downy head and the proud grip of the man's hand as it comes to rest on her shoulder.

The caption beneath it reads:

*Charlus Potter and his wife, Dorea Potter nee Black welcomed their first child and heir James Ignatius Potter on 27 March 1960 at 4:27 in the evening.*

Harry looks at the picture again, fingers shaking as he brushes across faces of faded ink. Now that he knows what he is looking at it he can pick out a few things. The man – *Charlus*, his brain supplies – is wearing pair of wire framed glasses perched upon his nose. His skin is darker, dusky and warm and in it Harry spots the deep glow that has begun to show up in his own flesh now that he no longer exists in a cupboard. There's something as well, in the shape of his nose and the set of his eyes that reminds Harry of his own reflection. The woman is beautiful and unmistakably a Black with glossy raven tresses and eyes that distinctive steely gray.

His grandmother and grandfather.

He had never even known their names.

Beneath the announcement of his father's birth are a handful of articles that track his grandparents major contributions and social appearances to the wizarding world over the next decade. There aren't many but somehow that falls in line with the vague, insubstantial idea of them that Harry had formed through Sirius' occasional comments: a quiet, private couple who preferred to stay home and who were not heavily involved in the politics of the time. There's a donation to St. Mungos, copies of a few potions patents, an appearance at Ministry party, and a large picture of the couple in full dress robes greeting a Malfoy – who Harry assumes to be Lucius' father – above the caption *Guests arrive at Malfoy Manor for a traditional Yule Ball. Long a staple in the wizarding world this marks the first year that Lord Abraxas Malfoy has hosted the event since the passing of his late wife, Lady Elodie Malfoy nee Richelieu in 1961.*

The next thing of note is a clipping from the Prophet with **HOGWARTS INCOMING CLASS OF 1971** written in large, bold letters across the top. A single glance at the four neat sections below it confirm that it the publication of the year's sorting – something that he hadn't even realized was a thing until he saw the list published on the front page of the prophet a few weeks ago - and that the class size is significantly larger than Harry's own. At least double the number of students.

As expected, he finds *Black, Sirius; Evans, Lily; Lupin, Remus; Pettigrew, Peter; and Potter, James* all on the Gryffindor list. *Snape, Severus* is listed towards the bottom of the Slytherin list just above a *Talbot, Ian* and below more recognizable names such as *Avery, Tomlyn* and

*Mulicber, Donahue*. He spots a *Vance, Emmeline* at the bottom of the Hufflepuff list and feels a faint pang of surprise at seeing *Lestrange, Rabastan* in the middle of the Ravenclaw list.

Of course, then he mentally slaps himself for being surprised to see a Death Eater's name somewhere besides the Slytherin list. That's damaging and dangerous and – as has been proven many times over – just plain *wrong*.

Following that are seven years of school pictures and once again Harry is faced with the startling realization of just *how much* he looks like his father in the first couple of years. The similarities aren't quite as startling once James is clearly in the depths of puberty, his face narrower and sharper than Harry's has ever been, the structure of it clearly highlighting his Black heritage.

He feels a lump form in his throat at the sight of his mother, whom he recognizes only by grace of Snape's memory and the picture he had given to Harry. He had never understood how his mum could be related to Aunt Petunia and had even entertained the idea that at least one of them had been adopted, completely unable to see any similarities between the face of his mum in the photo album Hagrid had given him and the judging, unhappy features he had grown up under.

It's a little more obvious in the coltish, awkward teenage years.

Lily's face is always a little long, though not nearly as horse-ish as Petunia's, her features a little broader and more solid than the sharp angles or delicate features that seem to dominate the pureblood gene pool of wizarding Britain. As a young adult she is pretty, if more striking than classically beautiful, the copper sheen of her hair and the bright clarity of her eyes shining like polished jewels out of her face overshadowing her basic facial structure.

In addition to the school pictures there are pictures of his father and the rest of the Gryffindor quidditch team from fourth year on and the announcement of his parents' engagement in the March of their seventh year. This is followed up by a familiar picture of his parents in their wedding finery, beaming at the camera before his dad turns and swoops in for an exuberant kiss that leaves his mom laughing with the caption: *Potter Heir Weds: James Ignatius Potter bonded with Lily Elisabeth Evans in a private ceremony on 22 June 1978*. His grandparents' obituaries are next in the dwindling stack, both of them dead of Dragon Pox during the early months of 1979.

The final clipping is the announcement of Harry's birth. The picture is not one he has ever seen before: his dad is standing next to a chair, puffed up prouder than a peacock while his mum just smiles at the camera, rocking the bundle in her arms back and forth. It is unnerving to see a picture of himself so small and so content looking, the forehead beneath the already chaotic mess of black hair smooth and unmarked.

He is unbearably relieved that Daphne's mom stops with his birth and not with his parents' death. He's never been able to bring himself to read what had been printed in the weeks following Voldemort's downfall. He doesn't know if he could bear it.

Hermione had, though. Back in their third year after he had overheard the tale of Sirius' supposed betrayal in *The Three Broomsticks*. She had tried to tell him, well meaning and

overbearing and bubbling over the excitement of curiosity satisfied and curiosity sparked. He had walked out of the common room and spent the night wandering the castle with the invisibility cloak draped over his head.

He hadn't been able to bear it then either.

She hadn't tried to bring it up again.

Harry shakes his head and begins to gather all the photos and slips of paper and parchment up from where he has them spread around him.

One of the single greatest moments of his life had been when Hagrid had gifted him with the photo album. Those pictures had been proof – proof that his parents had been more than worthless, lazy drunks. Proof that at one point that he had had parents who loved him. Proof that he could be loved. Proof that he had been part of family, a real family, once.

This is more.

He had never thought of a family beyond his parents, not really. He had kind of adopted – or been kind of adopted – into the Weasley brood and his desire for parents had flexed to include Sirius and Remus as something between uncles slash pseudo fathers - largely absent fathers at that. But that had been it. He had never spared much thought for other family that must have existed at one point. It had been too much to dream for parents. Wishing for grandparents - for aunts and uncles and cousins who actually cared about him - had been unthinkable.

But he had them. He had grandparents. He is the last Potter but at some point there had been more of them. They had been real people that had breathed and felt and *existed*. They had lived and loved and laughed and grieved and raged. They had gone to school, gotten jobs, gotten married, had kids, gone to parties, and contributed to society.

His grandparents had attended a party hosted by the Malfoys. In the seventies. Had they met Voldemort before he had risen to the height of his power, before he had gone utterly mad. Had they shared drinks with the Dark Lord? Had they argued over politics?

The realization that he, Harry Potter, does not exist in a vacuum is enough to make him dizzy. To leave him gasping and wheezing, papers shaking in his hands as he leans over his knees and tries to *breathe* past the Devil's Snare that has taken up residence in his chest and wrapped itself around his lungs and heart until both stutter and threaten to fail.

For all of his life he has been adrift and unwanted. Even in the wizarding world he had been separate from everyone else, simultaneously above them and below them. Watching and protecting their world but never a part of it. Not really.

He had been a singular, shining creature with exactly one purpose.

But that's not true, is it?

He has a history, a heritage. He is a part of this world, part of this people even if they have forgotten.

With gentle fingers he touches the ring that has sat, unmoving, on his finger since that day at Gringotts.

He belongs here.

He is someone.

He is more than the Boy Who Lived.

He just needs to remember it – and make the rest of the world remember it too.

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“Happy Birthday!” Hannah’s cry is practically a squeal as she bounces through the doorway and instantly triples the energy level of the room. Something that not everyone welcomes, if Pansy’s suddenly pinched face is anything to go by. Harry kind of loves it – partly because it annoys Pansy but mostly because Hannah’s exuberance is joyful instead of chaotic: the energizing warmth of the sun on his skin compared to the crackle and roar of the flame of energy that had always consumed Gryffindor Tower. One is not particularly better than the other, objectively, but to Harry at least there is an ease to the warmth, something that soothes rather than riles like the noise of Gryffindor always had.

*All the care of Molly Weasley but without the smothering expectations and snap judgements,* he had caught himself thinking last week when the girl had silently pressed the peeled segments of an orange into his hand – when he had told her that he had to cut back his consumption of sweets due to medical issues he had thought that would be the end of being fed things every time he looked more than a little peaky. It had not. She had merely given him a worried look and by the next day the cauldron cakes and chocolate had been swapped out for various pieces of fruit and lightly salted mixed nuts. He had instantly felt bad for the thought. His feelings on Molly Weasley are complex and tangled. She is the closest thing to having a mother that he remembers – and that, second life or not, is likely to remain true. She is loving and caring, fiercely devoted to her children. But she is also prone to quick, scathing judgement and more concerned with keeping the world as she thinks it should be than acknowledging what it actually is.

“You made it,” Draco acknowledges, the obvious relief in his voice pulling Harry from his thoughts. The other boy had been beside himself for days that the rest of their group wouldn’t show up. That they wouldn’t deign to come so openly into Slytherin territory even though Draco had specifically requested the use of the extra sitting room – the one for visiting with other house siblings – for the party. Harry had gone with him when he asked Snape and the pinched look of wariness and resignation on the Potion Master’s face had made it entirely worth it.

Hannah disentangles herself from Blaise and plops a brightly wrapped gift into his hands before turning back to Draco.

“Of course, we did,” she replies. “But we haven’t spent a lot of time exploring the dungeons, have we? We might have gotten lost once or twice.”

Draco’s raised eyebrow says that he’s not entirely sure that he believes her and while Harry *does* believe her he also understands Draco’s skepticism. The Slytherin Common Room and associated extra visiting room were fairly deep in the dungeons but from the Great Hall it’s a rather straightforward journey. At least by Hogwarts’ standards. Just two staircases and three turns in total.

“We had to take a few extra turns,” Susan informs them as she adds her own gift – a small, bookish shaped gift wrapped in sensible brown paper with a bit of green ribbon tied around it – into Blaise’s arms. “Some of the Gryffindors were trying to follow us. Happy Birthday!” she adds and gives Blaise a broad grin.

“T-t-trying to f-follow m-me,” Neville corrects, edging into the group. Harry is completely unsurprised to see a potted plant held in the Gryffindor’s hands. He’s also not surprised to find that he doesn’t recognize it in the slightest. He’s not half bad at herbology but Neville is to plants like Snape is to potions and he’ll never be in the same league as either of them in either subject. “T-they d-d-don’t like th-that I h-hang out w-with y-you.”

And by *you* it is obvious that he means the three Slytherins.

The way that Hannah, Susan, and Draco all stiffen and swivel to look at Neville would be hilarious if Harry didn’t almost feel sorry for the other boy. Being under the scrutiny of all three of them is Not Fun. Heartwarming, mind, but bloody terrifying.

Harry would know.

“Neville,” Susan begins in a quiet, steely sort of tone that reminds him very much of the few interactions he’d had with her aunt. “Are the other Gryffindors giving you a hard time for being our friend?”

Neville shakes his head rather frantically. “N-not r-really.”

Blaise and Draco each raise an eyebrow in identical movements of disbelief.

“Oh?” Blaise inquires mildly.

Neville swallows. “T-t-they...” he shakes his head again. “It’s j-just w-words. N-nothing l-like u-uncle Algie.”

Having spent six years hearing the occasional story about Neville’s great uncle Algie Harry does not find this quiet qualifier in any way reassuring. Apparently, everyone else doesn’t like it either and varying looks of concern cross their faces. Maybe they’ve met Alfie.

“I’m f-fine,” Neville asserts with a rather dogged sort of determination. “Th-they’re just j-jealous.”

Harry nods. He believes that. He also believes that just because they’re jealous – of the large group, of being Harry’s friend, of the obvious newness of their uniforms and supplies, of



Merlin knows what else – doesn't mean that they're not potentially dangerous.

Harry killed – *really* killed – his first man at eleven. There had been extenuating circumstances, sure, but that doesn't erase the fact that he had been a murderer before he turned twelve.

"Idiots," Mandy mutters and plops down on the sofa like a puppet with their strings cut.

Neville shoots her a grateful smile.

"You promise you'll tell us if they get too obnoxious?" Mandy continues.

Neville agrees instantly. "I w-will." Poor bloke lies about as well as Harry does but doesn't quite have the experience yet to know it. Or realize that he needs a way around it yet.

Should helping him with that go on the list?

Harry makes a note to consider it later.

Susan lets out a long-suffering sigh. "Will you at least promise to bring it to Professor McGonagall?"

"Like she would do anything," Draco scoffs under his breath and promptly earns a handful of glares.

"No, Draco's right," Hannah agrees after a moment. "It's like with Professor Sprout, isn't it? Only different. Professor Sprout would believe you but is too nice to do anything that would actually help. Professor McGonagall wouldn't believe you because she's a very upright and solid sort, isn't she? The type that believes that just because she's that way that everyone else should be too. Especially those who *are* supposed to be like her."

Hannah, Harry has learned, is frighteningly observant beneath her bubbly exterior.

"We could always take the issue to Professor Snape," Mandy suggests from the couch. She's pulled a book from somewhere and is idly flipping through it much like Aunt Petunia would flip through a magazine at the hair salon: not really reading but putting on a show that people expect to see.

Blaise's eyebrow nearly disappears into his hair. "Ask him to help a Gryffindor?" Even Neville snorts at the thought.

Mandy just shrugs but Draco is nodding, looking at her with speculation.

"Think of it less as helping a Gryffindor and more as getting to take a ton of points from Gryffindor without the other professors being able to complain," Harry points out. It's been a few weeks since Harry told him about being stalked every where he went and several weeks of Snape sweeping about the castle deducting dozens of points left, right, and center has worked miracles. Harry hasn't been followed into the loo since Tuesday.

"It would be like Yule coming early," Draco agrees knowledgeably.

“D-don’t t-t-tell P-professor S-s-snape!”

But Neville’s protests fall on deaf ears if the look Hannah and Draco exchange are anything to go by and Harry doesn’t doubt that if the Gryffindors don’t stop harassing Neville then Snape is most definitely going to hear about it. And the perpetrators will probably get hexed in the corridors.

Not that Harry is planning anything.

Nope.

Not at all.

There is, however, a definite feeling of shame twinging in his chest.

Shame that a mixed group of Slytherins, Hufflepuffs, and a Ravenclaw have treated and cared for Neville more in a month than his own house had – Harry, included – in the first four years of their schooling.

That he simply hadn’t noticed, or hadn’t cared – and, bloody hell, had even *participated* in the Lions’ disdain for the slightly pudgy, stuttering herbologist – until the other boy had been useful. Until he’d been a believing, supportive, *soldier* that Harry could train up and count on to do what was expected of him.

The fact that he can think of himself using the same terms he would use to describe Dumbledore makes him want to sick up all over his shoes.

“Congratulations on getting older,” Mandy adds, nudging Blaise’s leg with her foot after the silence has gone on for a moment longer than is comfortable.

Blaise grins and slinks down beside her. “*Grazie.*”

The subject of Neville’s bullying by members of his own house seems to be shelved for the moment, though Harry isn’t dumb enough to think that Susan, Hannah, and Draco are going to let it go. Mainly because *Harry* isn’t going to let it go but he’s not so dumb that he can’t see the point to waiting until they’re somewhere more private than a rather posh birthday party filled to the brim with Slytherins who might not be as prone to helping Neville as Draco, Blaise, and Harry.

The rest of the afternoon is spent in pleasant small talk and gentle teasing while taking advantage of the buffet Draco had arranged. It’s lighter fare than is usually present in the Great Hall: platters of cheese squares, perfectly roasted meats, salted nuts, plump grapes, juicy peaches, and bowls of salty olives and bite sized tomatoes that burst sweetly between his teeth. Toasted pieces of bread alternatively topped with thick slices of fresh mozzarella, tomato, and a thin chiffonade of basil or piled with thin shavings of a cured meat that tastes very similar to bacon and buttery sweet mixture of figs and onions. To drink there are iced glasses of water with the option of lemon slices or cool, sweet mint leaves hanging suspended in the glass.

Everything is effortless and elegant, obviously posh yet comfortable and casual.

Harry is impressed and can't resist taking small samples of everything.

He's also glad that his birthday doesn't fall during the school year. He's not quite sure how he would react to this level of attention – even if it manages to be casual instead of uncomfortable and scrutinizing.

Except it only takes a moment for his quiet celebration to be squashed by the fact that, if anything, the party is limited by the fact that it is being held *at school* and that one way or another he won't have the dubious excuse of being shunted off to the Dursleys to save him from attending any fancy soire held in his honor.

Bollocks.

After nearly an hour everyone gathers around to watch Blaise open his gifts – an event that has caused Harry no small amount of stress over the past week. Apparently gifts in wizarding society are a thing. Like a properly important, full of convoluted, absurd, and yet oddly fascinating rules and meanings *thing*. He hadn't paid much attention to gifts in his first life.

Wait. No. That's a bloody lie.

In his first life he had paid an enormous amount of attention to gifts and presents. At Privet Drive it had been a matter of survival – sometimes a little more literally than he would have liked – or conversely, a subtle hunt for toys and things that he might be able to abscond with to his cupboard (or later, his room) once Dudley had broken and/or discarded them. In the wizarding world they had been a source of wonder. That someone would bother to give *him* a gift never ceased to blow his mind and he appreciated each and every present given to him with even the slightest amount of sincerity. Every single one: from a single chocolate frog to a multi thousand galleon broom they had been measures of kindness and regard that he had never quite been able to understand.

In turn, he had delighted in being able to give gifts. In *having* people to give gifts too.

Presents – giving and receiving them – are an undeniable luxury in his mind.

So naturally, when he had noticed an entire lengthy chapter devoted to the subject of gifts in one of his introductory books on the customs of the wizarding world, he had to read it.

It had been... eye opening.

Clothing, for instance, is seen as a rather intimate gift denoting a certain level of familial or romantic involvement so Harry is not terribly surprised when Blaise unwraps a box containing a pair of gloves from Draco. It is obvious from their interactions that they have been friends since before either of them could walk. The gloves are a cashmere and acromantula silk blend so gossamer thin that it will be a miracle if Blaise can even tell that he's wearing him and, in fact, looks rather like he's had some sort of shimmering, faintly fuzzy ink poured over his hands when he tries them on and flexes them to establish range of motion.

Jewelry on the other hand is a completely loaded present. Ignoring age traditional gifts of watches and the passing on of family pieces from one generation to the next the entire subject is a minefield waiting for a single misstep and Harry had promptly made a note to find more information on the subject. Everything had a meaning and implied very specific things: from the type of jewelry to the metals and gems used – and the combination thereof. Even the method used to craft it and how, when, and where it is presented is loaded with meaning.

Nearly two years later he's exceedingly relieved he hadn't gifted Hermione and Ginny those bracelets he had been looking at for Christmas gifts because he may have accidentally gotten... well, not engaged, but promised? Expressed serious intention? There's a formal layer of meaning there that he feels he's not quite grasping and while he doubts that either girl would have held him to it but still.

Merlin, it'd have been bloody awkward.

Candy and small, practical things like stationary are appropriate for acquaintances and friends while books and more specific hobby related things are for family members or those wishing to deepen their relationship somehow. Despite reading the guidelines in this section at least a dozen times Harry sweats nervously as Blaise unwraps his gift.

"Oh," the other boy says in a moment of surprise as he stares down at the case of drawing charcoals. "Thank you," he adds after a moment, a brilliant smile stretching his face.

"It's alright?" Harry can't quite help himself from asking, picking at the hem of the jumper he has on under his robes.

Blaise rolls his eyes. "It's perfect!" he assures and Harry bites his tongue to keep his cheeks from turning red.

He's not quite successful.

Mandy sniggers.

In a similar vein, Susan has gifted him a small sketchbook and Mandy a collection of quills. Hannah gets him an assortment of chocolates and a tin of tea that she had created herself. It is sweet and sharp at the same time, a warm curl of vanilla with the bite of licorice and something vaguely woody and green smoothing the edges and filling in the spaces between. Neville's plant is some semi-aquatic low light thing that Harry misses the name of.

"I-it's c-carnivorous," Neville informs Blaise. "Y-you w-will need t-to f-feed it o-once a w-week. I-it prefers f-f-fish."

Blaise blinks, long and slow at both the plant and the Gryffindor.

"O-once it m-m-matures the s-sap h-has a-a-a s-s-soporific a-affect. I-it's u-used in v-various calming and s-sleeping potions."

Blaise and Draco both turn deeply interested gazes on the plant that looks very much like mossy green variations of Dumbledore's beard growing from thin, creeping vines.

Even Mandy looks vaguely impressed. “Cool,” she mutters, poking at the tip of one of the moss-beards with her finger. The plant seems to shrink away from the attack.

“Do you think I could feed it?” Hannah asks but Susan shakes her head so hard her pony tail swishes back and forth, the ends of her hair hitting her cheeks.

“You’re not allowed in their dorms.”

Hannah shrugs, unconcerned. It’s obvious that she’s not going to let a silly little detail like *that* stand in her way. Not when feeding fish to a carnivorous plant is on the line. Harry is beginning to suspect that the bubbly little Hufflepuff has a bit of an obsession with feeding things. “He could always bring it out here and let me feed it.”

Blaise laughs quietly and sets the plant carefully to one side. “We could probably do that,” he tells Hannah and she grins broadly and bounces on her seat.

It isn’t until all the presents have been opened and the collective population of first and second year Slytherins plus a handful of older years and the non-Slytherin members of their little friend group have gorged themselves on the largest tiramisu that Harry has ever seen – and, oh fucking Merlin, it is *delicious* and Harry doesn’t even care that he’s going to spend the night cramping and feeling sick to his stomach – that Harry gets a moment to slip off.

Technically.

“Be right back,” he murmurs, holding up his empty water glass as explanation. Mandy nods absentmindedly and makes a little shooing motion with her hand. She and Blaise have got a book of some kind – a gift from one of the older Slytherins – open across their laps and are tracing something across the page. Pansy has managed to ooze her way back across the room and is hanging off of Draco’s arm. Maybe it’s because he knows what to look for now or maybe Draco just isn’t bothering to put on much of a mask but the pointy little ferret looks about as pleased as he had when Barty had *actually* transfigured him into a ferret and bounced him all over the entry hall.

Harry slips away before either Draco or Blaise notice him leaving and heads straight towards the buffet – or, more accurately, to the ghost floating quietly in the corner behind it.

The Bloody Baron is there because Snape asked him to oversee the festivities, knowing that his own presence would put a bit of a damper on things. Also, Harry is pretty sure that a party – especially a children’s party – is pretty much Snape’s personal hellscape. Just stock it with the Marauders and eternal torment would be good to go.

Oh, Merlin.

Harry gives his head a little shake to clear his thoughts.

Now is not the time.

He has tried to approach the other ghosts during his scarce minutes of alone time over the past several days but so far he has utterly failed to establish anything other than the fact that

the Grey Lady rarely leaves the area surrounding Ravenclaw Tower and there's only so many times that Harry can pretend to get lost in the area before people will start thinking that he's a bit not bright.

He hasn't seen the Fat Friar at all since the incident. Nor has he had a run in with Peeves. Or even been on the same bloody floor as far as he can tell. He has seen Nearly Headless Nick but only from a distance and it would definitely ruin his plan to be sneaky if he started shouting at the ghost from across the great hall.

But the Bloody Baron is here. Right now. Standing – *floating* – before him and bound by his word to his Head of House that he will stay put and supervise.

If Harry is ever to have a chance to speak to the formidable ghost it is now.

“Er... hi.”

Harry wants to slap himself.

Really, now that he has a chance *that* is what he starts off with?

The Bloody Baron looks about as impressed as Harry feels. That is to say: not at all.

“Um. You're the Bloody Baron.”

*Merlin's fucking beard*, he is going to beat himself to death on the edge of the table. He is.

The ghost raises an eyebrow in a very Snape-like manner. Actually, it's *exactly* like Snape.

Huh.

Harry wonders if this is where he learned it. If the Bloody Baron had given the Potions Master *lessons* – if he had taken the scruffy, sharp tongued half-blood under his ghostly wing and helped hone Snape into a force that is equally terrifying and awe inspiring.

The ghost gives him *the look*. The get-on-with-it-you-fucking-dunderhead-before-I-eviscerate-you-and-use-you-for-potions-ingredients look.

Yeah. That one.

“I'm Harry Potter.”

“I am aware,” he drawls and Harry very much wishes that he had taken five seconds to pull his shit together before approaching the ghost. But no, he had to let the stains of Gryffindor raise their head and roar at him, making him hurry in his efforts not to be noticed.

Bollocks.

Now there is nothing for it.

“I, um, I have a question?” he forces himself to ask, giving in to the urge to shift nervously from one foot to the other.

The Bloody Baron looks down his nose at Harry’s nose like he’s a bit of lake scum come in on the bottom of someone’s shoe. Except no, that’s not quite right. The haughty, sneering disdain is definitely there but there’s something else as well. A stillness, coiled and tense.

Predator preparing to strike? Possibly. Even as a ghost, the Baron cuts a striking figure and Harry knows little about him but what he does know is enough to make tread carefully.

But now that he’s noticed, now that he’s had it shoved in his face Harry has been watching the ghosts.

There is something wrong with them.

Something wrong with the Fat Friar who flees from him as if he had a horde of dementors at his back. Something wrong with the Grey Lady who eludes him with a thousand years of practice. Something wrong with Peeves and Nearly Headless Nick. Something wrong with Binns who will not acknowledge him for all the gold in Gringotts, who glances over him as if Harry is not even there.

Something wrong with the Bloody Baron too, perhaps.

Not a predator, but something hunted. Something hiding and waiting – *hoping* - for danger to pass them by.

*Impossible*, Harry’s mind whispers. He’s just as he’s always been: he’s *just Harry*. He can still barely get through the day without tossing back headache potions and stomach soothers like a starving Ron Weasley let loose in a candy store. He is healing but he is *weak*.

“I, uh, I was wondering why the ghosts don’t like me,” he spits out in a rush: nervous and confused and projecting both of those facts as loudly as he can. “You’re the first that has talked to me,” he continues, “You don’t run away. Are... are they afraid of me?”

The Bloody Baron laughs.

It is not a pleasant sound but it’s quiet and Harry knows, as only someone who has spent most of his life creeping around places that he is not supposed to be, that he is the only one that hears it.

“Of course they are,” and even the sneer sounds the same, though the Baron’s burns hotter than Snape’s. Like he has fiendfyre snapping in his veins instead ice. Destruction instead of control. Harry swallows and takes half a step back. The Baron bares his teeth. “You carry death around beneath your skin, little master,” he whispers as he leans forward, the cool mist of his ectoplasm brushing against the tip of Harry’s nose. “And there is nothing a ghost fears more than death.”

Harry blinks, trying to understand. “But...”

“I do not fear death,” the Baron cuts him off, lips pulled back in a snarl.

No, Harry thinks and remembers the account of a man who loved a woman and killed her when she did not, could not love him back. He remembers that the man had turned the knife on himself, ripping out his own life rather than live with what he had done.

Rather than live *alone*.

“I know,” Harry murmurs.

The ghost gives him a long, piercing look.

“They will not speak to you,” he finally acknowledges and it takes Harry a few seconds to realize that he is speaking of the other ghosts. “They will not stay in your presence unless all avenues of escape are lost to them. They are too afraid of what you might do to them if they attract your attention. You should go back now. They will notice your absence soon.”

And Harry knows a dismissal when he hears one. Knows that this is as much of an answer as he is going to be getting today. Honestly, it’s more than he hoped to get.

He makes it back to the group, glass of water in hand, just in enough time to be roped into a game of exploding snap.

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Later that night, Harry lies on his bed and thinks. The ring on his finger is warm from his body heat, from the constant *brush brush brush* of the pad of his thumb over its surface.

He thinks of what he learned today, of the Bloody Baron’s words: *You carry death around beneath your skin, little master*.

He thinks of the flash of the Killing Curse, of a distant, fluffy white limbo. He thinks of a baby sobbing beneath a bench. He thinks of Dumbledore, so sure and proud.

He thinks of moving on.

He thinks of going back.

He thinks of three brothers and he wonders.



# Twelve

## Chapter Notes

Hello gorgeous readers, I hope wherever you are during the absolute shit show that is 2020 that you are safe and well! Life has been crazy (as I imagine it has been for all of you) and somedays writing is a familiar, blessed escape - other days I can't muster up the creative energy to pick up the pen (or the keyboard). Slowly, I seem to be getting back in the swing of things and I can't express how much your continued support means to me. As I type this, my little spur-of-the-moment story has passed 11k kudos - and has made a good start at climbing towards 12k.

(If you need me, I'm the redhead in the corner with my head down between my knees hyperventilating and making hysterical noises.)

Truly, I cannot express my awe for you all. I delight in every kudo. I cherish every comment. You have made me smile. You have made me laugh. You have made me cry.

Thank you.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

By the time October really settles in Harry's days have fallen into a pattern.

He wakes up, takes his potions, puts Inigo into his terrarium, gets ready for the day and the heads off to breakfast and classes with the rest of his dorm. Hedwig usually visits him during breakfast, fluffing up and cooing as he feeds her bits of bacon and making angry hissing noises at the owl that delivers his issue of the *Prophet* – something that makes Blaise laugh and croon at her in Italian. Hedwig seems to approve because at least three times a week she deigns to let the other boy feed her bits of bacon as well.

Classes are an exercise in restraint, which has never been one of Harry's strong points.

It feels like an odd choice in light of his plan of putting on a show for the wizarding world. The wrong choice, perhaps. But Harry isn't going to lie to himself. He might be significantly more powerful than he thought – and he definitely is. Already, with just a month of solid, actual care under his belt he can feel the increase of magic swimming in his veins – he is not a prodigy. Not really. Not like Dumbledore or Snape, not like Hermione or the Weasley twins, probably not even like his mom and dad, and certainly not like Tom Marvolo Riddle.

Currently he's more of a Lockheart: really good at only one thing and isn't that a bloody depressing thought.

But if he doesn't restrain himself, if he goes through his classes unabashedly showcasing his understanding and mastering of these basic, fundamental magics that are easy to learn but

hard to perform – magics that are designed to make him *stretch* and learn to use and control the magic lurking beneath his skin then *everyone will think he is*. They gush and praise over him. So strong. So smart. Of course, he is. But then they'll expect it of him.

No.

They'll *demand* it.

So. Restraint.

Better to be acknowledged as studious and hardworking with a tendency to master new spells and lessons with a quickness that hints at the power gathering in his core than to be hailed as a genius and be stuck trying to live up to something he's not for the rest of his life.

*Again.*

So he goes to his classes. He pays attention, even though most of it is review, and studies hard. He completes his homework thoroughly but efficiently. He helps those around him when they ask for help but he never goes out of his way to offer it. He only answers questions when called upon.

He doesn't show off. He doesn't go out of his way to earn house points. In the beginning he even tries to mask his obvious mastery of the spells they're learning by only pretending to say the incantations so that it appears to take him longer than it does to get it right.

That works for about a week and then he – slowly but surely – begins to cast nonverbally. Without trying.

Which is... really not what he had been going for, *bloody hell*.

So now he just gets it right the first time and does so as subtly and unobtrusively as he possibly can.

He doesn't bother paying attention in Binns' class. Honestly, he's pretty sure Hermione is the only person to actually pay attention in his class in the last fifty years. Instead, he reads through a chapter in his history text and takes careful notes, marking places and questions where he wants to ferret information out from another source – a habit he carries over to all of his other classes.

Nearly six years of listening to Hermione lecture him about how he could improve his study habits and he finally puts it all to good use. There's a pang of sadness in his chest when he realizes that First Life Hermione – *his* Hermione – will never know.

Of course, if he has his way she'll never fight in a war, feel forced to obliviate her existence from her parents' minds, starve, freeze, and be tortured.

Still, he misses her. He misses Ron. He misses his old life even as he detests it, everything tarnished and soured with betrayals and good intentions.

He spends a decent amount of time in the library. He spends a *lot* of time in the Slytherin Depository. (It takes him less than five minutes of browsing the stacks to realize that Dumbledore probably has no idea the place exists because if he did, he'd probably confiscate and/or destroy at least half of the books.) He even sends Hedwig off to Flourish & Blotts for an owl order catalogue and then later with an order. And then a second one a few weeks later.

“Are you sure the Sorting Hat got it right?” Mandy asks him one day, watching with a great deal of amusement as he scribbles notes about the Wizengamot in a second never-ending journal. The first, with all of his memories of his first life and ponderings about his second is warded and never leaves his flat but he's taken to carrying the second around with him everywhere, filling it with questions and notes about the world and society around him so that he doesn't forget. “I mean, you were up there forever. Maybe it just picked something so you would go away.”

“Hmm?” Harry blinks at her, suddenly conscious of how tightly he is holding his quill and of the ink staining his fingertips. “What? Oh. No. Slytherin's the right place. Definitely.”

It surprises him how much he means it.

“But you're so...” she motions at his... everything.

“Well, yeah,” Harry agrees, because she's not wrong. He's spent more time studying and reading books in the past ten weeks than he did in his entire first life. “But I don't actually like it. I mean, it's not bad,” he defends instantly, just so that she's not offended. Mandy definitely loves books more than he does. “It's really interesting most of the time but it's not what I would pick to do for fun.”

Merlin, Harry misses flying.

And cooking, oddly enough.

“So then why do you do it?”

“Well, how else am I supposed to learn it all?” Harry asks back. “It's not like anyone tells me about these things. They just assume I know.” Or they've been instructed not to tell him.

He doesn't think it's anything as insidious as keeping him purposefully ignorant in order to abscond with his money and influence but Dumbledore had obviously kept his world very narrow – limiting him to Hogwarts and the Dursleys and not bothering to tell him anything, ever. Not even the really, obvious important stuff. Was it to keep Voldemort from possibly seeing it inside of his head? Almost certainly once Dumbledore began to suspect that the connection between Harry and Voldemort allowed such a thing. But before then? Before the Dark Lord had resurrected himself?

Harry doesn't think Dumbledore – and everyone that operated under his authority – kept him in the dark out of some desire to control him. Certainly, there were times when Dumbledore kept him in the dark in order to test out some theory, using Harry's ignorance to ferret out more information about what remained of Tom Riddle but mostly Harry thinks that he was

kept in the dark out of some misguided attempt to protect him from things deemed too frightening or too heavy for a child to bear.

Which is ridiculous.

Harry hasn't been a child since he was fifteen months old.

So instead he had been blind and scared and *brash*, left floundering and feeling not just alone but like no one else cared.

It was all on him but no one bothered to tell him why or how. They had just expected him to do it.

Harry gives his head a little shake and lets his eyes drift back to book he's reading. In his notebook he writes *Wizard's Council??* and circles it twice.

When he's not in class, doing homework, or burying himself in research and trying to understand the world around him he spends his time much as he had in his first life: with his friends.

Only this time, *friends* encompasses so much more than following around after Ron and being quietly envious of his family and home while the red head pesters him with questions about his scar, speaks with stars in-his-eyes about Harry's fame, and generally does his best to introduce Harry to what Ron Weasley deems important about the wizarding world. Which, Harry admits, wouldn't have been horrible if he had been normal. If he had been *just Harry*.

Original eleven-year-old him had *loved* it, had soaked it up like a sponge. He had held it close, clasped it tightly, and hardly dared believe that it was for him. That this friend was for *him*. That this person was excited about *him*.

But he isn't *just Harry*.

He is the Boy Who Lived, sure, but he is more than that.

He is the last scion of House Potter.

He is one of the last living descendants of Salazar Slytherin. He is heir to the line of Peverell.

He is a living, human horcrux.

And he...

He has died and been reborn, after a fashion.

Whatever that might mean.

That calls for a different sort of friend, he thinks. If only to preserve his own questionable sanity.

Not necessarily *better*, though Ron's bouts of jealousy and occasional betrayals still sting, but just... *different*.

And they are different. Merlin, they are.

Oh, sure, they spend a lot of time talking about Quidditch. Hannah – sweet, bubbly Hannah – and Draco get in a screaming match one evening over the efficiency of the strategy of Puddlemere United's chasers – an argument that promptly derails when Hannah's face cracks into a smile and suddenly the two are half collapsed on each other, giggling and snorting and agreeing that Puddlemere's seeker is an incompetent arse.

They spend many hours exploring Hogwarts and the last warm days of autumn perched out by the lake, doing their reading on the sun-warmed rocks and splashing through the shallows in simple, gleeful games of tag. They play gobstones and exploding snap and while all of them have at least a basic understanding of chess Harry finds himself thinking that he would give not an insignificant amount of gold to see Blaise and Ron face off over a chess board. He's not sure it will ever happen, that Ron would ever deign to play with a *Slytherin*. Still, part of him hopes. It would be a sight to behold.

They are children.

Children, like he never got to be.

Children, like they are meant to be.

Like he was perhaps meant to be, once upon a time.

He catches himself smiling fondly at them at the oddest moments: when Draco is dramatically huffing over a perceived unfairness, when Blaise somehow manages to charm a sixth year Ravenclaw into blushing and giggling behind the scant protection of one hand. When Mandy starts stealing books from his hands and flopping down next to him to read them. When Hannah produces an assortment of snacks and juices from the depths of the purse she carries around and manages to talk Blaise into letting her try out spells to paint his nails in an assortment of colors. When Susan talks them through their homework with all the brisk efficiency of a drill sergeant but makes Neville smile so broadly it cuts his face in half, his cheeks pink with baffled embarrassment and pride.

One afternoon he and Mandy and Susan watch on, amused and laughing, as Draco, Blaise, and Neville spend nearly an hour poking and prodding – gently – at Blaise's birthday plant while Hannah coos at it and feeds it small strips of fresh fish.

And he doesn't exist in a vacuum. He's not just *Harry and his friends*. He speaks to his housemates, tries to show them that he means them no harm, that he's not what everyone has built him up to be. He brings Inigo with him into the Common Room and speaks to him proudly beneath dozens of watchful eyes. He forms a tentative peace with Nott. He helps Draco explain Charms theory to Crabbe and Goyle. He makes polite small talk with the girls. He gets two more letters from Daphne's mom containing a few articles and photographs that she has dug up about his parents, grandparents, and even his great-grandparents.

He takes notes and organizes his thoughts and practices clearing his mind every time he overcome by the shadow of his first life. Sometimes it works. Sometimes it doesn't. But by the end of October he can get through an Astronomy class without hearing Dumbledore pleading for his end and he can walk into the Great Hall and see the room as it is and not as it had been and hopefully never will be: covered with rows and rows of the dead.

It hurts sometimes to sit and laugh in a place where those he loved had been set, bloody and broken and *gone*. It hurts to find himself happy in a world that had held such darkness and misery – in a place that still nurses the potential for such destruction. It feels frivolous. It feels...

Sometimes the hurt of it takes his breath away, the guilt of getting a do-over enough to bring him to his knees or even sick up his carefully selected meals.

Except he's not the only one getting a do-over. Not really. Everyone else is too. They just don't know it.

That, Harry decides, is probably even worse.

Because now it really *is* all on him and if he lets himself think on it for too long it consumes him: the weight of his own expectations eating him up and reducing him down to a mere shadow of himself. A numb, unfeeling thing that stumbles from class to class with less grace and coordination than an inferius.

Some nights he lays in his bed and stares unseeing at the dance of the water on the other side of the glass, fingers clenched in the soft flannel of the sheets until they're white and bloodless.

*Let me get it right*, he pleads soundlessly. *Let me get it right. Let me get it right this time.*

Some nights the pathetic pleading of his own voice in his head makes him want to scream. Makes him want to throw and rip and rend. Makes him want to tip his head back and just *roar* until his throat is bloody and raw. Makes him want to unleash his fury and his pain on the thick pane of glass, to pit the enormous well of anger and grief seething inside of him against centuries of magically reinforced structure.

Makes him want to see if it would break or if he would, as if somehow the knowing would give him an answer to a question he doesn't even know he's asking.

And someday, fleeting and brief, Harry wishes that he were dead. That he had boarded the train in limbo and gone on to whatever waited for him after. Sometimes he wishes that he were gone, dead and dissipated into the dark while his physical remains lay empty and cold on the forest floor.

Sometimes Harry is just tired.

But then Draco laughs and sneers at the same time, grinning and pushes his pointed posh nose in the air and drags him into potions.

But then Hannah throws an arm around his shoulder and babbles on about the article she read in *Witch Weekly* about the latest French fashions in dress robes and shoves an apple into his hand.

But then Blaise drapes himself across the laps of Neville, Mandy, and Susan while they sit on an overstuffed couch in an alcove on the fourth floor looking out over one of the inner courtyards. Neville turns bright red and sputters to a stop mid-sentence. Susan laughs and tries to shove him off onto the stone floor and Mandy merely uses the sweeping planes of his face to prop up her Transfiguration book.

But then Snape is there, sweeping along the periphery of his vision: tall and proud and sneering and so fucking *alive*.

They're all alive.

Snape. Remus. Tonks. Fred. Sirius. Lavender. Collin.

Bellatrix. Pettigrew. Crouch. Quirrell.

Dumbledore.

Tom Marvolo Riddle.

Harry Potter.

They're all still alive.

So when the weight and the darkness and the fury and the grief and terror creep in on him, when it tugs at the edges of his eyes and drags him down Harry takes a deep breath.

Everyone is still alive.

And if he wants to keep it that way, if he wants this all to somehow turn out better - better for them but *definitely* better for him – then he needs to have his head on straight.

So he takes a deep breath, acknowledges what he is feeling, and sets it aside to study later when he can think and not just react.

And instead he just... floats. Like a feather upon the wind, like a leaf upon the surface of the lake. He drifts. He rises and falls and just...

*Settles.*

Into his skin and into this life and into the knowledge that with every passing day it all feels a little more real.

And that is enough.

For now.

---

“What’s this?”

Harry stares at the two sheets of parchment that have been shoved into his hands. They are, as best as he can tell, two lists: each containing about half a dozen different names. One is written in Blaise’s elegant scrawl and the other has been transcribed in Susan’s careful, meticulous hand.

“Solicitors,” Blaise drawls. “You didn’t think we forgot, did you?”

Harry blinks. “Uhh…”

“We told you that we would ask for recommendations!” Susan reminds him.

Harry blinks some more.

“Um. Thanks?” he finally settles on saying, just because it seems like the polite thing to do. Susan promptly lights up like the bloody sun and beams approvingly at him. “I just… I don’t think I need them?”

And just like that the smile on her face dims as surely as he’d dumped a bucket of cold water on her.

Harry sighs.

“I really appreciate it. I do. It… it means a lot that you go through so much effort for me but…” Harry presses his lips together and stares down at the lists, struggling with how to explain what he’s feeling. “People have stopped following me around,” he finally settles on saying, even though it’s not what he wants to say at all.

Susan rolls her eyes. “Only because Professor Snape completely decimated the entire point system,” she points out.

And she’s not wrong, Harry is willing to admit. It’s almost the end of October and even with the other professors handing out more points than usual to offset Snape’s blatant war on anyone bothering his students Gryffindor and Hufflepuff still haven’t managed to get to a hundred points. Ravenclaw has managed, but only just, and the entire house seems to promptly piss itself in fear anytime Snape and Harry are present in the same location.

Harry doesn’t find it gratifying in the dark little corner of his soul that is still blindingly furious at *everything*. Not at *all*.

“Well yeah,” he agrees. “But the problem has been solved, hasn’t it? I don’t have any need for a… solicitor.”

He shuffles the parchment awkwardly, unsure if he should just hand them back or…

“Please, you can’t actually believe that,” Blaise says with an eyeroll of his own.

Harry blinks. “Um…”



“Oh.” Blaise’s eyes widen a little. “You *do*.”

“Er...”

“That’s stupid,” Susan tells him bluntly.

“Seriously stupid,” Blaise agrees. “And we know you’re not dumb. We’ve seen what type of books you’re reading.”

Harry stares at both of them, eyes narrowed as he tries to figure out exactly what he is missing.

“Look, we know that you prefer to let things go.

“You don’t like to cause trouble for others and that’s not a bad thing, not really, but...

“Professor Snape isn’t always going to be there and people aren’t always going to stop just because someone takes away some meaningless house points,” Blaise finally says and Harry feels each word like a blow. He knows – *he knows* – that the other boy is correct. People trying to follow him into the bathroom and trying to touch his forehead like some sort of lucky talisman is just the beginning.

And Snape...

The idea of the other man not being there is terrifying and Harry knows that he’s probably holding too tightly to the potions master, so tightly that even those close to him can catch glimpses of it, but he can’t help it. He can still feel the man’s blood on his hands, can still see him sprawled out on the floor of the Shrieking Shack, missing half his throat and begging.

*Look at me.*

“We just want you to be safe,” Susan whispers, staring at her hands. “We won’t be at Hogwarts forever.”

And the thing is... they’re not *wrong*.

They’re not.

How many times had Harry been left hanging, without any idea what was happening or what he could do? How many times had he been left swinging, waiting for someone – usually Dumbledore – to sweep in and save him?

How many times had he wished that he could fight *back*, even though the very idea of doing so made him clammy and queasy?

He just wants to be left alone.

That’s not an option, Harry knows. It will never be an option.

But maybe... maybe this is a way to force people to interact with him on his terms.

Maybe.

He lets out a deep breath. “Fine,” he says, and offers them a decisive nod. “I’ll... I don’t know what to do,” he admits after another second.

Blaise smiles. “Well, first you should probably hire someone. *Ow!*” He rubs gingerly at his side where Susan had elbowed him.

“I could ask my aunt, if you want,” Susan offers and really, Amelia Bones seems like a credible source when it comes to advice about how to hire a solicitor. If he actually hires a solicitor. But Susan has already put so much work into this and he doesn’t want to bother her aunt. Not yet, anyway. He imagines that someday – sooner, rather than later – they’re going to have a conversation about a rat, a dog, and the Fidelius Charm but that day isn’t today and...

“You could ask Snape,” Blaise suggests.

And Harry wants to protest, he really does. Seven years of ingrained belief make him want to point out that the man is likely to laugh and/or throw him out of his office for asking for help in managing his ill-gotten fame.

Except Snape had helped earlier, hadn’t he?

In fact, in his own prickly, sneering way Snape has done nothing but help Harry since his physical.

Sometimes it is so hard to believe that this Snape – this Snape and the Snape he saw in the man’s memories – are the same Snape as the bullying bastard who had loathed Harry and who Harry and loathed and feared in return.

And yet...

“Okay,” Harry agrees with another decisive nod of his head. “I’ll ask him.”

---

Despite having agreed to it, Harry manages to put off talking to his Head of House until the end of the week.

Part of that, his is willing to admit, is a conscious choice on his part meant to maximize his chances of not having his arse hexed off as soon as he opens his mouth.

First, because a Snape that is done wrangling dunderheads in the classroom for the week and is facing two blissful days free of having to keep them all from blowing the castle sky high is a much more pleasant man than a Snape who still has this week’s class with the Weasley twins looming on the horizon.

Second, because no matter how long he thinks about and tries to reassure himself with the evidence of this life there’s a very large part of him that expects to be avada’d on the spot.

Still, on Friday night he gathers himself, takes a deep breath, and walks down the short corridor from the Common Room to the man's office and knocks gently on the frame of the door.

“Enter.”

Snape is at his desk, a stack of essays at his elbow but his red ink is stoppered. Instead, he has a book open in front of him, quill clutched between his fingers as he writes – no, sketches – something in the margins. A half full cup of tea and a plate with a few biscuit crumbs sit near his other elbow.

It might be the most relaxed Harry has ever seen the man in an official capacity.

It might be the most relaxed Harry has ever seen the man *period*.

Maybe waiting until tonight hadn't been such a bad idea after all.

Harry is totally going to pat himself on the back for this later. Even if it's mostly accidental.

“Do you need something Mr. Potter?” Snape asks, obviously catching sight of just who has entered his office. A brief flicker of worry crosses his face. “Are you in pain?”

Harry shakes his head. “No, sir.”

Snape raises a skeptical eyebrow.

“I'm barely even dizzy,” he assures the older man.

After a long moment of dubious scrutiny Snape inclines his head and motions sharply to the chair in front of his desk, saying, “So what can I help you with now?”

“I was wondering if you could help me with this,” Harry swallows nervously, proffering the pieces of parchment that have spent the week riding around in his second journal. “Sir.”

Snape straightens in his chair, eyes narrowing as he plucks the parchment from Harry's grip and scans them. “These are all solicitors.”

Harry blinks and closes his mouth, having opened it to explain. “Er. Yes sir. My friends seem to think I need one...?” He purposefully makes it a question. If Snape tells him it's ridiculous then it'll all be over. Blaise and Susan will drop it and the little cringing boy who lived in a closet and still lives hidden in the shadows behind Harry's ribs will stop panicking at the idea of making such a fuss over nothing.

“You don't have one?” Snape replies absentmindedly as he stares at the list. He blinks, just once, as his own words catch up with him and he heaves a great, suffering sigh. “Of course, you don't.”

“Um. No?”

“Your friends are quite correct to counsel you about the acquisition of one,” Snape tells him, deadly serious

“...wait. Really?” Harry can feel his mouth hanging open, his eyes so wide at the professor’s sincerity that they actually hurt a little. “I didn’t think...”

Snape’s eyebrow twitches upward and Harry slams his mouth shut, teeth clicking with the force of swallowing back the rest of his words.

Snape’s lip twitches in what is almost the beginning of a smile.

“Mr. Potter, loathe as I am to give any credence to the brainless masses that follow you around you *are* one of most public and well-known figures of our world. You are also the last of an old and prosperous House. Of course, you should have a solicitor.”

Harry blinks. “But...”

“While there is no one else in this school possessing your level of... celebrity,” Snape’s lip curls around the word and Harry winces, shoulders hunching beneath the weight of the man’s disdain, “you would certainly not be the only student to have a lawyer. Your friend, Miss Abbott, has no need for one and I suspect if Miss Bones were to ever need one her aunt would simply make use of her connections but the families of Misters Malfoy, Zabini, and Longbottom all keep solicitors on retainer as well as dozens of others I could name.”

He had rather thought so, given their conversations, but it provokes an odd feeling of relief to hear such suspicions confirmed. He feels less like a freak, less like he is making a big deal over nothing – even if, in the quiet, rational part of his brain he knows that it is not *nothing* – and more like he is not demanding the world make an exception for him.

“The world is a dangerous place,” Snape continues pointedly. “There is no shame in protecting yourself.”

Harry looks away, eyes stinging. The words coming out of Snape’s mouth are simple and yet, like so many things the man has done in recent memory, Harry feels them all the way to his core, disturbing the very foundation upon which he is built.

The first statement is an acknowledgement of fact: a truth they are both intimately acquainted with, though Snape cannot begin to guess the true extent of Harry’s relationship with danger.

The second statement is both shattering and steadying. In its wake Harry feels the familiar, bubbling rise of hysteria – when, *when* was the last time he had been allowed to protect himself without being scolded? When was the last time he had even tried? *Really* tried? Third year, he thinks, when he knuckled down and forced himself to learn and master the Patronus Charm as best as he could – and the soothing, life giving rush of relief.

If Snape had dismissed him, if he had scoffed and sneered and thrown Harry out of his office like Harry would have accepted it. He had *expected* it. He had expected the potions master to brush him off and stare him down while viciously making some comment about flaunting his

fame. Maybe throw in some comments about his entitlement and arrogance – something reminiscent of their conversation that first night in Hogwarts.

But Snape *hadn't* and it simultaneously feels like falling off his broom a hundred feet in the air and being caught all at the same time.

As he so often does these days, Harry can't decide if he should laugh or cry or scream. Maybe all three. At once.

It wouldn't be the first time.

Snape is watching him from the other side of the desk, his face very carefully blank. He's concerned though. Harry can spot the tell-tale tension around the edges of his mouth.

Harry takes a deep breath and forces himself to admit, "I don't know what to do."

From the way Snape is staring at him those are words he expected to hear from Harry bloody Potter about as much as Harry had ever expected to say them. Out loud, anyway.

"Normally," he begins after a lengthy pause. "I would advise you to discuss this with your guardians seeing as you are still underage but that is not exactly an option in your situation. Or rather, I suppose you are already doing so," he adds after a small, thoughtful sort of pause.

"Blaise and Susan put together these lists to get me started but do I just owl them? Can I do that?" The latter question is more directed at himself than Snape because honestly, he had forgotten until right this second that he is still technically underage. And that *that* probably actually matters.

"You can with my oversight. Technically, it would be bending the rules as I am not *actually* your parent or guardian but within these walls I have the legal responsibility to stand in their place which allows me leeway on certain matters. I would not be able to sign your Hogsmeade permission slip or pull you out of school but I would – and have – given consent for medical procedures on your behalf. Approached correctly I do not anticipate there being any insurmountable difficulties."

"Oh." Harry nearly slumps over with relief. "That's good. Sir."

Snape's mouth twitches. "It is," he agrees blandly and reaches for a quill. "I have no doubt that Miss Bones utilized her aunt and that Mr. Zabini consulted his mother so these won't be completely useless," he says as he pulls the lists closer.

"It was just going to be Susan asking her aunt but Blaise thought I might need someone more cutthroat," Harry admits honestly, unable to completely stamp down how amused he feels as the older man starts slashing through names on the lists with sharp, red lines of ink.

"Mr. Zabini is quite correct," Snape agrees as he crosses out one name with a particularly vicious swipe of his hand. "Kindness and a sense of fair play is not something you want in a personal solicitor. Never hire a Gryffindor lawyer." He taps the vigorously crossed out name for emphasis. "Or most Ravenclaws for that matter. You want a Slytherin or a Hufflepuff."

The Slytherin suggestion doesn't surprise him, but... "Hufflepuff?" he asks, feeling his own eyebrow rise.

Snape crosses out a few more names. "Loyalty and hard work, Mr. Potter, are excellent qualities to find in someone doing battle on your behalf."

Harry thinks of Susan and Hannah. He thinks of them now, both so worried and ferocious in their own ways and he thinks of them then, focused and devoted to learning what he could teach them – to fighting when Death Eaters invaded the castle. To seeing them throw themselves into battle against the full might of Voldemort's forces.

He thinks of Tonks. Brave, wonderful, funny, tenacious Tonks.

"Yeah," he agrees quietly and Snape pauses in his carnage to give him a steady look. "A badger is a fearsome creature when roused," he murmurs and knows that he sounds sadder than he should be.

Snape stares at him, dark eyes flat but glinting: pieces of polished stone set in a man's face.

He has to remind himself to not look at them straight on and instead focuses at the line of the man's cheekbone.

"They are," Snape finally agrees and there is something terrible rumbling around in the depths of his voice. Sorrow, yes, but fear and anger as well.

Harry clutches at the fabric of his robes and makes himself take a deep breath, slowly counting to ten and clearing his thoughts away until they're nothing more than smoke dissipated on the wind.

"Your friends made an impressive showing," Snape finally says, gesturing at the pieces of parchment. They are full of red ink. Harry eyes them pointedly before flicking a glance to his Head of House's face. "All of them are passable at their job," Snape acknowledges with a tip of his head, "even if most of them are brainless dunderheads. I would recommend one of these three."

All three of the names are on Blaise's list.

Harry is not surprised.

Not a single bloody bit.

Though, he supposes he should give Snape a few points for leaving a couple of names on Susan's list ink free even if the stern man isn't giving them his official approval.

"Okay," Harry agrees because he might be clueless but he's not stupid. Snape's recommendation is enough for him.

Merlin, that's not a phrase he'd ever thought he would think.

Somewhere, first life Harry is screaming at him. He can feel it.

“Any of them would be able to serve your purposes without making complete fools out of themselves or you. Ideally, you would be able to interview them all in person but it will be almost impossible to get them into the castle without the Headmaster knowing,” Snape tells him. “And I assume that you do not want him to know about this either?”

Harry wants to tell him that it wouldn’t be nearly as impossible as Snape probably thinks it would be but he also can’t imagine three grown, successful wizards walking through the tunnel from the cellar of Honeydukes so he just nods. “Correct, sir. So what do I do?”

“You pick up a quill and write to them,” Snape drawls and pushes a sheaf of parchment and a quill across the desktop towards Harry. “It is easier to hide one’s opinions and intentions via written word than in person but I will tell you what I know of them.”

“Okay.” Harry swallows and picks up the quill. It feels heavy in his hand, less like a feather and more like a weapon. “Okay.”

He can do this.

Right.

---

In the end, after a couple weeks of correspondence and Snape sharing tidbits about his three choices that cover everything from where they’re currently employed, who else they represent, to what house they had been at in Hogwarts – and, in the case of the younger two, exactly how they performed in potions, Harry settles on a former Slytherin named Ethan Abbott. The man just so happens to be Hannah’s uncle and it’s ultimately that fact that swings Harry in his favor. Not as some sort of loyalty *to* Hannah but because she has obviously spoken freely and highly of him to her family in her letters and some of her budding loyalty to *him* is reflected back in Mr. Abbott’s correspondence.

Plus, if he stops to think about it, Harry can acknowledge that a Slytherin raised in the bosom of a family of fiercely loyal and hardworking Hufflepuffs is a terrifying creature to contemplate.

Snape is pleased with his choice – Harry can tell – and he signs his name in a sharp, spikey scrawl beneath Harry’s on the magical contract delivered by a nondescript barn owl one evening at dinner.

“The poor fool is going to have his work cut out for him,” Snape mutters as he gives his wand a complicated twist over the contract, causing it to duplicate itself onto several waiting sheets of parchment. “Keep this somewhere safe,” he adds, giving Harry a pointed look as he hands him one of the copies.

“I will,” Harry promises, fully intending to ward the hell out of it and stick it with the notes he has written concerning his first life.

“I will keep a copy in my quarters,” Snape tells him again, having gone over this with him earlier, “and a second in my Gringott’s vault. The original goes to Mr. Abbott.”

“I understand, sir.”

Snape catches his gaze and holds it for several moments and despite all the secrets he knows he must keep Harry can't bring himself to look away, to look away from this proud and prickly man who has spent several hours over the past weeks coaching him in writing formal correspondence and leading him through careful evaluations of the replies received. He doesn't feel any brush of legilimency – nothing obvious and nothing faint and fleeting - but he's not arrogant enough to think that for all of his experience with having someone rummaging around in his head that he would actually be able to *tell* if Snape actually decided to be subtle about it.

“You have your solicitor now Mr. Potter. Do not forget to use him.”

It sounds like a warning.

Before the end of the week Harry understands why.

## Chapter End Notes

If this chapter feels very transition-y it's because it was originally only meant to be *half* of chapter 12 but it just kept growing and growing. So! Good news: chapter 13 is 95% done. I just need to go through it a few times because most of it was written as a continuation of this chapter but the last bit of it (and the significant portion of chapter 14 that I have written) was written well over a year ago so I should probably make sure things still line up like they're supposed to.

Which means, in true tribute to my "irregular updates" tag you will likely get three chapters in the space of a month after going nearly three months between updates. Gold star for me being consistently inconsistent!

Also! I have had several people ask if this is going to be (or if it *could* be) a Harry/Tom/Severus fic... and, tbh, that was an idea I mulled over quite heavily in the beginning. Largely because I have a soft spot for Snarry and I think the time travel/life do-over trope is particularly well suited to that pairing. Now, *at this exact moment* I am writing as if Harry/Tom is the main pairing but I'm still early enough in the story that if you all *want* to make it a triad fic I can do that with very few adjustments to my plans (Harry and Snape will have a close relationship regardless). So if you have strong feelings on this topic, either way, let me know. I'd love to hear it!

(If it makes any difference I do have a few Snarry fics and a Harry/Tom/Severus triad fic in the outlining/worldbuilding stage of my writing process.)



# Thirteen

## Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who commented on the last chapter. It seems like the majority is definitely in favor of keeping this just Harry/Tom so I will continue on with that trajectory.

My writing process is very chaotic and very organic and one of the things that I love most about writing/posting fan fiction is this immediate interaction that takes place between author and reader. Hearing your desires for the story and the views on what has been written both adds to the richness of the ideas and allows me to fine tune the story to you. The fic becomes art that we create together and I love it.

For all of you who were hoping for a triad (or simply expressed a desire to see me write one and/or Snarry) first, thank you, because that was a definite boost to my ego and second, I do have fics featuring both relationships in varying stages of development. I've been trying to avoid adding even more WIPs to my queue but honestly, life is short, the world is fucking mess, and I think we need every stolen moment of peaceful escapism that we can get.

Also, I'm just going to go ahead and apologize now :D

Enjoy!

The difference between Slytherin and Gryffindor has never been more obvious than on Halloween.

During his first year the entire week building up to the holiday had been spent listening to Ron regale him with stories he'd heard from his brothers: floating jack-o-lanterns, brilliant orange and black candles, skulls filled with candy, and a feast. To a child who had grown up watching Dudley get dressed up – and whine if everything wasn't *just right* – and return with bags full to the bursting with candy all from where he had been locked under the stairs it had all seemed unbelievably magical. At eleven he hadn't thought of it as the day his parents had died. At eleven he had barely even known that they *existed*, let alone what happened to them. They were a faceless, abstract concept and the whole idea of them being murdered by a dark wizard still seemed ridiculous to contemplate. He had spent most of the day grinning and shoving candy into his face, thrilled beyond imagining that it was all *real*.

His carefree delight and celebration had been a reflection of the whole of Gryffindor house. Everyone had been loud – louder than usual – and the Weasley twins had set off flashing lights and smoke bombs in the common room. They had also dressed Lee Jordan's tarantula in what Harry now suspects to be a shrunken Weasley sweater charmed bright orange and sat

it on the mantle over the fireplace, where it had made more than one person – Ron included – scream.

It hadn't been until the next year – until he had memories of his parents, until he had seen them in the mirror and spent hours and hours and *hours* flipping through the photo album that Hagrid had given him, until he had killed a man and everything had suddenly become *real* and not just a story – that Halloween had become a day tinged with sorrow and solemnness.

Here in Slytherin he feels it before he even opens his eyes. It hangs heavy over his head and he knows it's not just him. That it's everyone. That this grave, melancholy feeling will already exist wherever he goes within in the House, drifting from room and filling them like smoke. He can almost see it out of the corner of his eyes: white and wispy, licking along the stone floors and curling up the frames of the doors and entryways.

If he closes his eyes he can almost smell it: salty, ocean spray and the more stagnant, earthy smell of the lake. It smells of dust and stone and fire, of fresh green things and damp, loamy earth mixed with decayed leaves and slowly creeping mosses.

It tastes like ash.

Absentmindedly, Harry rubs at the hollow of his chest with the heel of his hand and puts on a soft black jumper over his usual clothes before donning his school robes. It seems like the cold has finally settled in.

His dormmates are subdued while they get ready for the day, murmuring their greetings quietly. Even Draco is quiet, his mouth pressed in a soft line as he comes up to stand next to Harry, his bag slung over one shoulder. "Blessed Samhain," he finally says, hesitation filling his steel gray eyes.

Harry swallows, thinking of the passages he had read late at night, of the dull, aching feeling at realizing once again how little he knows – had known – of the magical world, at the reminder of how little he had scratched the surface of his heritage.

Of how he would surely have dismissed it, so determined was he to be *good*.

"Blessed Samhain," he returns and the words feel odd in his mouth. Odd, but familiar though he has never spoken them before.

Beside him Draco shifts, almost flinching away from him in surprise. "Oh," he breathes dumbly and Harry wants to laugh at the odd, open mixture of emotions on the other boy's face. But he doesn't, for the same reason that he wants to – it's too vulnerable. Too real.

"Don't look so shocked Draco, I told you he'd be fine with it," Blaise's voice says from his other side. "We've all seen the books he's been reading."

Harry winces.

On one hand, he's glad that it is obvious that he is trying to learn about this culture he belongs to because it really cuts down on awkward conversations, inevitable barriers, and

potential misunderstandings.

On the other hand, he's more than a little terrified, the bottom dropping out of his stomach so quickly that he thinks he might be sick at the realization that *it is obvious that he is trying to learn about wizarding culture*.

He doesn't think it had been kept from him on purpose during his first life. Not really. And maybe that is giving Dumbledore too much credit. Maybe there's a part of him that still thinks too well of the Headmaster even though he routinely wants to strangle the man with his own beard.

But at the same time...

Death, Harry decides, has made him bloody paranoid.

"We'll be holding a ritual to honor our dead after the feast tonight," Blaise tells him, blissfully unaware of all the thoughts and feelings churning around inside of Harry's head. "Just a small little thing. Would you like to join us?"

Harry thinks of his parents. Of Sirius. Of Cedric. Of Tonks and Remus and Fred and Lavender and Colin.

He thinks of Dumbledore and Snape.

He thinks of Tom and the monster he became.

He thinks of an entire life, an entire world, gone. As good as dead.

"Yeah," he agrees, smiling gently and nudging at Draco's shoulder when he gapes again. "I'd like that."

---

Harry's stomach is sitting somewhere around his feet as he looks at the front page of The Daily Prophet. Distantly he is aware of someone calling his name. Draco, he thinks blankly, the boy's voice barely distinguishable over the roaring of his own blood rushing through his veins. Beneath his ribs his heart beats erratically, at times pounding so hard that he feels like he must have been sprinting for *days* and at others moving so weakly that he feels like his is down in the Chamber once again, collapsed in inches of cold, dirty water with the burn of basilisk venom dragging him under. The paper is smooth beneath his fingers and feels scalding against his skin though he knows that it hasn't been out of the elements long enough to truly war up from being transported. The smell of ink curls up to fill his nose over the scents of tea and breakfast, reaching down into him until he thinks he might feel it coiling around and around in all the empty places inside his chest.

**TEN YEAR ANNIVERSARY OF YOU-KNOW-WHO'S DEFEAT**, screams the headline, taking up nearly the entire top fold of the paper. Beneath it is a picture of the house at Godric's Hollow and Harry can feel something tearing inside of him at the sight of his childhood home – a home he had never seen until he was *seventeen fucking years old* – plastered there for everyone to see. It looks how he remembers it, but sharper. Fresher. The

picture must have been taken within a day of his parents' death. The destruction of the second story walls, where the backfired killing curse had blown open his nursery, is still smoking with magical residue. There are happy jack o' lanterns lining the walk. There are frost-kissed flowers in the window boxes. If he ignores the ruin of his nursery he can picture exactly the sort of home that it once was.

*Ten years ago today, You-Know-Who met his demise at the hands of Harry Potter, age 15 months, following the murder of James and Lily Potter. Exactly how such a young child managed to defeat the greatest Dark Lord of the last century remains unknown but it has long been surmised that Potter's survival has been a deep, primal act of accidental magic. Potter, now eleven, recently started at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. For more on the Potters and the fall of You-Know-Who, see page 2. For more recent updates on Harry Potter, see page 3...*

Beneath the brief words are two more pictures.

The first is of Harry boarding the Hogwarts express. He can remember the exact moment that it must have been taken. He had paused to look back over the unsuspecting crowd and momentarily met Lucius Malfoy's gaze. He can see it in his face, a fierceness and a wariness as he stares past whoever took the photo, the intensity of his gaze and the flat line of his mouth at odds with just how young he looks.

A child with a soldier's memories.

The second picture is of a baby: eyes red rimmed and bloodshot beneath a crown of messy black hair. Its mouth is open in a soundless cry, fists clenched so tightly around the edges of a soft looking blanket that they are white with tension. There's ash or dirt on the child's face and dusted in its hair. And...

*It's me*, Harry realizes, staring at the familiar lightning bolt shape on the baby's forehead. The wound is fresh - a cut and not a scar - with blood trickling down his face and the side of his nose. *It's a picture of me.*

*It's a picture of me before they left me at the Dursleys.*

Beneath his hands the paper is shaking and shaking and *shaking* and the ground is shaking beneath his feet and the table is shaking and he can feel it, feel it vibrating right down to his soul until he feels like he's not here anymore. He's somewhere. Anywhere. He's trapped. He can't breathe. He can't breathe. He can't breathe. He can't...

"...Mr. Potter."

The paper tears right down the center as Harry gasps, inhaling so sharply that it fucking *hurts*. Snape's touch is like a brand on his back, the pressure of his hand spanning between his shoulder blades and up to where his thumb brushes against the base of his spine drawing him back into his body with a lurch that surely everyone must see. That they must *hear*.

Harry takes another breath. And another. And other. Heaving like a winded hippogriff beneath the weight of everyone's eyes.

They're staring at him.

Harry ignores them. He's had a lot of practice.

Thank Merlin the Great Hall is significantly emptier than it will be fifteen minutes from now.

"I'm okay," he finally says. "I'm okay." His voice sounds strained even to his own ears but steady otherwise. Certainly, steadier than he feels.

He doesn't even have to be looking at Snape's face to see the blatant disbelief written across the man's features. It's easy enough to see it echoed in Blaise and Theo's faces as they sit across from him. Even Crabbe and Goyle are staring at him, mouths slightly open and eyes unsure.

"...Harry?" The sound of Draco's voice, so quiet and *afraid* sounding – so much like that day in Myrtle's bathroom. *Too much like that day in Myrtle's bathroom* – pulls his attention to the small, pale hand clutching at his arm.

"I'm okay," he repeats, making himself look at Draco. He can't bring himself to smile but he hopes... he hopes his friend believes him. "I'm sorry. I'm fine. I just... I've never seen... I didn't..." he takes a deep breath and shakes his head. "I'm sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry for," Snape says sharply. "With me, Mr. Potter."

Harry is unsteady on his feet, dizzy than he's been in weeks, but he manages to follow Snape from the Great Hall without falling flat on his face. The Potions Master leads him to a small chamber just off the entry hall and Harry barely has the time to notice the creak of the door shutting before Snape has his wand out, the familiar buzzing of *muffliato* settling over them like a cloud.

This is closely followed up by the now familiar sensation of a basic diagnostic charm washing over his skin.

"I'm okay," he repeats firmly, though he imagines the way he's propped himself up against the curtain covered walls and closed his eyes – just for a moment, just until the bloody room stops spinning - steals some of the assurance he'd attempted to inject into the statement. "I promise," he adds, rubbing at his chest. "I just... I wasn't prepared for there to be pictures," he admits. Which is a stupid oversight on his part, now that it's happened and he's thinking about it. Just because he didn't pay attention to the Prophet and what it was saying until his third year doesn't mean that it didn't tick along happily before that. And he rather doubts that it just up and decided to start reporting on the Boy Who Lived when his name came out of the Goblet of Fire.

"I've never seen... I've never seen the house before." The part of him that is first life Harry, the part of him that had cowed and snarled at Snape is ashamed of the way his voice wobbles, of the sudden tears he can feel burning at the corners of his eyes. The rest of him can't be arsed to care. This wouldn't be the first time in this life that he's cried in front of Snape. "And the pictures of me... I wasn't expecting that. Especially," he swallows roughly. "I didn't know there were any of me. As a baby."

It makes sense though. Like so many things do once he bothers to stop and think about. How else would everyone know exactly what his scar looked like and where it was?

There hadn't been any in the books he had read. Universally they all seemed to prefer pictures of him with his parents, happy and helpless in their arms. Having seen the alternative now, he understands why. It wouldn't do for the picture of their precious hero to be bloody and screaming, terrified and crying for a comfort that will never come again.

Hands shaking, he accepts the small vial that Snape presses into his hand, uncorking and swallowing it without even looking. The artificial cool of a calming draught flows down his throat and leaves a vaguely floral taste on his tongue.

"I'm sorry, sir," Harry whispers after the potion has had a minute to take effect. He can't believe he caused such a spectacle – and it's not even the good type of spectacle. This is the sort of thing that would make Rita Skeeter write about how his eyes glistened with tears.

Or about how he is clearly unhinged and should be locked up for the safety of the wizarding world.

It depends on the year, really.

"Don't be an idiot, Mr. Potter," Snape snaps. "You have nothing to be sorry for. Halloween is a difficult day for some of us," he adds more quietly.

Harry forces his eyes open to stare at Snape. The professor is standing beside him, back straight and staring at the wall behind Harry. His face is perfectly blank, pale even by Snape's standards with cheekbones that are more prominent than usual. Up close he can see dark smudges under his eyes, the man's gaze focused but unseeing.

"Yeah."

"Did you give someone permission to print photos of you?" Snape asks after several quiet moments. The sudden brusqueness of his voice is enough to jolt Harry back to consciousness.

Merlin, he hadn't even been aware of closing his eyes again.

He shakes his head. "No sir."

Snape fixes him with a stern, disbelieving look. "Are you certain?"

"Positive," Harry nods. "I don't write to anyone but Mr. Abbott and Gringotts."

"No, I suppose you don't," Snape drawls. He pauses and Harry imagines that they're both thinking of Aunt Petunia with matching sneers of distaste. "Draft a letter to Mr. Abbott. We will go over it tomorrow and send it off." Harry blinks. "Well, I certainly did not give them permission so unless you've accidentally signed something you shouldn't or they have been in contact with your aunt," another pause, taken so that both of them can appreciate the sheer absurdity of Petunia Dursley voluntarily talking to wizards, "then they are printing photos of a minor, which is illegal."

The smile on the potion master's lips has entirely too much teeth.

If Harry wasn't suddenly so empty and tired, he might have panicked at the thought of suing the Daily Prophet. He doesn't, of course, but it's quite possible that that's because the implications haven't sunk in yet. He'll probably panic later.

Maybe.

Or maybe he's spending too much time with Snape because he finds his lips stretching in a snarl of his own.

---

"I'm okay," he says as soon as he sits back down at the table. He and Snape have been gone long enough for the whispers to fan into full on flames. Neville is throwing him worried looks from the other side of the Great Hall and twitching as if he wants to join him at the Slytherin table. Mandy is watching them carefully from over the top of her book and Hannah and Susan have foregone all sense of House propriety and have sat themselves down next to Draco.

The rest of the Slytherins are eying them with rather panicked expressions on their faces.

That, more than anything, makes Harry smile. Just a little.

"I'm okay," he repeats, though it's obvious no one believes him. "I was just caught off guard."

Hannah throws one arm around her and leans against his shoulder. "This must be hard for you."

"Honestly? It's more unsettling than anything. That everyone has pieces of my life that I've never seen, never known about." Harry shrugs. "Not much I can do about that."

Not about the knowing, anyway, but maybe – just maybe – he can stop it from being rubbed in everyone's face.

For now.

---

"It's no wonder no one can stand her! She's a nightmare, honestly."

Harry winces at Ron's familiar words, remembering how they had been said to him once upon a time.

Worse, he remembers how he had *agreed*.

"That's harsh," Blaise mutters as Hermione pushes past them, the bushy, frizzled mass of her hair streaming behind her as she runs away. Part of him – the part that still feels like it is stuck in that fucking tent, starving and cold and so, *so* terrified – wants to run after her, wants to tell her that it will get better.

She might just slap him if he tries, though. He hasn't had much luck talking to second life Hermione.

And Merlin, he's tired. Too tired to deal with this today.

"That's *true*," Draco mutters back.

Blaise shrugs. "Doesn't mean I need to say it though. *I* have manners." It doesn't take a genius to figure out the implication of *that* statement and Ron, predictably, turns bright red.

"Y-y-you sh-should ap-p-ologize," Neville stutters out.

"Why should I?" Ron retorts, his hands clenched into fists at his side as he rounds on Neville, who takes a quick, neat step back to Blaise's side.

"She's just trying to help." Because even though he knows that she's trying to prove that she belongs here, at Hogwarts and in the broader wizarding world, that she's desperate for a place to fit in and belong he doesn't doubt that she's trying to help Ron as well. If only to stop him from losing Gryffindor points when he accidentally makes something blow up because he's mispronouncing the incantation and is sloppy with his wand work.

Of course, Harry knows as soon as the words come out of his mouth that they're the wrong thing to say.

If eighteen-year-old Ron had found reason to stand in front of the Mirror of Erised Harry suspects he would have been greeted by a visage of himself and Hermione: successful, well off, and respected by his family – all of whom were alive and well. But eleven-year-old Ron is a different animal entirely. Eleven-year-old Ron is the last in the long line of brothers, bundled off to Hogwarts with shabby robes and falling apart books and a wand that isn't even his own. Eleven-year-old Ron is hungry – *desperate* – to be his own person, to stand outside of his family's shadow and achieve greatness of his own.

It's probably a small miracle – and his sheer, innate Weasley-ness – that the red head hadn't been sorted Slytherin.

In a different life, eleven-year-old Ron had stood in front of the Mirror of Erised and seen himself grown up: handsome, popular, and both Head Boy and Quidditch Captain.

Eleven-year-old Ron is a prideful, prickly thing who doesn't handle anything he views as a handout – or worse, *pity* – with any grace.

His face turns purple, clashing horribly with the bright ginger of his hair, and completely swallowing up the freckles that sweep across his nose and across his cheekbones.

"I don't need her help!"

Harry, in an effort to exert some type of control over the situation before it really gets out of hand, preemptively elbows Draco in the side as soon as he opens his mouth.



Blaise regards Ron with precise sort of fascination before he simply raises a single, silent, thoughtful eyebrow in obvious imitation of their Head of House.

Harry can't elbow him in the ribs because he's standing safely on the other side of Draco.

"Just... just mind your own business you stupid slimy Slytherins!" Ron sputters with all the coherency of spitting cat and then storms away.

Harry watches him go, a familiar pain spearing through his chest at the sight of Ron Weasley walking away from him. Shivering, he pulls his robes closer.

Dean and Seamus stare wide eyed at his retreating back for a long moment until suddenly they're scrambling after Ron as if they expect a demon to swoop down and eat them now that they are alone with a bunch of Slytherin students. And Neville.

Given Snape's recent tendency to pop up whenever anyone is excessively bothering Harry and berate them to the point of tears before stripping of them of a bloody disturbing number of points... well. Harry can't really bring himself to blame them.

Still, "That's just insulting."

"Th-they sh-shouldn't b-b-be calling n-names," Neville agrees fiercely, staring after them with a look that would do any real lion proud. Harry can't stop the soft, pleased smile that he can feel tugging at his lips as he stares at the other boy. If interacting with Ron and Hermione leave him tired and aching and wistful and bitter, interacting with Neville is a lot like watching a plant discover proper sunlight and ample water.

"Well, yes, that too," Harry nods. "But snakes aren't slimy. It's not like they're *worms*."

"You would know...hey!"

This time it's Blaise that elbows Draco in the ribs and it honestly takes Harry more than a few seconds to figure out *why*.

*Oh.*

Neville doesn't know about Inigo.

In fact, none of his non Slytherin friends know about his boa or his parseltongue abilities.

Harry wonders if he should tell them. If he dares.

Merlin.

He's going to have to think on that.

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Samhain is a liminal time. It is the end of the light half of the year and the dawning of the dark. It is the last of the harvests. It is a time of offerings – of celebration and introspection and protection. It is a time of honoring and remembering those that have died.

Ultimately, it is a doorway between life and death. A day, balanced between worlds.

Harry understands now why Voldemort had picked that date to wipe him out of existence.

He wonders if his mother's sacrifice would have been enough to protect him on any other day. He wonders if Voldemort hadn't been so vested in ritual and power – if he had cared more about plain efficiency – what the world might look like. Better than things had been there in that final year? Worse? Effectively the same? It's not something he'll ever know but still, he wonders.

Clearly, his entire life – from beginning to end and back again - is a cosmic clusterfuck of pure, dumb luck.

Of course, he had known none of this in his first life. Suspects that if someone had dared to say '*Blessed Samhain*' to him back then he might have reflexively said '*bless you*' and offered them a tissue.

"They're so *loud*," Draco complains, shooting a dirty, sneering glare to the Gryffindor table and Harry wants to protest. There's a part of him that wants to defend his old house. *They're just having fun*, he wants to say. *They're just happy*.

And both comments would be true.

He remembers sitting there and grinning and laughing with them, caught up in the pageantry of it all. Even in later years once he had begun to associate sorrow and loss with the date he had smiled and fondly looked on his housemates as they celebrated. Fifth and sixth years had been grating, filled with frustration and resignation, but he hadn't begrudged his friends and acquaintances their candy even while he mourned and worried.

But they *are* loud – not just physically noisy but also something... else. He can feel their energy, their enthusiasm and their magic like concussive blows, like spell backfire. He can feel it there, vibrating under his skin and ringing, fuzzy and muffled in his ears and it is *loud*.

"Yeah," he settles for saying. "They're just..." he shrugs.

It's hard to put into words. He's all twisted up inside: present and past and future tumbling around and around in his head like fighting cats.

He's sitting at the Slytherin table and feeling the weight of his housemate's judgement and their sense of openness, of *waiting*.

He's watching the high table. Quirrell isn't there.

He's sitting at the Gryffindor table, eating chocolates and cauldron cakes and enormous pieces of pumpkin pie and laughing at Dean when he eats something that turns his teeth bright orange.

He's watching the Gryffindor table, hoping but no, "Granger isn't there."

Draco blinks. "So?"

Harry rolls his eyes, “So, it’s been half a day! Is she still crying in the bathroom?”

“That’s what I heard from Brocklehurst,” Daphne murmurs. Harry sighs. That’s what he had heard from Mandy as well. Two hours ago.

Maybe he should have sent Hannah. Bubbly, happy Hannah probably would have been a better choice. But Mandy is a fellow book lover and a little more sedate. Maybe Susan?

Harry shakes his head clear of his thoughts. They won’t do any good now.

“Who cares if the mudblood is crying?” Pansy hisses. “Maybe she will go back to where she belongs.”

The words are quiet, so quiet that only those at their end of the table catch them. So quiet that they go unheard by the Ravenclaws behind her and everyone else.

Harry feels them like a blow to the chest, a strike that shatters him open and forces his insides to spill out onto the table.

He remembers being angry – remembers raging at his friends, remembers being infuriated that no one believed him, remembers casting an unforgiveable at Bellatrix, remembers destroying Dumbledore’s office, remembers slashing Malfoy open, remembers being filled with so much burning hatred as he chases after Snape, screaming that he is a coward, so ready to kill the man that he had *shook* with it – but this anger is nothing like that. This anger is cold and empty. It is tired. It spills out of his chest and creeps along the table like frost, chilling food and climbing goblets until ice crystals form across the surface of water and pumpkin juice and tea.

Distantly, he is aware of his flatware rattling.

“Do. Not. Use. That. Word,” he growls, fixing his gaze on Pansy’s round face.

She’s just a child spouting learned hatred, parroting things she’s likely heard her entire life.

She’s standing in the middle of the Great Hall and suggesting that they just hand him over to Voldemort.

Her lips, so carefully pink, twist in a sneer that he swears she must practice and Harry just... *flexes*.

Pansy gasps and flinches away from the table with a small, pained cry. Her fingertips are red, as if burnt, but her silverware is completely iced over: fuzzy with hoarfrost and beginning to steam in the warmth of the Great Hall.

The table is so quiet that Harry can hear the ice melting.

Harry blinks...

...and snaps back into the moment.

*Oh, bloody fucking hell.*

He closes his eyes for just a second and takes a deep breath.

“My apologies,” he offers genuinely, though he’s not sure if he is apologizing for the painful burst of cold against her skin or for the fact that he lost control of his magic. Again.

Probably both, if he’s being honest.

Behind him the doors to the Great Hall are flung open with a thunderous *CRASH*, practically bouncing off the stone walls.

“T-Troll!” Quirrell’s familiar voice yells, instantly drawing all eyes to him as he sprints into the room, turban streaming behind him like a long purple ribbon. “Troll in the dungeon!” He pauses at the foot of the steps leading up to the high table and leans over, grasping at his own knees in an effort to remain upright as he pants for air. “T-thought y-y-you ought t-to know.”

For a moment everyone just stares at him, even the other professors, clearly caught off guard by their colleague’s dramatic entrance. And then Quirrell collapses, toppling forward in slow motion to sprawl across the steps, his face pale and his mouth slack as it hits the rise of the stairs.

Everyone starts screaming.

Privately, Harry has never been more thankful for Quirrell – for *Voldemort* – in his entire life.

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“First years, First years!” Gemma Fawley’s voice is like a beacon among the huddled Slytherins, drawing them to her like a moth to the flame in the chaos following Dumbledore’s instructions. “We need to get back to our dorms!”

“But our dorms are in the dungeons!” Pansy points out hysterically and Harry can’t help but agree, even though he *knows* that the troll isn’t going to go anywhere near the Slytherin dormitory.

“Professor Snape has opened a passage just off the entry hall,” Gemma explains quickly, keeping her voice low so that passing students can’t hear her. “It’s meant for teachers needing to transverse the castle quickly. It’ll be a tight fit but we will be able to bypass the main passages ways and come out near the professor’s office. We’ll be able to get into the common room through there.”

*And then we’ll be safe.*

She doesn’t say it but Harry imagines he’s not the only one that hears it anyway. It will take more than a rogue troll to break through whatever protections Snape has placed over their dorms.

“Where are you going!” Draco’s hand catches him by the sleeve as he tries to slip away and Harry sighs.

“McGonagall!” he replies shortly, jabbing a finger in the transfiguration professor’s direction. She’s come down off the dais to herd her Gryffindors towards the doors – and up towards their dorm. It’s going about as well as it had in Harry’s first life: not at all, the Gryffindors largely milling around and trying to get a look at Quirrell or pester their Head of House with questions instead of following instructions. “I don’t know if she’s noticed that Granger isn’t with them!”

Draco rolls his eyes.

“Harry...”

“Go! I’ll catch up. It’ll just take me a second.”

Both Draco and Blaise, who has suddenly appeared over the blonde’s shoulder, look skeptical at this statement but the sound of Crabbe making what can only be described as a noise of distress draws Draco’s attention.

“Go,” Harry repeats more gently. “I’ll be right behind you.”

Draco looks at him for what feels like forever but is really only a second or two before he nods. “Be quick, or I’m telling the prefects.” *Who will tell Snape*, the rest of the threat goes unvoiced. Harry nods.

“Go.”

They go.

Harry is left alone in the flood of students and, gritting his teeth, he begins to pick his way through them, ignoring the way he is kicked and shoved and pushed in their efforts to get out of the Great Hall. He’s going to have bruises tomorrow.

In the time it takes to find her, McGonagall manages to get the bulk of the Gryffindors moving, shooing them in front of her like overexcited cats.

“Professor!”

“Mr. Potter!” The stern woman peers down at him in surprise. “What are you...? Did you get separated from your house?”

Harry shakes his head. “No, I just...”

“Ach. Then what are you doing here lad? The headmaster gave instructions!”

“I just wanted to tell you,” Harry tries again, speaking a little louder.

“Everything is well in hand,” she interrupts him and Harry nearly screams with the frustration welling up in his throat because clearly, everything is *not* or he wouldn’t be here! “Go to your dorm!”

“But professor, it’s Grang...”

“... your dorm, Mr. Potter! And five points from Slytherin!”

Harry reels back, her disregard as good as a slap across the face.

She doesn't know, he reminds himself. She doesn't know that Hermione is crying in a bathroom that a troll is about to stumble upon. She's just trying to do her job. She's just trying to get the rest of her students to safety.

But it hurts anyway, too reminiscent of the times in which she wouldn't listen to his worries because she was busy with something else – or believed that he should be doing something else.

Harry stands in the Great Hall until it is all but empty and then drifts along with some of the last to leave. A group of fifth year Hufflepuffs, he thinks, huddled so tightly together that he's pretty sure they don't even see him.

Out in the entry hall he spots the shining, platinum of Draco's hair out of the corner of his eye. He's standing out of the way next to what looks like an open broom closet, an annoyed looking Travers next to him.

Unseen, Harry watches him for a minute. Watches him fidget, just a little, his fingers worrying at the hem of his sleeves, his shoulders twitching as he cranes his neck and looks around.

*Sorry Draco, he thinks silently. It seems I still have a problem with having to save people.*

And then he turns toward the corridor that leads to the girls' loo.

Bollocks.

---

He doesn't run into Snape. He must have loitered too long in the Great Hall to cross paths with the man as he raced to prevent Quirrell, who is no longer lying prone on the floor, from trying to get his hands on the Sorcerer's Stone. Harry is not sure whether to be relieved or disappointed. Relieved, because now there is no chance for the situation to be taken out of his hands, relieved because Voldemort won't succeed or disappointed for the exact same reasons.

Merlin, but he's tired.

The troll is already in the bathroom.

“Shit,” Harry mutters and draws his wand. The troll is exactly as he remembers it: at least three times his own height, gray skinned and solid with wispy hair and so foul smelling that Harry actually gags before he remembers that he is a wizard and casts a bubble headed charm on himself.

Hermione is where he remembers her being, pressed to the back wall of the bathroom and paler than the tile she's trying to disappear into. She has her arms curled over her head, hair erupting from between the press of her skinny limbs and she's screaming, *crying* as she cowers.

And Harry... fuck. Harry has no idea what to do. He'd had no idea what to do the first time and everything had turned out okay but this time the problem is almost the opposite. The spells he would reach for now are certainly ones that an eleven-year-old – even a studious, hardworking one – wouldn't know.

And frankly, if *sectumsempra* rolls off his lips and leaves its signature slashes across the troll's magic resistant skin, Snape *will* string him up by his toes, tear his mind open, and then eviscerate him.

"Hermione!" He yells just as the troll's club is swinging down. "*MOVE!*"

Hermione doesn't move. Not really, instead she lets out another wail and drops to the floor, curling into a ball that will do absolutely nothing to protect her.

Harry swears and lashes out with his wand. "*Protego! Bombarda!*"

The spell itself doesn't do any damage to the troll itself but it does catch the fist holding the club, propelling it off course and out of the troll's hand. It goes flying, smashing through the line of sinks as if they were nothing more spun glass. Porcelain and water go everywhere. It's too much to hold up the shield charm against hundreds of tiny projectiles so he lets it go. Recasting quickly, he manages to keep the bulk of them from hitting Hermione but the troll lets out a confused roar as dozens of scratches score its leathery skin. Harry winces as one particular chunk catches him on the cheek, the warmth of his blood trickling down his face to drip onto his robes. The water is cold, filling the bathroom with a frigid spray that soaks through his robes uncomfortably quickly.

He does not remember it being this miserable the first time around.

Of course, the first time around he jumped on the trolls back and shoved his wand up the thing's nose – an experience he is in no hurry to repeat. Nor does he have Ron here to conveniently distract the troll by calling it names.

Speaking of, "Hey, peabrain, over here!" Another *bombarda* glances off the troll's shoulder and ricochets into the wall. Stone and plaster explode outward in a cloud and the troll roars, propelled away from Hermione's helpless form. Caught off guard and off balance it stumbles, slipping in the icy water and taking it further away from Hermione but closer to Harry.

Which might be a mistake because now it is not just confused and hurt, it is threatened and *angry*.

"Shit, shit, shit," Harry mutters under his breath scrambling backwards to get out of the way, scrambling to bloody *think* of what he could do to stop a full grown mountain troll without assistance and without performing borderline – okay, *actual* - dark magic or revealing knowledge and proficiency that even *I'm bored, so I read ahead* couldn't possibly cover.

It's the cold of the water, finally soaking through his robes to brush up against his skin, that gives him the idea.

Maybe. Just maybe...

The chill from earlier is still there, sitting in his chest and numbing his extremities. It's easy to free it, the metaphorical lid he'd put on it earlier nothing more than a poorly formed scab, slipping away at the slightest pressure. It spills out of him like water, like vapor off of bubbling cauldron, pouring down his sides and spreading outwards.

It's not accidental this time. It's not a loss of control.

He still doesn't know what he's doing but this time he knows that he's doing it, that he *wants* it to happen. He wants it to spread. He wants it to cover *everything*.

The cold moves quickly.

The troll bellows and squirms, slipping in the slush and then thrashing like a caught fish, straining against the ice encasing its toes and creeping up its legs, its skin blackened and flaking in its wake. Curled in a ball at the foot of the wall, Hermione is little more than a lump of sodden black robes, hands raised protectively over her head. She's still whimpering. Still alive. Still safe.

Well, mostly safe.

His breath hangs frozen in front of his lips, robes crackling with ice as he takes an unsteady step forward, wand raised.

"*Wingardium Leviosa*," he murmurs with a gentle, barely there swish-and-flick of his wand. The troll's club, frozen as solid as the room around them rises into the air. Harry holds it there for a second and then...

It hits the troll's head and shatters.

The troll drops like a bag of rocks, hitting the ground with a thunderous crack that shakes the entire room, ice and stone falling from the ceiling and breaking up the ice that covers the floor.

The troll's frostbitten legs are still upright, bone and flesh splintered – smooth and jagged, like broken glass.

Harry takes a deep breath.

It's so cold.

Not just in the room.

No, the room is warming up now. Now that he's replaced the scab, now that he's no longer willing the troll to freeze the cold has stopped spilling out of his chest and the ice is melting as fast as it appeared.

*Drip. Drip. Drip.*

There's ash in his mouth.



An emptiness there behind his ribs: a bottomless, expanding void of nothing.

It's how he felt, there on the pebbled beach, slumped across Sirius with the rattling, open mouth of a dementor looming over him.

*"Avada Kedavra."*

Harry doesn't move out of the way. Instead,

He.

Stumbles.

Goes.

D

O

W

N

*"You're dead, Harry Potter. Dead. Even Dumbledore's bird knows it."*

The water laps against his knees.

Distantly he is aware of someone screaming.

*"Master, I cannot hold him – my hands! Master, master help me! Master...!"*

He tightens his grip and holds on, prays for Quirrell to die. Just die already. If he just holds on then...

*"Avada Kedavra!"*

A flash of green light.

"HARRY!"

The forest floor is hard and cold, layers of decaying leaves and stabbing twigs crushed beneath his cheek. He can feel it. He can smell it. He will lay here forever, rotting from his bones and picked at until nothing remains.

A wall of black appears before his eyes.

The water beside his face is swirled with blood. Around and around and around it goes.

*"Harry Potter, The Boy Who Lived."*

"... HARRY!"

Harry closes his eyes.

And then there is nothing.

## Fourteen

White.

Everything is white.

Utterly, completely, unescapably *white*.

Harry Potter spins in a slow circle as the familiar setting of Kings Cross appears out of the wispy white *nothingness* that surrounds him.

“No, no, no, no, no,” he mutters frantically. He can’t be here. He can’t be dead. Not again. He just got started. He just got settled. He doesn’t want to start over. Not again. The very thought of having to relive the past three months is enough to make his chest heave, lungs burning to get oxygen that just isn’t coming no matter how quickly he gulps air.

Probably because there isn’t air in limbo, he thinks rather hysterically. But it doesn’t stop him from trying.

He ends up bent at the waist, hands braced on his knees, and his head practically pressed into his thighs. It doesn’t make it any easier to get nonexistent air but not being able to see the fucking *white* that’s everywhere goes a long way to restoring rational thought and control to his brain.

Or at least something that pretends pretty well.

Harry is not quite sure what happened. He’s certainly done a great many things more dangerous than confronting a confused mountain troll in a bathroom. Really, in the grand scheme of his life the actual *danger* of the whole troll incident is nearly negligible. He’s come closer to dying playing quidditch for Merlin’s sake!

But here he is.

Dead.

Presumably.

Though he can’t imagine how it actually happened. The troll hadn’t been close enough to crush him when it toppled, he hadn’t been hit by the club or any debris pieces larger than a knut. He could have always bled out, he supposes. There had been a not insignificant amount of blood in the water there at the very end. Maybe. He thinks. It’s all a little fuzzy to be honest, distant and hazy like a scene watched through fogged glass.

Maybe he froze to death?

It had been cold in the bathroom. He had made it cold, so cold that metal and stone shattered like glass. Not to mention the troll.

He dismisses the thought almost as soon as it occurs to him. It just doesn't *feel* right and, for good or bad, Harry's accomplished ninety percent of what he's managed operating on sheer *feeling*.

Well, and dumb luck. Which seems have worked against him this time.

Bloody, fucking, *hell*.

It doesn't matter in the end though, does it? He's still here. He and the Horcrux trapped in this...

Harry bolts upright so fast that his head spins and his stomach lurches.

The Horcrux.

He doesn't hear any crying but that doesn't mean much. It had given up before, hadn't it? Reduced itself to pathetic, hiccupping cries of misery when nothing answered its first piercing wails. Harry too had learned that crying never brought the comfort that it asked for.

He's off before he realizes it, dashing up and down the platform and checking under each bench frantically. The platform isn't endless. Really, it's not much more than a stop or two long, so he's reasonably sure that he circles the area at least twice before he has to acknowledge that the Horcrux *isn't here*.

For a moment the thought hangs in his head, knowledge without any sort of comprehension. Then it hits him and he's nearly sick all over the platform. Can he even be sick in limbo? Does he even have a *body* in limbo?

Regardless, he ends up with his head back down around his knees trying to suck in air that isn't there, shaking like he's gone a few too many rounds with the cruciatus, and trying to figure out *what the fuck is wrong with him*.

The Harry of several years ago – the Harry of several *months* ago – would have felt this level of revulsion at finding out that he had a part of Voldemort's soul wound with his. That he was – and is – literally keeping his mortal enemy alive. He is quite sure that he would have lost the bloody plot and accidentally destroyed whatever building he'd been in when he found out.

But now...

Well, now he's rather forced to acknowledge that the idea of it – of that poor, abandoned and mutilated soul piece – being *gone* is gutting. Here in the quiet, white nothingness of the inbetween he can't help but remember all of the times he had caught himself doublechecking the state of his scar in the mirror. Can't help but admit to himself that he's far more attentive to Quirrell the second time around, secretly delighting in the burn of his scar when it happens. It's less an actual hurt these days and more a warmth – a reminder and a warning. Of where he has been, of where he could end up again if he's not mindful.

Almost everything feels like that these days.

When he finally manages to get his stomach under control, he forces himself upright and gently, hand shaking, forces himself to trace the scar that Voldemort had given him.

It's still there, still raised and angry beneath his touch, the bumpy tissue of it warmer than the surrounding skin. Just like it usually is.

So does that mean... does that mean that the Horcrux is still there?

Dumbledore had implied, Dumbledore had *said* – and how he's come to hate any thoughts that begin with that phrase: *Dumbledore said* but in this situation the bloody old man's word is all that he *has* and it is *galling* – that the only way to separate the soul piece from Harry was for Voldemort to destroy it himself.

And Voldemort hadn't been in the girl's bathroom just now.

At least, he's pretty sure.

To the best of his knowledge while he was facing off with a troll Voldemort had still been attached to Quirrell and one floor up trying to avoid being eaten by Fluffy and/or hexed fifty ways to Sunday by Snape.

Now that would be a fight to see.

He's seen Voldemort duel against Dumbledore and it had been an elegant, vicious thing.

He's never seen Snape duel. Not really. That spectacle with Lockheart doesn't count, not even a little, and it hadn't taken much more than a minute of actual thought to realize that not only had his fight with McGonagall been a complete and utter sham but that he had used the cover of it to take out the Carrows and leave the castle safely and uncontested in the Order's hands when he had fled. Which speaks to his level of skill all on its own.

Harry shakes his head.

He's reasonably sure that Voldemort hasn't murdered him. Yet.

So logically, the Horcrux must still be with him.

He thinks.

The relief is enough to make him dizzy.

Fighting the rather hysterical laughter bubbling up in his chest, Harry presses the heels of his hands to his eyes and lets out a slow, shaking breath.

Right.

Last time, he's pretty he managed to leave by picking up the Horcrux – by rejoining them, something that rendered going back to that clearing in the Forbidden Forest and the battle raging across the grounds of Hogwarts impossible. Or that's the best theory he's been able to come up with when he lays in bed at night unable to sleep.

But until that point, going back had been an option, hadn't it? Boarding a train and going on or going *back*.

If he is here, again, does the choice remain the same? On or back?

If this is the death that sticks he is going to be *furious*.

That in mind, Harry forces himself to lower his hands and walk over to the ghostly, fluffy looking tracks.

There aren't any trains. Not a single bloody one.

Not one going forward. Not one going back.

None.

Harry closes his eyes and slowly counts to ten, focusing on the feeling of being high in the air on his broom, wind whipping past his face and taking the almost feral burn of his emotions with it.

He opens his eyes.

Still no train.

"You're not dead."

Harry swears and jumps, spinning around and brandishing his hand as if he were holding a wand.

There's a man.

At least, Harry thinks it's a man.

At first it is just darkness, void of light and shape and it hurts his eyes to look at it. But that can't be right because he blinks and there's a man leaning against the divider between platforms.

He's not that far away but it's still hard to make out his features. He's a tall man, as tall as Snape and possibly even taller, dressed in smart black slacks and shoes so highly polished they seem to suck in the soft glow of the endless white surrounding them. His shirt is white, but not soft and wispy like everything else. It is hard and cold, cutting in its whiteness, the contrast even more striking against the black of his very muggle suit jacket. He's not wearing a tie or anything like it but has left several of the top buttons undone and there is a pair of dark sunglasses hooked over the open v of his neckline.

All in all, not the sort of person he expects to run into here.

Of course, he hadn't actually expected to run into anyone here. Seeing as how he hadn't expected to bloody *be* here.

Harry blinks again.

“...what?”

The man pushes away from the wall and saunters forward, hands shoved deep into his pockets.

“You’re not dead,” he repeats with a knowing little smirk that curls the edges of his mouth. “That’s why there aren’t any trains, darling. You’re not dead.”

Harry stares. For a minute the man’s features seem to just slide past, he can see them but they just don’t register and then, for a moment, he thinks that he’s staring himself in the face but that’s not right because he blinks and finds himself looking into a handsome, pureblood sort of face.

Harry can see why he might have thought that it was himself. There’s something in the cheekbones and the sweep of the man’s nose. Of course, there’s also something in the square of his jaw that for some reason makes Harry think of Tom Riddle as he had sat across from Dumbledore and interviewed – if it can be called that – for the Defense position.

The man’s hair is red, but not the red of his mum’s or of the Weasleys but a deep red-black that almost gleams purple: the color of blood spilt in the moonlight.

But no, Harry blinks and the man’s hair is black. It’s long to his shoulders... No. It’s a flyaway mess on top of the man’s head and...

Harry shakes his head and it... settles. It’s black and gleaming, cut short but still long enough for Harry to see the hint of a curl in the artfully tousled strands.

His eyes are blue, almost gray, but no they’re green: bright and familiar, the same ethereal green of the Killing Curse. No. They’re not. They’re bottomless. They suck him in like a pensieve, swirling him around and around and around except instead of spitting him out he’s just drawn deeper, drawn into something that never ends, a darkness without borders, without even the faintest glimmer of light and Harry is falling, falling, falling into a cold that extends beyond comprehension.

Harry blinks.

The man’s eyes are so dark brown as to be nearly black and outlined with carefully smudged eyeliner. His lips just red enough that Harry thinks he must be wearing some kind of lipstick as well. There’s a faint hint of scruff on his chin, neatened just enough to make it obviously intentional and not just lazy.

“And how would you know?” Harry finally asks, not bothering to hide his suspicion. There’s something about the man that’s familiar and almost comforting but he also makes the hair at the back of Harry’s neck bristle and stand on end.

The man smiles, a quick flash of white teeth. “Well, it’s rather my job to know.”

Harry stares.

The man smiles and rocks back on his heels. He's close enough now for Harry to realize two things: first, that he really is as tall as Snape and two, that Harry isn't nearly as short as he should be. Oh, he's still short, but he's no longer a scrawny, underfed eleven-year-old. He's not even a half starved, half defeated seventeen-year-old walking to his own death. He's taller than he remembers being, if his gauge of the other man's height is correct. Not by much but when you're as short as he had been a couple of inches makes an enormous difference. And now that he's thinking about it he can feel the difference in the rest of him: he's stronger, more solid. His shoulders take up more space than he ever thought they would, though the rest of him is still slim. His hair is still long enough to brush his shoulders but it feels different when he moves.

"What's going on?" Harry whispers, taking half a step back. "Who *are* you?"

"Ah," the man acknowledges. "I'm afraid that's my doing. I am Death and it's a pleasure to finally meet you Harry Potter." The man pauses, head canted to one side and a roguish smile on his lips. "Well, this *you*."

Harry has no bloody idea how to respond to that. Or... well, any idea how to respond to any of it, really.

So he takes a deep breath, imagines the wind rushing past his face as he turns into a dive, and counts to ten.

"...Death?"

"Mmm-hmm."

"Death," Harry repeats flatly, unable to stop staring. "As in '*Once there were three brothers*'...? That Death?"

"Yes." The man nods. "Well, technically there is only one death. I am the Void, the Inescapable Darkness. I am without Beginning or End. I am everywhere, in everything in an ever growing, infinite number of universes and realities. I am inescapable – even for those who think otherwise, who rip themselves apart to hide from me. I am the Darkness from which all Light, Life, and Warmth emerged and I am the Cold to which all things return."

"...and you look like that?" Harry's mouth can't help asking.

Bloody hell.

"Don't be ridiculous," Death huffs, looking far too amused. "My true form looks nothing like this and is utterly beyond the ability of your mind to see, let alone comprehend. The barest of glimpses would render you a blubbing wreck and quite probably liquify your brain. I'm just being polite."

Sure. That sounds believable.

Harry's incredulity is obviously smeared all over his face.



“You’re always awful at hiding your feelings,” Death tells him, smile warm and voice fond. “But I am being quite serious. I... I’ve taken this form before. In other universes, other realities. It’s as close to *me* as you’ll be able to get for quite some time.” Gently, slowly, Death reaches out and curls a hand around Harry’s shoulders. “Come. Sit. Let’s talk.”

It's not until they've been seated on a bench for quite some time that Harry manages to pull his brain into some level of functionality. If being able to string words together again counts as functional. He's going to break down over this later, he's sure. Turn into a raving, hysterical mess, and absolutely trash his flat.

No. Bad. He doesn't want to trash his flat.

The Room of Requirement still exists. Maybe it will give him something to destroy.

“I thought it was just a story,” he finally whispers. “Even after... even after last time, I thought it was just a story. A wild tale to hide or make sense of the idea of *hey, if you happen to unite all three of these very powerful artifacts they equal a get out of dying pass*. I didn't think it was actually *real*.”

“Oh, don't feel bad, you never do,” Death assures him. “It's always a bit of a shock. Of course, it didn't happen *exactly* as the story says but it's close enough. Especially in your reality. Also, why does everyone always think that it means you won't die? You will, of course, when you want to. You always do. *Everything* dies. Suns. Gods. Cockroaches. Entire bloody universes.”

“Well,” Harry says slowly, daring to steal a glance at the wildly gesturing being sitting next to him. “I think it has something to do with the title *Master of Death*.”

Death scoffs. “Really, you humans. *Master* is such a loaded term. So many nuances. Sure it can mean *to conquer* or some seem to take it as you *controlling* me as if I am some sort of *slave* to your whim...” the idea is enough to curl Death's lip in a snarl as he turns his head and his eyes, so dark they are almost black, gleam with scarlet undertones. “But in reality, it is all about proficiency. One who is the Master in Death deals in death, with death. Their life is consumed by it, controlled by it, shaped by it and in turn they develop a particular affinity for it. They also teach it, nurture it, protect it, care for it.”

“Care for it?” Harry repeats. “Protect it?” Now it is his turn to scoff. “The Inescapable Darkness needs to be protected?”

The very thought of it is insane. Impossible.

But he's died and woken up in the body of his younger self so really, who is he to say that something is impossible?

“You would be surprised,” Death murmurs, staring off into the distance. “Death cannot be harmed, nor can it be stopped, but you must remember I am not just that snip of a thread that ends a mortal life and sends a soul on. I am the antithesis of light and life and warmth – everything they are not, I am. *Everything*.”

Harry is still skeptical. “And that means you need to be protected?”

“Yes.”

“And I’m supposed to do that?” His voice is embarrassingly high, squeaking and cracking with panic. Protect Death? Harry suddenly wants to laugh and laugh and laugh. To think he’d thought that being responsible for the murder of a powerful Dark Lord before he made it out of his teens a daunting task. Suddenly the ordeal of having to find and destroy the Horcruxes seems much more manageable.

Death’s gentle touch against his shoulder draws him from his thoughts, quieting the hysterical giggles that had bubbled over without Harry realizing. “You are doing it. You will do it. You have done it. Don’t sweat, my dear,” the being assures him and something in the rumble of his voice is like a key opening the trap that has been sprung around his chest. Suddenly, *finally*, he can breathe and Harry sucks in air so loudly that Death’s lips curve in another smile. Harry ducks his head, cheeks burning, but he doesn’t shrug Death’s hand off of his shoulder. “This isn’t some herculean task that you must succeed at or doom existence to some terrible fate,” Death continues once Harry has settled. “You succeed just by existing. By being aware of who you are and what you do. By acknowledging and honoring it.” Death laughs quietly and gestures Even by sitting on a bloody bench in Limbo and talking with me.”

And there’s something in the way he says it speaks to Harry, that calls to mind every long, dark moment of sitting in his cupboard, wishing for someone to come but knowing they wouldn’t. Harry twists to stare at the taller figure, gaping like a bloody idiot. “So, I’m the Master of Death because... you’re *lonely*?”

“Lonely is such a mortal concept,” Death dismisses quietly. “But yes, I suppose I am.”

Harry doesn’t know what he’s supposed to say to that. He understands loneliness, understands the unrelenting ache of it. He knows the way it feels, the way it hums under everything you do until you feel like flighty, easily startled thing that must be gentled and tamed to touch and conversation. He knows how it takes up home in your chest – not behind your ribs, with your heart, like you might suspect but just there below your throat and above the rise of your lungs until you choke with it. Harry understands but what is his loneliness compared to Death’s? What is the loneliness of an eighteen-year-old boy compared to a sentience that is all encompassing and everlasting?

As if sensing his thoughts Death settles back on the bench, the long line of his body flush with Harry’s. He’s not cold, not quite, but he’s certainly cooler than Harry expects from another body. It’s bracing. The sort of cold that clears your head and lets you think properly.

“It’s not a title, you know,” Death tells him. “It’s not just something to slap on your resume after succeeding in a magical scavenger hunt. The Master of Death has been and will always be one singular being. In every permutation of existence, in every reality that ever was, is, and will be the Master of Death is you, Harry Potter.”

And that, that might be the most baffling thing that has happened to him in the last year – or even longer. “But... why me?” He can’t help but ask, suddenly feeling on the edge of tears.

It's too much. He doesn't know how to do this, how to be this, how to be great. He's getting better at pretending but in his heart of hearts he will always be Harry, just Harry and he doesn't *understand*.

Death gives him a look that is all too knowing. "Because you were the one to fulfill all of the criteria, darling."

"Right," Harry laughs and blinks away the tears burning at the corners of his eyes. "Yeah. Pull the other one. You can't tell me that in all of... *everything*... that I'm the only person to manage to collect three objects?"

"Of course not," Death scoffs. "For starters, as I said, the criteria are so much more than holding three artifacts in your hand but the truth is the criteria only exist to be filled by you. It's... do you remember the first time you successfully cast a corporeal Patronus?"

The sudden change of topic leaves Harry blinking and it's curiosity more than anything else that prompts Harry to answer, "Yes."

"And how did you manage that?" the being asks and Harry can't help but feel that he's being led somewhere. "You'd spent positively ages practicing that year and yet you never quite mastered it. You couldn't even do it when you knew failure meant the devouring of your soul and your godfather's as well. What made *that* time different?"

Harry's brow furrows in thought. "I knew I could do it," he answers slowly, remembering. "I'd already seen myself cast it so I knew it would work."

Death smiles, a lazy curl of approval. "So, your Patronus existed because you could cast it but you could only cast it because it already existed."

Harry blinks.

"Er...yes?" It's more of a question than he meant it to be.

Death makes a gesture with his hands that can only be interpreted as *well, there you have it*. "That is how becoming the Master of Death works. You are the Master of Death because you fulfilled the requirements but the requirements are only there because you are the Master of Death. Don't think about it too hard," Death adds hastily as Harry's eyebrows nearly climb off of his forehead as he tries to make sense of it. "Your brain will melt."

The seriousness of his tone makes Harry jump in his seat. "What? Wait, really?"

"Really," Death nods. "Mortal brains aren't meant to comprehend things on this magnitude. The will is there of course, but the flesh is lacking."

Harry narrows his eyes. "But I'm not mortal anymore, am I?"

"No. Not anymore," the sentience known as the Void sounds entirely too smug about the whole thing. "But you're still very, *very* young."

Harry blinks. That's true enough, he supposes. "So then why..."

Death sighs. "... I can see you're going to be stubborn this time," he observes mournfully. "It's always so much easier when you just accept the explanation and we move on our way."

"If it's all the same to you," Harry replies steadily, "I think I've spent enough time not bothering to question what people tell me."

"Touche, darling," Death acknowledges with a tip of his head. "So," he claps his hands together, "to become the Master of Death one – meaning *you* - must fulfill the following requirements. Number one: you have to be of the Peverell bloodline."

Harry scowls. "Why?" he demands hotly. If this is some piece of blood purity nonsense then Harry is going to lose his...

"Ah," Death interrupts his righteous little fury with a positively sheepish sounding noise. "Well," he says, scratching at the stubble on his jaw, "that one is my fault. Technically. I told you that I have taken this form before – or one like it." Harry nods when it's clear that the being is waiting for acknowledgement. "Well death is everywhere, in everything, but sometimes I like to get my hands dirty, so to speak. I like to get down in the muck of Life. Look at things from their point of view."

"Alright," Harry nods again, feeling confused. This is not going where he thought it was going. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Well, existing on the mortal plane leaves me rather more open to...supplication, I suppose. And in one reality... well," Death tips his face skyward and stares upward into the white, wispy strands as if they hold the secrets of the universe. Maybe they do. At this point, Harry wouldn't be surprised. "The story that brought you here is, almost universally, across all existences known as *The Tale of Three Brothers* but in one reality they call it something else." Death takes a deep breath. "They, uh, they call it *The Sons of Death*."

Harry stares.

Death very deliberately keeps his eyes focused on the absent sky.

"Wait," Harry manages to croak out after Merlin knows how long, "So you're telling me that you, that... *Death* took human form and *had kids*?"

"Mmm. Triplets," the Endless Dark tells him, impossibly sheepish and impossibly fond all in the same breath. "Quite the bloody terrors they were. It had been a spur of a moment thing, you understand, and I didn't *quite* consider the affect it would have on... everything else, really."

Harry stares some more. "So I'm a descendant of Death?"

"Oh, not in this reality, no," Death finally looks at him and gives a little wave of his hand, brushing Harry's shock away as if it were a physical thing. "But as the saying goes, it only takes once. All Peverells, everywhere, they possess... a certain shadow, a certain mark in their blood that ties them to me. So, requirement number one: be a Peverell."

“...right,” Harry agrees faintly.

“Requirement number two: you must collect the three Hallows. Which you’ve done. Bravo.” Death flashes him a smile which Harry returns automatically. “Requirement number three: you must die three times. Truly die.”

“The forest,” Harry breathes instantly. He can still feel it, sometimes, the weight of everything, the stillness of it as he walked between the trees. Still sees that flash of green light every night when he closes his eyes.

“Yes,” Death agrees. “That was the final time.”

“But I don’t... I only died the once. Don’t get me wrong,” Harry hastens to add, even though it feels ridiculous to argue about dying with *Death*. “I’ve come really close so many times but that... that was the only time.” He pauses. “Wasn’t it?”

He hates how small he feels when the words come out of his mouth.

Death shakes his head.

“You died for the first time on Halloween of 1981. Do you know how the Killing Curse works?” he asks and when Harry manages a jerking shake of his head he explains, “It sunders the soul from the body all but instantaneously and the shock of it destroys your nervous system. Your entire body ceases to function and it all happens in such a miniscule fraction of a second that it would take me ages to tell you how small it is.”

“But I didn’t die. I lived. That’s what this whole thing is all about!” Harry protests with angry jab at his forehead, at the scar that has marked him for as long as he can remember.

“No,” Death says gently. “You died. But you also didn’t. Your mother was a powerful witch and she loved you very much. For you, she dabbled in magics that few even try to understand anymore and bound those protections with her own life – a life that she had been offered three times in exchange for yours and refused three times. Three, darling, is a very powerful number.”

“Three brothers. Three objects. Three deaths.”

Death tips his head. “Just so. And it won’t be the last you see of it either. Now, pay attention, because this gets very tricky, very quickly.” When Death seems certain that all of Harry’s attention is focused on him, he holds up a single, elegant finger. “Tom Riddle casts the Killing Curse. It does what it is supposed to do: you die, technically. Your soul is severed from your body and your body ceases to function but your mother’s protections are freshly in play, the sacrifice only a minute old. It tries to stop your death by nullifying the shock of the Killing Curse by trapping your soul and drawing it back into your body.”

Death holds up a second finger, “At the same time, you are dead-and-not-dead. Your magic panics and, acting with your mother’s protection, lashes out. It pushes the effects of the curse back at the one who cast it. Now, Tom Riddle does not have the protection you have so the curse works as it’s supposed to: it sunders the soul from the body, but it can’t kill him

because though body and soul are sundered clever Tom Riddle has his soul anchored to the mortal plane in five different receptacles.”

Death raises a third finger, his eyes bottomless and all but black as he stares at Harry. “So, his soul stays, his body is obliterated, and the sheer destructive powers of the whole experience break off a bit of his soul. Which, contrary to what your professor Dumbledore tells you, happens more than you might think. Beings are almost universally violent creatures and souls splinter all the time but the pieces almost always rejoin with the main soul piece – but Tom Riddle’s soul was, and is, a tattered mess. His poor little soul sliver is confused. Does it rejoin the piece it was broken from or does it rejoin the only healthy soul in the room? As you know, it rejoined with you.”

Here the being that is Death holds up a fourth finger and Harry can’t help but feel a touch of dread. “This,” Death tells him carefully, “is the most vitally important moment of the whole encounter because suddenly you aren’t just Harry Potter who is dead-but-not-dead but you are Harry Potter *and* Tom Riddle. Tom Riddle who is now tethered to the mortal plane in seven different pieces. Seven is also a very powerful number, he was never wrong about that. So now Harry-that-is-also-Tom is *also* tethered by his horcruxes. Alone, your mother’s sacrifice wouldn’t have prevented your death. It simply held you in limbo. You died beneath Tom Riddle’s wand but lived because by the end of the reaction his horcruxes protected you as well,” Death stares at him for a long moment and then lowers his hand. “When you died in the forest,” he adds, “when you walked to your death, you died but you also didn’t because *you were not the last horcrux*. You died, but the soul pieces in Nagini and Tom Riddle kept you from moving on. And there you have it: your first and your third deaths.”

Harry swallows, head spinning and throat suddenly dry. “And my second?”

“Basilisk venom is one of the most lethal substances in existence. You were dead within seconds.”

“But not instantly,” Harry muses, thinking of how long he had sat there fading, of how long it had taken to destroy a horcrux with that same venom. “The horcruxes held my soul and body together and then Fawkes cried on me.”

“Exactly,” Death sounds pleased. “Requirement number four: you must kill three times.”

Once again the first answer comes instantly and without prompting. “Quirrell.”

“Yes, poor Quirinus. He was kill number two.”

“Two? But who...oh,” Harry trails off, mind scrambling as it plays back the details of that Halloween night. “Voldemort.”

“Just as he killed you that night, so did you kill him,” acknowledges Death. “It just didn’t stick for either of you. The two of you are very troublesome,” he adds with a huff and a small smile that curls just the corner of his mouth. “Gives me a bloody complex.”

Harry smiles at that but then it fades. Three kills, Death had said. Three *murders*, though he hadn’t called them that. Who had been the third? There are a large number of people who are

dead *because* of Harry. One could argue, probably successfully, that most of the magical deaths in the past few years happened because of him. Somehow, though, he doesn't think that's what Death means. Do the individual horcruxes count? "And the third..."

"Earnest Travers. His younger brother is currently your fifth-year prefect," is the answer. "You hit him with a stunner. He's got a weak heart so it kicked off a heart attack. It also propelled him backwards into a doorframe and snapped his neck."

"Oh." Harry hadn't even known. Hadn't even thought. He doesn't know what's worse: that or the fact that he might not even have cared even if he had known. He might have even been pleased. Happy for there to be one less Death Eater to contend with.

"Requirement number five: you must witness the moment of someone's death three times."

Still a little stuck on the third person he had killed, Harry gives his head a little shake and mutters, "Well that one was certainly easy."

"Mmm. Harder than you might think, darling."

"Really?" Harry gives him a dubious look and starts counting them off on his fingers. "My parents. Quirrell..."

"You have seen a great many people die, yes, but to have your eye on them at the *exact* moment of their passing?" Death clicks his tongue. "Much more difficult. Let me ask you this: when did you first see the thestrals?"

Harry blinks. "Fifth year."

"So even though your mother had been killed in front of you and you'd already killed a man with your bare hands it wasn't until *after* Cedric that you could see them." Which honestly, was a stroke of luck on your part. The Killing Curse kills so quickly that it is almost impossible to catch the exact moment of death."

"So Cedric was the first," Harry can't help but agree, impossible as it feels. And hadn't he wondered at the time how he was only seeing the thestrals *now* when thanks to the dementors he could vividly recall his mother's death? When he had held on to Quirrell until he was nothing more than ash? "The others?"

"Dobby and Snape." Somehow both feel fitting. Snape being the final piece somehow feels inevitable and Harry can't help but feel a surge of twisted, grieving joy that Dobby's death had counted. That in the eyes of *Death* the house elf mattered just as much as the wizard.

It makes him feel better about the whole situation.

"So let me see if I have it right: I'm the Master of Death because I am a descendent of the Peverell brothers - who were, in some other reality, your *actual* sons," Harry recounts. "Because I collected the three magical artifacts you...gifted them?" Death makes a wobbly motion with his hand. Harry decides to let it go. "Plus I have died, killed, and witnessed

death three times each. These things make me the Master of Death but they only make me the Master of Death because I have always been the Master of Death?”

“Well, there is one other thing, but yes, that is how it works, more or less.”

Harry stares at Death for a long moment before he slumps back on the bench and rubs at his eyes. “My head hurts.”

“Try not to think about it too closely,” Death encourages.

“Because my brain might melt?” Harry asks, opening an eye to catch sight of Death nodding seriously.

“Mortals – humans in particular, they like to think linearly but time isn’t *linear*,” Death says. “It’s not even a bloody loop. Time is without beginning and without end. It is ever moving, ever growing, and constantly splintering apart and merging together in an infinite number of ways across an infinite number of universes and realities. It’s...” Death lets out a deep sigh. “To quote a madman in a box: it’s just a big ball of wobbily wobbily timey wimey *stuff*.”

Harry mouths *wobbily wobbily* silently to himself and Death laughs. “Trust me, my dear. It makes perfect sense,” Death assures him. “You’ll see.”

Harry believes him.

“And the last requirement?” he finally asks. “You said that there was one more.”

“Ah, I did, didn’t I? The last requirement is simply this: you must choose to be the Master of Death.”

“That’s it?” Harry exclaims, confused.

Death smiles broadly. “That’s it.”

“So even after doing all of *that* I could just choose not to be the Master of Death.”

“I mean, technically, yes you could.”

“Technically,” Harry repeats.

“Mmm. Much as I only need to actually father the three brothers once for it to be felt across every existence, you *really* only need to actually choose to be the Master of Death once for it to be true across every existence.”

“... and it’s already happened,” Harry concludes. It’s obvious even to him. This is not the first time Death has had this conversation with him – with some version of him.

“Has happened, is happening, will happen,” Death waves a hand and smirks. “Take your pick, darling, they’re all true.”



“Is there really any point in choosing if it’s already happened then?” If he’s already the Master of Death then he’s already made the choice. Unless this is one of those weird things. Like being able to cast his Patronus and he has to make the choice because he’s already made the choice.

Or something like that.

“Of course there is! A choice is the most powerful thing in existence. You, specifically *you*, the Harry Potter sitting on this bench, in this plane of existence, having a conversation with me right now could choose *not* to be the Master of Death. Technically,” Death tells him, gesturing excitedly. “You could say no, ignore it, and go back to your life. You’ve done that before. You’re doing it. You will do it. It doesn’t happen very often and when it does it tends to happen earlier – during your first trip here – but it *does* happen. The fact that you’re here, *again*, that you didn’t go back to kill Tom like Dumbledore wanted you to, that you haven’t broken, abandoned, or turned away from the Hallows and the power they represent suggests that you’ve already chosen to accept. Or at least thought favorably of it.”

“I have,” Harry admits. “Of course, I didn’t think it meant all *this* but I’ve spent a lot of time thinking of it. Being thankful for it because it’s the reason I woke up my cupboard again, isn’t it? Me being the Master of Death is why I get to try again.”

“Yes.”

He’d thought so but it’s nice to get things confirmed. Which pretty much means...

“I’m the Master of Death,” Harry whispers and he feels the words like blows as they fall out of his mouth, the words aligning his entire existence. He hadn’t even been aware that it was out of whack. “I’m the Master of Death,” he repeats and can’t help but let out a giddy laugh at the sensation that sweeps through him. It’s the rush of the dive, speeding toward the ground: nothing but him and the snitch and the wind. It’s the tingle of lightning forking through the air. It’s the rush of cold welling up from the snow and slipping under his cloak. It’s exhilarating. It’s bracing. It, ironically, makes him feel more alive than he has in *years*.

Beside him Death positively preens, watching him with bright eyes and a soft, joyous smile. When Harry finally manages to pull himself back, Death extends a hand and Harry takes it.

“Hello darling.”

They grin at each other like loons.

For an untold amount of time they sit on the bench, not speaking, just sitting. The two of them: Death and its Master sitting in the silent white softness of Limbo. Part of Harry wants to stay here forever, to never leave this little bubble of peace.

The rest of him is already itching for more.

He’s never done well with just sitting on the sidelines.

“So now what?”

“Whatever you want!” Death exclaims gleefully. “I’m serious. Go back, live your life. Live it a dozen times. A thousand. Try to do ‘better’. Do worse. Save everyone. Kill everyone. Become the next Dark Lord. Move all magicals to a colony on the moon. Travel back in time. Pretend to be someone else. *Actually* become someone else. Travel the world. Travel to other worlds. Hell, if you wanted, you can hop to a completely different reality. Explore other magics or worlds without them. Become a werewolf, a vampire, a creature. Become a muggle. Whatever you want, darling. You do *whatever you want*.”

“And that’s it.”

Death smiles, bright and blinding. “That’s it.”

“But you said that I needed to protect you. To care for you,” Harry reminds him. “How am I supposed to do that if I don’t know how?”

“I did,” Death agrees. “And you do that simply by existing Harry. I require nothing else in a Master.”

“I don’t...” Harry swallows roughly, caught off guard by the simple, blatant honesty in Death’s face and voice. “I don’t understand,” he finally admits.

“That’s alright,” Death says kindly. “It’s early days.” His hand is cool and grounding on the curve of Harry’s shoulder, his grip just tight enough for Harry to really feel the press of each individual finger. “You’ll need to be careful though. Being the Master of Death comes with a great deal of power – and you were already enormously powerful to begin with. You’ll have noticed it already, now that you’re healing and your magic is starting to come back to you. Things that utilize aspects of me – darkness, death, cold – will come more easily and more instinctively to you. You’ll even find yourself utilizing the powers of the Void without even meaning to.”

“Is that what the ice was with Pansy?” Harry asks, absentmindedly rubbing at his chest. “With the troll?”

“Yes. Obviously, you can kill with it. Eventually you’ll be able to kill without the physical manifestations,” Death tells him and Harry can feel his eyes getting wide. “In addition, you’ll find yourself feeling stronger during the dark half of the year. Samhain and Yule will be days of great power for you. Likewise, you will be weaker – not weak,” he hastens to emphasize, “but *weaker* – during the light half of the year, particularly on Beltane and Midsummer. Dark magic, true dark magic, will come incredibly easy to you. Easier than breathing. True light magic will take time and work for you to become proficient in. And regardless of a magic’s classification you will always have an easier time with magics whose purpose align with me and a harder time with those that align with Life. This is why it took you so long to master the Patronus but you were able to cast *sectumsempra* perfectly on the first try.”

“And I can’t die.”

“Well. *Technically*, yes, you can. It would be bloody difficult in your current reality. All of the horcruxes would have to be destroyed, Tom would have to kill you, and then someone

would have shortly thereafter but preferably simultaneously kill Tom. And even then it wouldn't matter because you would just end up here and you would get go back if you wanted to."

"And if I didn't want to?" Harry pushes, spotting the weak point.

Death shrugs. "If you truly don't want to go back or move on to a different reality or identity or world then yes, you would die. For real."

Harry nods slowly. He's glad, glad that he can still die, glad that that option isn't lost to him entirely. Still, he can't help but clarify, "But I'm not dead right now."

"No. For one, all the horcruxes are still very much intact but mostly you just didn't *die* to begin with. You simply got close enough for me to pull you into the In Between so that we could have our little chat. As you explore and gain more control over your magic you'll be able to get yourself here without a near death experience. A novel idea for you, I'm sure," the being drawls, teasing. "You don't even *need* to be here at all in order to talk to me. I'm always with you. Just call for me and I'll be there."

That makes sense, Harry supposes, given how Death is present everywhere, in everything. But how does it work? Will Death be the voice in his head, the shadow on his shoulder? Will he just stroll up to him on the street or appear on his desk in the middle of Transfiguration? He opens his mouth to ask exactly that when Death silences him with a gesture, the beings fingertips fleeting and cool against his mouth.

"You've learned an awful lot in a short amount of time," Death says as if he needs reminding. Bloody ridiculous, of course, because it's all whirling around and around so fast in his head that it's liable to make Harry dizzy and quite possibly sick. "Why don't you give that brain of yours time to process it, hmm?" suggests Death gently. "You might not be mortal anymore but this is all new to you. Think it over. Let it simmer. There's no rush."

"Alright," Harry agrees after a moment of petrifying thought. "I can do that. And you'll answer any questions I have?" He hates that he sounds suspicious. Death simply smiles again – one of the soft ones, full of assurance and promise.

"Of course, darling."

"Alright," Harry agrees again, though it's not like he has any other choice. If Death is telling him to wait then he's going to have to wait. He might be called the Master of Death but he highly doubts that he would be able to bend the all-encompassing sentience to his will.

"Then how do I get back? There aren't any trains."

"Well that's easy my dear Harry," Death murmurs, reaching out a finger to rest over the scar on Harry's forehead. "You just take a deep breath and *wake up*."

# Fifteen

## Chapter Notes

First of all - thank you for all of your kind words on the last chapter! I posted it very late while feeling very unwell (ear infections as an adult are no fucking joke) and until I saw the email notifications for all of your lovely comments I wasn't entirely sure that I hadn't just hallucinated posting it. That said (since past, feverish me forgot to do so) the last chapter contained a lot of general references to a lot of different fanfiction, specific reference to Batsutousai's "Xerosis", and direct quotes from Doctor Who (specifically the episode "Blink") and Dragon Age Inquisition. None of those things belong to me but I love them anyway.

Second - for those of you that may not be following along with the accompanying side POVs in "Harry Potter and the Peanut Gallery" I feel obligated to point out the most recent chapter (ch 10 "Just Enough to Damn Him") as it was written simultaneously with the beginning of this chapter and adds a bit of a punch/depth/further understanding. If you don't want to read it, no worries, all relevant plot points will be covered here.

Pain.

Slip sliding through his veins, tingling along his nerves, not *hurt* but some sort of ache. A sensation of emptiness, as if someone has hollowed out his innards with a dull spoon, leaving him nothing but thin bits of skin and sinew to hold himself together around the endless abyss that has opened up inside of him. Endless and without beginning, without form or thought it expands and collapses and expands again and again and again, beyond thought, beyond comprehension.

The return from limbo is jarring, a clash of symbols slamming together in front of his face, and he flinches back from it. Away from the bright, the light, the warmth, the *feeling*. Caught in this body, this skin that suddenly feels too small for the hollowness inside his chest. It hurts. It itches. It is so *loud*. He wants out. He wants out. He wants *out*...

"...upid boy!"

[*Not yet, darling.*]

"...fetch the Head..."

Amidst the bright lights and the noise, he feels the weight of hands pressing against his shoulders, so cold he can feel them all the way down into the emptiness, a lightning strike pinning him in place, trapping him here in these tatters of flesh and blood.

He wails at the restraint, arching against it, a movement with makes all of his ligaments scream with pain, forced to stretch around the never-ending expanse: the veneer of mortality stretching until it must surely break. Break and let him go, *let him go*, why is he here it so loud so bright it hurts it burns it aches. Please, please let him stretch, let him *be*...

[ *You are far too young for that yet. Let your wings dry a little before you seek to fly.* ]

The soft impression of cold against his scar chimes like a bell.

Harry's eyes fly open.

"...p'fessor?" he slurs. "You're...still...bleeding." It wells, so crimson he can see it even through the fog of his vision, from beneath the tattered remains of the man's trousers and down across boots to stain the waters pink.

So much blood.

He's not supposed to be bleeding.

Not again.

"Make it stop," Harry whispers, reaching, and he's so heavy, so clumsy and useless in this flesh.

He's in the Shrieking Shack, kneeling on the dusty floor. There's so much blood. It's everywhere, pouring out of Snape's body with every beat of his heart. His own body killing him, its own uncomprehending march only hastening his end. It's pooling up against Harry's knees. It's soaked his hands – they'll still be red with it, hours from now, when he walks into the forest – and staining his ratty clothing up to his wrists and higher still, spatters of blood painted across his arms and torso no matter how hard he tries to keep it in, inside this man who he has loathed and feared and scorned, this vile bastard. This *traitor*.

*"Look. At. Me."*

The blood is hot beneath his touch, burning his too cold skin, but he doesn't flinch away from this.

Not this time.

"Not again," he whispers and *pushes*.

Something shatters.

The noise is louder now: a buzz transformed into a roar.

There are hands pulling at him but he doesn't let go.

He can't.

Harry blinks.

Once. Twice.

And then the world blissfully fades away, the red and the noise replaced with the silence of the Void.

---

*[Oh, darling. You do like to be difficult, don't you?]*

---

Pain.

It comes in waves, pulling him out of and pushing him back into unconsciousness in turns.

He rides it. A calm boat upon a stormy sea, up and down and up and down he goes.

“Severus? Headmaster? What is...*Is that Mr. Potter?*”

“Poppy dear, there seems to have been an incident...”

Up and down. Up and down.

It's too hard to listen, the words too fuzzy around the edges so he lets go. He's too tired to hold on, even if the curiosity to listen in on the conversation would have killed him in another life. Even if it might be distantly killing a part of him now.

Time and place, he supposes.

Up and down.

Drifting, drifting back into the dark.

“Don't you fucking dare,” a familiar voice rumbles beneath his cheek.

*Dare what?* He wants to ask as he floats.

Up and down. Up and down.

Farther and farther away, just a pinprick on the horizon. Going, going.

Up and...

A boulder slams into his chest, the full weight of a dragon settling over his heart.

It capsizes the boat. Over turns him. Pushes him under. Down, down into the deep where it's dark and cold and pressing in around him until he's flattened between the two, between the abyss beneath his skin and the one outside of it. Trapped so, he can't struggle, not even a little. But he's too tired, too weak, and it *hurts*...

Inside out and upside down and filled up and scraped out and...

Something gives inside of him.

And then suddenly he's full, too full, not full enough, because there's darkness but there's warmth as well. Not heat, not brightness, but warmth and vital and sparking like a gold shimmer of fireworks fading against a midnight sky. Glimmer and cold together. They don't push away the dark, they are the dark but not. The confines of his skin suddenly feel *less* but stronger. The expanse still there both in him and out of him but Harry feels *anchored* now, connected to the mortal cage in a way he had forgotten in his bid to be free of it.

Oh.

It's not a cage. Not really.

It's just him.

Just Harry.

Harry gasps, feels the air inflating his chest, feels it rushing through his veins, and opens his eyes.

It's hard, so hard. They're so heavy but he manages. He has to.... He has to see.

"..everus! Severus!"

It might be Dumbledore yelling. Or Pomfrey. Harry's not sure. He registers the words but not the voice.

Snape is kneeling over him and it's his hands that are the enormous weight on Harry's chest, palms down and crossed over his heart, skin to skin. There's a smear of ash beneath Snape's hands and blood and the sight of it makes Harry's heart skitter to a stop, the panic more crushing than whatever Snape is doing and...

He's singing, part of Harry realizes. Deep and tonal, a wordless melody that rumbles around in the other man's chest as he stares down at his hands, at Harry's chest with a single-minded intensity that is nothing short of terrifying. It's not the *vulnera sanentur* that he had used on Draco but it's similar, Harry thinks. It's helping. Whatever it is, it's helping.

"A'right, 'fessor," Harry breathes and those dark eyes snap to his. "I'll be alright."

*Don't worry*, he wants to say. *I can't die*, he wants to add.

Instead, he closes his eyes and slips away.

---

[*Honestly, my dear, the three of you... must you be so troublesome? A complex, darling. You give me a bloody complex.*]

---

Pain.

Harry is used to pain. Merlin knows he's suffered more than his fair share of it. If he's ranking things on some grand scale of Harry Potter's Harshes Hits it's really a toss up

between Voldemort's cruciatus and the basilisk venom for the top spot. *That* had hurt.

Though, according to Death apparently the whole drawn out pain thing had been the result of horcruxes so his experience is probably not indicative of the *actual* pain...

Oh.

Right.

Death.

*Death* Death.

The *actual* Death. Once there were three brothers, *Death*.

*Sons of Death*, Death.

And he... Harry, he is... he is...

[*You're going to melt your brain if you keep on like this.*]

In limbo, it had sounded like a joke. Mostly like a joke. Not so much on this side of things. On this side of things, what had been bewildering but kind of logical in the wispy white of limbo is now a nonsensical loop that his mind keeps trying to make sense of. He's the Master of Death because he fulfilled the requirements to be the Master of Death that only exist because he already was the Master of Death but he's not the Master of Death unless he *chooses* to be the Master of Death as part of the requirements that only exist because he is always the Master of Death.

[*Seriously, darling. You're going to melt your brain. Please stop thinking about it.*]

Harry takes a deep breath and pushes it aside. It's the tangle of the Forbidden Forest below him as he loops through the breeze, visible but out of reach.

He takes another breath and focuses on the sensation of wind rushing past his face. On letting the tangled logic disappear with it until there's nothing but the pleasant sensation of his face going numb with the force his dives.

Harry opens his eyes.

He's in the hospital wing. He's been here often enough that he recognizes it even before he opens his eyes to the inevitable sight of the signature lofty ceilings, even if it is dark enough that he can't actually *see* the arches of the roof. It's dark, dark enough that the shadows feel like they have actual substance as they cling to the walls and the faint outlines of furniture. There is a soft pool of golden light splashing across the soft blue surface of the infirmary blankets, an intrusion against the darkness. Enough to make him feel warm and less alone but not bright enough to hurt. There's a feel to the place: a heavy calm not unlike that of the library lying over the frantic, frenzied energy of the hospital wing and the sterile, artificially bright smell of it. He's never seen anyone scrubbing at the hospital wing with anything other than magic – not even a house elf – but it still always smells like the stuff Aunt Petunia had



made him scrub the bathroom down with: harsh and cloying, burning his nostrils and ever so faintly smelling of lemon, sticky and fake.

... except that's not what he smells.

Or rather, he still smells that, but it's fainter, farther away. Up close it smells like...hay? And something faintly astringent – not harsh and fake like Petunia's cleaner but sharp and bitter. Sort of... leafy? Harry twists his head deeper into his pillow, following the faint herbal scents, trying to pick out what they are. There's a faint sort of crinkling noise as he moves, the curve of his cheek nudging up against a small bulge under the flat, if soft, form of the infirmary pillow. A few moments of clumsy grasping reveal a small, cloth bag stuffed with... something. It's soft, mostly, but there's something that feels a bit like a rock at the bottom and...

"Leave it."

Half a decade of conditioned obedience to the sharp crack of Snape's voice makes him drop it before he fully processes what the other man had said. Or that the professor is even *there*, for that matter.

Harry blinks and turns his head. The soft golden light is cast by a single flame: a tall taper candle resting in a crude looking holder of black stone is set on the small table next to the bed, a few beads of melted wax bubbling down its sides. His wand is on the table as well, the black of its wood a near match for the black of the stone, its somewhat odd curved handle positioned just *so* off the edge of the table. Harry knows, without even having to think about it, that if he were to reach out his hand would curl around it perfectly, no adjustments.

Something that, he knows from experience, is not as easily accomplished as it might look. It had taken him two weeks of practice before he could draw his own wand without fumbling or, Merlin help him, *dropping* it.

Snape is sitting in a chair pulled up to the side of Harry's bed and, honestly, he looks about as tired as Harry feels. Small wonder, if it's really as late as he thinks it is. The man has striped off his robes, the great black swathes of wool possessing millions of buttons feared by everyone in Britain under the age of twenty-five, and laid them across the neighboring bed. Or at least, that's what Harry thinks that particular shape and shadow must be. The golden glow doesn't reach quite far enough to illuminate them. Lacking the robes, Snape is left in nothing but wrinkled looking black trousers and a plain white shirt, unbuttoned at the throat and rolled up to his elbows. His hair is even pulled back and tied loosely at the base of his skull though it's all mussed at the top as if he has tried to run his hands through it anyway. He should look relaxed, stripped of his armor and closer to naked and vulnerable than Harry has ever seen him but he doesn't. There is a line of tension running through his shoulders and though he's leaning back in the chair, one leg crossed casually over the other, Harry thinks he looks less like a lounging housecat and more like a snake, coiled tighter than a spring and ready to strike at the slightest provocation. He doesn't miss the fact that for all Snape is half undressed there is nothing else with him – no homework to grade, no book or portion journal to read. No tea or midnight snack, not even the evidence of some. It's nothing but the man and his wand, held with careful casualness between his fingers.

“You imbecile,” he hisses and Harry flinches back from the venom in his voice. “You arrogant, brainless *idiot*. I thought you were better than this. I thought that you possessed the barest modicum of intelligence rattling around in that empty place between your ears but I see now that I was mistaken, you irresponsible, foolish little twit! Rushing in and confronting a *full-grown mountain troll*,” he snarls and he doesn’t need to move out of the chair to make himself loom. Snape has never needed to resort to ridiculous posturing to make himself seem larger, to seem like he eats up the shadows around him and towers over Harry until the man’s presence is all but crushing him. “I might have expected such a thing of *Weasley*,” Snape spits. “But clearly, you are deigning to lower yourself to all new lows, you ridiculous, irresponsible *boy*...!”

And for a moment Harry wants to shout and snarl back, the instinctive push back against Snape’s vitriol rising up like bile, burning its way through his throat. Because he most certainly did *not* rush in like a foolish, brainless Gryffindor. He might not have had the particulars of a plan but he knew what he was facing and he had *tried* to get a so-called responsible adult. He hadn’t *wanted* to go toe to toe with a mountain troll but it’s not his bloody fault, is it?

He even has his mouth open to tell Snape *exactly that*, the bloody git, when he actually looks at the man. At the lines bracketing his mouth, at the intensity of his gaze on Harry. At the way he still hasn’t moved out of the chair, at the way he hasn’t moved hardly at all, not even to gesture with pointed, brutal efficiency with hands that are... that are...

Bandaged.

Barely visible in the soft glow there’s the faint line of off-white bandages wound around both of his palms.

Palms that had been pressed bleeding to Harry’s chest. Palms that had felt like the whole of Hogwarts dropped onto his chest and yet had drawn him back, had soothed him back down into the confines of flesh and bone and led him home.

And just like that Harry can see the off-white line of bandaging peeking out from underneath the wool of his trousers. Just like that he can see a dozen other times echoing in the other man’s face, dozens upon dozens of moments over seven years compounding down into one single realization.

Severus Snape is scared shitless.

“...wha...?” his voice comes out pathetic and croaking and Harry licks his lips, compulsively swallowing in the search of moisture. “What happened?” he manages to croak out.

“What happened?” Snape repeats and Harry doesn’t think that he’s imagining the hysterical edge to the man’s voice. “What *happened*? What happened, Mr. Potter, is you thought it would be a brilliant idea to go confront a troll. A feat which would be a challenge for most full-grown wizards never mind an incompetent dunderhead with delusions of grandeur and you *nearly killed yourself*.” Normally pale to the point of vampiric rumors, Snape’s entire face has gone absolutely white at his pronouncement and suddenly Harry is able to pick out the dark shadow of a day’s worth of facial hair staining the stark lines of the man’s jaw.

It makes Snape seem terribly, horribly human.

“And now you’re suffering a very severe case of magical exhaustion. I don’t know what you were doing – or *trying* to do,” he corrects and his voice is so cold and empty that Harry knows he must be occluding like his life depends on it, like he’s kneeling at Voldemort’s feet with the Dark Lord roaming free inside his skull, “but you were hemorrhaging magic so badly that I wasn’t certain it could be stopped. It’s a miracle you didn’t turn yourself into a squib. It’s a *miracle* that the shock didn’t kill you.”

*Don’t you fucking dare.*

He can hear the words loud and clear in the air between them. Can feel them all the way down to his bones.

He wants to tell Snape that he doesn’t have to worry like that ever again – that Harry will always be fine. That he can’t die – not really, not unless he *wants* to and Merlin, that’s a thought that he pushes away as soon as it tries to surface, terrified of looking at the forest too closely.

“Had to,” he finally settles on saying. “Hermione…”

Snape’s face twists in a proper sneer. “Ah, yes. Miss Granger is quite insistent that she ran off to fight the troll all by herself, convinced by all of her reading that she would be able to take one down unaided.” It’s probably a good thing that Snape obviously doesn’t believe a word of the story Hermione has told them because Harry can’t help the laugh that bubbles out of his chest. It comes out as a hoarse hacking, choking sort of noise but he’s pretty sure that Snape knows it’s supposed to be a laugh.

“...she still telling that story?” he manages to get out between coughs.

“Obviously,” Snape growls and with little more than a flick of his wrist conjures a plain cup up from somewhere and angles his wand to allow water to flow out of its tip. “Slowly,” he orders, helping Harry hold the cup to his lips. The water is cool and sweet against his throat. It is more of a struggle than he thought it would be to not gulp it down.

“Thanks,” Harry murmurs when he’s done. Merlin, he’s tired. He’s barely been conscious for more than five minutes and already he’s slunk back down on his pillow like he’s trying to become part of it. “She was crying,” he adds after a pause and Snape raises a single eyebrow in question. “Hermione. Ron – Weasley said some mean things about her and she overheard,” he tells his professor. “Spent the rest of the day crying in the loo.” Harry sighs and lets his eyes close for just a second. “Tried to tell McGonagall,” he adds because it’s important that Snape knows that. It’s important that he knows that Harry didn’t just run in there like the lion he had once been. It’s important to him that Snape knows that Harry had no intention of coming within spitting distance of the bloody troll until McGonagall had turned him away. “She took points ‘n sent me ‘way.”

It's getting harder and harder to form words, his tongue flopping around his mouth in a way entirely too reminiscent of eating a Ton Tongue Toffee.

He tries to pry an eye open.

It doesn't work.

"...potion?" he slurs into the pillow.

There's a weight on his head, warm and comforting.

"Foolish boy," Snape's voice is weary and distant and maybe even a little fond is muffled as if by water or wind. "Sleep."

Mercifully, he doesn't dream.

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It's the harsh grate of demanding voices trying to be quiet that finally drag him out his potion assisted slumber. For a moment he lays unmoving, modulating his breathing into something slow and lets the words wash over him. It's just noise at first, something that registers deep in his consciousness as *voices* and *angry* but the longer he lays in the bed, blanket pulled up nearly to his nose so that he must appear as little more than a disarray of black hair peeking above the covers, the more the voices begin to take form and make sense.

"...his rest."

"And rest he shall, but you have said that he has woken. Harry needs to give his account of yesterday's events."

"Mr. Potter has already said what happened."

"So you say, Severus, but Miss Granger tells a wildly different..."

"Please, Albus, the girl is obviously lying. Badly."

"I must..."

"... in her time here Miss Granger has proven herself to be an over achieving stickler for the rules who is so terrified of being shipped back to London that she is constantly shoving her accomplishments and knowledge in the face of anyone who will stand still for half a second – and even those who *won't*. The idea of her running off to confront a troll is *laughable*," Snape's voice snaps, running roughshod over whatever McGonagall had been attempting to say. "Not to mention that when I arrived on the scene she was all but petrified with her hands over her head and her wand nowhere in sight. Mr. Potter's version of events is easily collaborated by the stories of Mr. Malfoy and Mr. Zabini. If questioned, I imagine Mr. Longbottom's words would support theirs."

"Still, better to get to the truth of the matter..."

"Fessor," Harry manages to croak. His throat isn't quite as dry as it had been earlier but he's willing to play it up a little. Especially because Dumbledore seems to think that he's lying – or perhaps, that Snape is lying to cover for him. Or maybe the Headmaster just wants him to go along with Hermione's story? He, and McGonagall, for that matter, had been strangely

accepting of her story in his first life. Even little first life Harry had been bewildered that they had bought it.

“There, there Mr. Potter, don’t trouble yourself,” Pomfrey’s familiar voice chides as she appears at the side of his bed and helps him sit up. Harry can feel his cheeks flush faintly at the fact that he actually needs her help, his entire body shaking with the exertion of propelling himself upright even with her assistance.

Suddenly, Snape’s middle of the night tirade seems much more appropriate.

“Slowly,” Snape’s voice prompts and Harry looks up to find the potions master on the other side of his bed a cup – complete with straw this time – held in his hands. Harry eyes the cup suspiciously for a moment before darting a brief glance up at Snape’s face. The dour man gives his head the barest of shakes, imperceptible except for the briefest of movements in his eyes and his hair, his mouth pressing slightly together.

No potion, Harry takes it to mean.

He takes a few sips of the water, just enough to ease the dry, throbbing sensation in his throat, and deliberately doesn’t look at *anyone* while Pomfrey casts a veritable barrage of diagnostic spells over him.

“Well Mr. Potter, you are very lucky,” she tells him after studying whatever results the spells give her. She doesn’t elaborate, her eyes flicking to where both McGonagall and Dumbledore are hovering expectantly at the end of his bed. “I want you resting. You’re not to get out of this bed today but you should be able to return to your dorm this evening.”

“Yes ma’am,” Harry nods gratefully, biting viciously at the inside of his cheek so that he doesn’t protest having to stay in the hospital wing for the day. He hates it here. Hates how vulnerable and exposed it leaves him to... everyone.

Plus, Inigo must be tired of the *small glass nest*. At least Harry doesn’t have to worry about him getting hungry or running out of water in the immediate future and the warming charm on his rock is still good for a couple of years at least.

“I’ll be back in a moment with your breakfast,” she pats him gently on the leg, a swift there-and-gone touch that doesn’t give him time or opportunity to flinch from. “You,” here she fixes her gaze on the professors at the end of his bed, “have until I get back. I will not have my patient disturbed. Mr. Potter needs to rest.”

“Of course, my dear,” Dumbledore agrees blandly, offering the mediwitch a smile that is positively blinding. At his side, McGonagall lets out a disgruntled huff that is entirely too reminiscent of a cat having been let out into the rain. “Now, Harry,” Dumbledore begins once Madam Pomfrey has bustled off in the direction of her office, “I am sure you must be very tired but it is vitally important that we know the absolute truth about what happened with the troll.”

For a split second all Harry feels is sheer, unadulterated panic: his mind whiting out and freefalling in the face of the Headmaster’s question. He doesn’t know how to answer, he

hasn't had *time*, he has no *plan* – and, Merlin damn it, he's trying to have a plan these days. Bloody hell, he can't even get his thoughts straight without feeling like he's going to throw up or pass out or quite possibly have whatever remains of his brain ooze out his ears like ice cream left out in the sun.

For a split-second Harry feels like he is tearing his way out of his skin.

Snape must pick up on his sudden spike of terror – Harry wouldn't put it past him to have plucked it right out of his head and honestly, the feeling is so all consuming that Harry can't even blame him if he did because he's probably *shouting* it for anyone to listen and *that* can't be good – because the man's hand appears on Harry's shoulder. It's a hovering, barely there touch but Harry feels it like an anchor, weighing him down and holding him inside this mess of flesh and bone.

“Am I in trouble?” Harry hears himself asking, the words falling out of his mouth almost before he has time to think them.

“No,” Snape replies instantly just as the Headmaster hums, “That remains to be seen.”

Harry doesn't need to be looking at Snape to know the man is glaring.

He never thought he would appreciate Snape glaring at someone but here he is.

“The troll is dead,” Dumbledore continues, “and we need to make sure that nothing untoward has happened.”

“It's *dead*?” Harry exclaims in shock, daring a glance up at his professors' faces. He hadn't known that. If he'd bothered to think about it all – if he'd had the *chance* to think about it – it would have been obvious given that the poor creature had shattered like glass. That's probably not good. “I didn't mean to kill it! I just wanted it to stop so that I could get Hermione out!”

“Miss Granger is insistent that she went to confront the troll,” McGonagall tells him, mouth pressed into a thin line as she stares down the line of her nose at him.

“I'm quite certain she didn't,” Harry snaps back. “Though I can guess that she might prefer everyone think so. She spent most of the day holed up in the loo crying because Weasley was mean to her.” As briefly as he can he outlines the events of the previous day. He gives most of his report to the edge of McGonagall's mouth or the flowing lengths of Dumbledore's beard. There's something almost soothing about staring at it. Hypnotic, even.

It's like being back in limbo.

“I tried to tell you,” he points out, sparing another glance at McGonagall's face because he understands, he does, but he's also mad about the whole thing as well: hurt and anger so tangled up inside that it burns. “But you just sent me away and I couldn't... I couldn't leave her there by herself while everyone else got to safety. So, I went to get her and the troll was already in the bathroom.”

His former Head of House has the grace to look uncomfortable at Harry's words, spots of color appearing high on her cheeks.

"So *you* decided to confront the troll instead of going for help?" wonders Dumbledore, steering them back on track.

Harry stares at him incredulously. "If I hadn't, Hermione would probably be a smear on the bathroom floor. When I got there the troll was already swing its club around and she wouldn't *move*."

It confuses him, even now, even though he's seen it happen both times he's had to deal with fighting the troll. *Fear paralysis*. He remembers her lecturing he and Ron on it at some point after the Death Eaters had stormed the castle, after Snape had killed Dumbledore. She had been trying to explain why so many people – why so many *students* – wouldn't fight back, wouldn't raise their wands or their fists against the horrors let loose in their corridors. He had never bothered to think of fear paralysis and Hermione in the same sentence. After all, by that point she'd punched Draco Malfoy in the face, helped an escaped convict fly to freedom on the back of a stolen hippogriff, organized and run an underground defense club, infiltrated the Department of Ministry, and dueled against Death Eaters. Twice. He hadn't understood it then. Honestly, he doesn't bloody understand it *now*. The idea of cowering, of *freezing* so utterly in the face of danger baffles him. He can't wrap his head around the idea of not fighting or fleeing, of not hiding or struggling with every ounce of strength in him, with tooth and nail and wand for the right to *live*.

But maybe that's it.

Harry has spent his whole life fighting. Everyday, from the moment he had been left on the Dursley's doorstep, his life has been nothing but a struggle for survival. Food, water, shelter – the very basic necessities that so many take for granted he has had to beg, scheme, and scrounge for. Not even coming to Hogwarts had saved him from that. The fight had just changed, become more charged and more direct.

And he had never stopped fighting, not really. He had walked to his death, had bowed his head before it and met it with no resistance once. Just once. Because he had been backed into a corner. Because death had been the only action he could take that he could live with the results of. Because the debt of his mere existence had been called due.

But as soon as he had had room again he had fought. He had said *No*. He had picked up a baby – the ugly, mangled soul shard of a man who had tried to kill him again and again. He had, unconsciously, chosen an unknown life over the peace of death or the road that others had laid out for him.

Because the awful, terrible truth is this: no matter how much he had tried to ignore it and push it down, no matter how much he might disagree with the methods taken to get him there Harry understands on a fundamental, *visceral* level Voldemort's struggle to live no matter the cost.

Because he had stood witness to Tom Riddle's history, had listened to Dumbledore's words, and - in the quiet of his bed, in the dark of the night when he was already half asleep and

therefore not accountable for the drift of his own thoughts – he had wondered: *If this is what makes Tom Riddle a monster then what am I?*

Harry might not fear death but that doesn't make his desire to survive any less.

"She wouldn't move," Harry repeats because even though he knows why it is something he will never *understand*. "And I knew I couldn't fight the troll. I've read enough about them to know that most magic won't work on them. I just wanted it to stop," Harry tells them honestly. "I was so scared it would reach her and I just wanted it to *stop*. I felt a popping," he adds, unconsciously rubbing the heel of his hand against the hollow over his heart. "And then it got really cold and..." he shrugs and stares down at the blanket, picking at a stray blue thread.

"It sounds like accidental magic," McGonagall finally offers after several moments of awkward, heavy silence.

"Not unheard of at his age, especially in a high stress situation," Snape is quick to point out, raising a single, imperious eyebrow. "He nearly burnt himself out. It's obvious he had no control over it. He simply went charging in there like a rampaging dragon and managed not to die."

*Idiot.*

Snape's silent condemnation is the loudest thing in the room.

"Well," Dumbledore claps his hands together and Harry jumps at the sudden noise. "I find myself satisfied with the course of events. You did a very brave thing, Harry. Very brave." He beams at Harry, warm and pleased, and reflexively Harry feels a smile pulling at his lips even though his stomach churns uneasily. "Twenty points to Slytherin for your courage defense of another student." He pats absentmindedly at Harry's foot and only the iron curl of Snape's fingers over his shoulder keeps him from recoiling the Headmaster's touch. "Now, I'll leave you to rest and return to my paperwork."

"And Hermione...?" Harry asks hesitantly after watching the Headmaster disappear from the hospital wing, hardly able to believe that the man had let him go that easily. "Is she okay?"

"Miss Granger needed nothing more than a calming draught and a good night's sleep," Snape informed him icily. "There wasn't a single scratch or bruise on her."

"Oh," Harry says faintly. "That's good."

At the foot of the bed McGonagall clears her throat pointedly and then rocks back almost imperceptibly when both Harry and Snape turn their gazes to her.

"It seems I owe you an apology, Mr. Potter," she finally says, lips pressed firmly together. "I am sorry for sending you away."

Harry stares at her for a minute, thrown by the unexpected apology. "It's alright professor," he finally replies carefully. With Dumbledore gone his fear is dissipating and now all he feels



is a hollow, uncaring sort of anger and frustration. He respects McGonagall. He likes her and thinks of her fondly but he doesn't think he'll ever trust her again. Not really. Not when it matters. He's not sure that he ever did to begin with. "I understand that you were only concerned for the safety of your students."

McGonagall *flinches*.

"Five points to Slytherin," she finally says and gives a sharp, almost jerky nod of her head. Then she leaves.

It is only when she is gone that Snape removes his hand from Harry's shoulder and, idiot that he is, Harry misses the weight of it once it's gone. He dares to glance up at the professor and finds the man staring back at him, face carefully blank.

"Twenty-five points from Slytherin," he drawls quietly and raises an eyebrow, daring Harry to protest the loss of points, "for being an insufferable dunderhead and I want twelve inches on the *correct* methods of dealing with a mountain troll. That and the letter," he gives Harry a pointed, meaningful look, "on my desk by seven pm tomorrow. Is that clear?"

Harry nods and can't help the genuine, lopsided smile that pulls at his mouth. "Yes, sir."

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"Harry!" Hannah's joyous cry echoes around the hospital wing as she bolts across the stone floor and flings herself at him. "You're okay!" she exclaims as she wraps her arms around him and hugs him until he can feel his ribs creak in protest.

"Can't...breathe," he manages to wheeze out as he awkwardly pats at her back.

"Let him up, Hannah," Blaise's amused drawl instructs from somewhere beside Harry's bed and the bubbly girl's grip loosens just enough to let him get actual air into his lungs. "It's be a shame if he died now."

"I was so *worried* about you!" Hannah tells him, finally backing up enough so that Harry can see something beside her hair. His heart gives an uncomfortable jolt at the sight of tears trembling at the corner of her eyes and he takes her hand, squeezing it reassuringly.

"I'm fine," he tells her. "Really. I'm just tired and I get a little dizzy if I stand up. It's nothing."

"...nothing?" Susan repeats as she pushes into view, crowding around Hannah to get a good look at him. "I'm not sure *this*," and she gives him a look that he's betting she learned from her aunt, "counts as *nothing*."

"Idiot," Mandy huffs as she flops down across the foot of the bed.

"You almost *died*." Draco's voice, strained and creaking, cuts through Harry's protests and suddenly, his little corner of the hospital wing is eerily silent. Hannah's grip on his hand tightens to the point of actual pain and Susan crowds closer. Even Mandy and Blaise are uncharacteristically solemn as they watch him. Draco pushes up to the side of the bed and

looking at him is too much like looking at his sixteen-year-old self: pale and pinched faced, eyes puffy and rimmed red with crying. Harry can almost hear Myrtle wailing in the distance, can almost feel the rush of the unknown *sectumsempra* hurtling out of his wand and the resulting splatter of Draco's blood across his face.

He clings to Hannah's hand, desperate to remind himself that that's over. It's *done*. It will *not happen again*.

"I've never seen Uncle Sev so scared," Draco admits. "You were just...still. I thought you were dead at first. And Granger wouldn't stop screaming and then Dumbledore was screaming at Uncle – at Professor Snape," he corrects, catching himself this time and the stumble is enough for Harry's mind to catch up to the other boy's words, to actually hear what he is saying.

Draco had, at some point, been in the bathroom as well. Had seen the wreckage of porcelain and stone and bloodied water and shattered flesh.

"And Pomfrey made me *leave*," Draco adds, so furious in his despair that he practically spits. "It was hours before anyone would even tell me if you were alive."

Beside him, looking like he hardly doesn't believe his own daring, Neville hesitantly reaches out and wraps an arm around the Slytherin's shoulder. Draco stiffens, puffing up like an offended cat and bristling at the touch but he doesn't pull away. Not completely.

"I thought you were dead," he finally repeats.

"I'm sorry," Harry apologizes instantly, the words tripping over themselves in their haste to get out of his mouth. "I didn't mean to. McGonagall wouldn't listen to me though and I couldn't just leave Hermio -*Granger* – there. It's not like I expected the troll to be *in* the bathroom!"

Draco gives a haughty sniff. "I suppose that would be stupid even for you," he finally acknowledges and they share smiles.

"I am sorry that I worried everyone," Harry says again, making an effort to make eye contact with each of his friends. "I'm fine though. I promise. Just a little tired still." And unable to feel the fingers in one hand, courtesy of Hannah, but he doesn't mind. It's just proof of how much these people care about it.

"So what *did* happen?" Blaise asks after a minute. "Half the school seems convinced that you duelled the troll and killed it."

"Well, I did kill it," Harry admits because he is not going to hide from his actions. He's not going to push them away and pretend that they didn't happen or that they don't matter because of who or what he was fighting. Not this time. "I didn't mean to though! I tried to distract it at first so that Granger could get away from it but she was as good as petrified. I didn't duel it though. Trolls are highly resistant to spells. I just... McGonagall thinks it was accidental magic," he tells them because if it's an excuse good enough for McGonagall and Dumbledore and maybe, possibly, Snape then it's certainly good enough for the rest of the

world. “I just wanted the troll to stop going after Granger so apparently I froze it? And then when I dropped its club on it, the troll kind of just... broke.”

“Ew.” Mandy scrunches up her nose. “That sounds gross.”

“Probably,” Harry gives a one shouldered shrug. “Honestly, everything is kind of blurry at that point.”

“Well, we’re glad you’re not dead,” Blaise tells him and then lets out a startled yelp as Draco shoves him off the bed. “Hey!”

“It’s not funny!” Draco retorts and Merlin help him, there are actual *tears* in Draco’s eyes.

“I wasn’t trying to be funny!” Blaise informs him, wincing as he clambers to his feet.

Somehow, after that, they all manage to crowd onto the bed until Harry finds himself squashed between Draco and Hannah, both of his hands being squeezed.

“We really were worried about you,” Susan tells him seriously. Mandy nods and pokes him with her foot.

“I promise that I’m okay,” he says again. He suspects he’ll be saying it a lot in the next day or two – a prospect he views with exasperated fondness.

“D-don’t d-do it a-again,” Neville tells him and Harry smiles at the hint of steel he can hear beneath the stammered words.

“No promises,” he says apologetically. “I’ve always been a bit of a trouble magnet.”

Neville narrows his eyes. “Try.”

Harry meets his gaze and quietly offers the only promise he can make. “I’ll be as careful as I can.”

Unfortunately, that’s probably not going to be even half as careful as his friends would prefer.

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His friends aren’t his only visitors.

“You told them.”

“...the truth?” Harry looks up from the book he is reading and carefully sets aside the piece of parchment he had been scribbling away on, the ink still wet from his latest notes. A house elf had popped up while he was eating breakfast and delivered a small stack of books – including the text that Remus had assigned for his third year and the slim volume currently perched in his lap entitled *Concerning the Earthbound: A Brief Survey of European and Asiatic Trolls* that is drier than burnt toast but oddly fascinating. If nothing else, Snape is making sure he’s well prepared should he ever encounter another troll. Like the one defending the Stone. Or had this troll been the one defending the stone and Quirrell had just set it loose? A thought for later, he supposes. “Yes, I did.”

At the foot of the bed Hermione shifts beneath his glance and absentmindedly brushes a stray curl out of her face. “Why?”

She seems oddly intent on his answer, eyes narrowed and lips pursed as she stares at him.

Harry raises an eyebrow. “Because I didn’t have any reason to lie to them?” he responds. “Because they obviously didn’t believe whatever tale you were telling them.”

“They didn’t believe me?” She looks surprised at that and Harry barely manages to keep himself from rolling his eyes.

“Well, I’m not sure about McGonagall...”

“...*Professor* McGonagall,” she corrects sharply. Harry ignores her.

“...but Snape couldn’t even keep a straight face. I think he would have started laughing if it wouldn’t have ruined his image or interrupted his yelling at me.”

“...*Professor* Snape. And laughing? But why would he...?”

Harry sighs. “Granger,” he says as kindly as he can manage because even if the memory of his last, pre-troll attempt to talk to her makes him want just scream and shake her he still is having the hardest time separating Hermione-who-slept-tucked-against-his-shoulder-and-cried-herself-to-sleep-every-night-after-Ron-left and Hermione-who-is-still-a-mess-of-nerves-and-anxiety-and-rapidly-alienating-her-entire-year. More than anyone else from his old life he wants to keep her, somehow. Someway. Yet, he’s not sure it will be something that he will be able to manage without their individual, desperate need for companionship and belonging to glue together. “You’re obsessed with being right – with *knowing* the right answer,” he hastens to clarify as she opens her mouth to probably shout at him. “And you’re a stickler for rules. The idea of you running off to confront a troll when the *headmaster* has ordered everyone to their dorms *is* laughable.”

Hermione opens her mouth and closes it, clearly realizing that while the words may be less than flattering, they’re not actually *wrong* because she does need be right and she *is* a stickler for following the rules.

“Honestly, I can’t figure out why you lied to them in the first place,” Harry says, partly to distract her from his previous statement before her magnificent brain can logic together some reason why he’s an idiot but mostly because he wants to know. The last time they’d done this he had always figured that she lied to protect – and impress – he and Ron but this time there’s not really that draw, is there?

His question seems to startle her because she blinks and stares at him for several long minutes. “I didn’t... I...” she bites her lip and looks away. “I didn’t want everyone to know that Weasley had upset me.”

“I hate to break it to you but everyone knows.”

Hermione jerks her head. “I know. I just... I thought if everyone thought that I tried to do something really *brave* that I would...”

“...fit in with your housemates a little better?” She nods again. Just the once.

And Harry... he has so much to say to that. He wants to tell her that it’s not worth it to contort yourself to what others think you should be. He wants to tease her about being put in the wrong house, ask her how badly the Hat wanted to put her in Ravenclaw. He wants to tell her that it will get better. That she’ll find friends. But he can’t say any of it – because he wants to say it to *his* Hermione and not this version of her, this version that will never be *his* because all the things that made his Hermione *his Hermione* won’t happen in this life.

Hasn’t happened. *Isn’t* happening.

Fucking time travel.

So instead he opens his mouth and says, “I’m glad you’re okay. I was really worried about you.”

“Oh.” Hermione blinks rapidly and he can’t tell if she’s confused or if she’s trying not to cry. Maybe a little bit of both. “Thank you,” she adds after a moment. “For saving me.”

Harry smiles and he knows it comes out a little sad, a little wistful as he stares at her so small and unsure, her riotous hair almost as big as she is. So familiar to him and yet a stranger.

“You’re welcome.”

It takes some time after she leaves before Harry can bring himself to do much more than stare unseeing at the book still opened across his lap.

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Snape sweeps into the hospital wing just after eight o’clock, robes once again billowing in proper dramatic fashion behind him. Harry watches his progress across the room and tries to be subtle about the fact that he’s really checking to see if the man is limping or not. He’s remembered enough of what happened in the past twenty-four hours that he’s reasonably certain that he did something to Snape. He has no bloody idea exactly *what* but... something.

There’s a bit of stiffness, he thinks, but certainly not a limp.

He has no idea what that means, though.

“I trust you kept your idiocy to a minimum today?” Snape asks as he comes to a halt beside the bed. The look on his face says that if Harry hasn’t, he is going to regret it.

“Yes sir,” Harry replies. “I mostly slept and worked on that essay.” The letter he’ll wait to write until he is back in the relative privacy of the Slytherin dorms. “The books you sent were very useful.”

Snape eyes him for a long moment before turning to Madam Pomfrey, who has followed him over, and raises an eyebrow in silent question.

“Mr. Potter has been an exemplary patient,” the mediwitch acknowledges and Harry bites back a chuckle at the skeptical look that darts, there-and-gone, across Snape’s face.

“And?”

“He is recovering well. Much better and more quickly than I had even dared to hope he would when he arrived.” The mediwitch lets out a small sigh and turns to Harry. “I have kept quiet about your condition, according to your previous wishes but now that we are alone - your magic is still severely depleted. The neural pathways that allow you to channel magic are very delicate at your age – it is remarkable that you did not damage yourself so badly as to render yourself a squib. I imagine that you have Professor Snape to thank for that,” she adds, ignoring the man in question’s annoyed huff.

Harry is pretty sure that, *technically*, he has Death to thank for that – and Merlin, he almost lets out a hysterical giggle out at that thought – but he is also equally sure that if he did *not* have the safety net of the Endless Void that Snape’s actions, whatever they were, would have quite possibly been all that stood between him and never being able to wield magic again. He’s been magically exhausted before, though not quite this young, and he’s never felt quite like this so he suspects he might have overdone it. Just a bit. The vague memories of reaching out for Snape, of something *breaking*, almost audibly as he had done so...

He can’t help the small shiver that passes through his frame, stomach churning uncomfortably at the memory.

“I am willing to let you return to your dorm if you refrain from using your magic until Sunday. Your magic levels are beginning to restore themselves but it would be very, *very* dangerous for you to use them up again so soon. Not just to your continued ability as a wizard but to your life. Do you understand?”

Harry nods. “Yes, ma’am.”

“And do you think you can do that?”

“I can.” And if he can’t well, then apparently Death will send him right back. But short of Quirrell bursting into his dorm room and trying to murder him in his sleep, Harry suspects that he’ll probably be okay. He imagines he’ll spend most of the time between now and then holed up there anyway, sleeping and writing his letter. Even after dozing off and on all day he still can’t manage much more than an hour of consciousness before it becomes almost impossible to keep his eyes open.

Madam Promfrey stares at him for a long moment. “Alright,” she finally agrees, “we’ll try it. But only because you’ve shown your ability and inclination to follow my instructions to the letter. You’ll be able to use your magic in small amounts starting Sunday but I don’t want you practicing for classes or even casting in class for all of Monday or Tuesday. I’ll make sure to send a note around to all the professors excusing you from practical exercises. I’ll reevaluate you on Tuesday during our regular appointment and see what we need to do from there. Any questions?” Harry shakes his head. “Well, then I will hopefully not see you before Tuesday. I believe Professor Snape will assist in returning you to your dorm.”

It barely takes more than a minute and a few flicks of Snape's wand for the professor to shrink and pocket the books and parchment sitting neatly beside the bed. Harry picks up his wand and it warms in his hand. The familiar zing of coming home, of connection snakes up his arm but it aches and Harry feels the world tilt alarmingly for a moment. Harry takes a long, slow breath and carefully tucks his wand into the pocket of his pajama bottoms.

"I'm alright," he assures, looking up to find Snape staring at him through narrowed eyes.

"You most certainly are not," Snape retorts but there's a distinct lack of actual venom in his voice. If anything, the man still sounds about as tired as Harry feels, bone weary and faintly irritable with it. Which makes sense because Harry gets the feeling that he sat up all night watching over him and unlike Harry the professor hasn't had the option of sleeping for most of the day. "Make sure you have everything. I will not be making any trips up here because you left your fan mail under your pillow."

Harry blinks. "Fan mail? I don't have any fan mail!" He protests, feeling his gut drop at the sudden attack. "I don't...!"

Snape stares pointedly at the soft, if somewhat flat visage of the standard infirmary pillow and then raises an eyebrow.

Harry blinks.

He blinks some more.

*Oh.*

He reaches blindly beneath the pillow, his fingers unerringly finding the lump that has rested there, beneath his cheek or the bridge of his nose or even pressed up against the curve of his tailbone when he deigned to sit upright, for his entire stay. He's thought about it more than once but he hasn't dared to touch it, to remove it to look it over like he wants to. Every time he's even thought about it, he can hear the sharp crack of Snape's "*Leave it*" echoing in his head.

Now he takes it and has a brief moment to observe the bundle of white cloth folded, knotted, and streaked in brownish red sitting in the palm of his hand before the jerk of Snape's chin has him slipping it into his pocket next to his wand. He wonders, as he has not allowed himself to all day, what it is. He can still smell it: faintly green and bitter. It had perfumed his entire pillow by the end of the day and had been there, waiting, whenever he struggled awake, stuck between exhaustion and trying to make sense of being confined in a body while all of him wanted to disappear into... nothing. Everything. *Both.*

The quick trip through the floo leaves him dizzy and nauseated, stumbling about with less grace than a newborn hippogriff as Snape guides him to the lone, tortuous looking chair sitting in front of the man's desk. Harry all but falls into it and it's softer than it should be. A small vial is shoved in front of his face and he takes it without question. The vaguely warm, chalky texture of stomach soother slides over his tongue and leaves the very faint taste of ginger and peppermint in his mouth.

“Thanks,” he mumbles into his hands as he forces himself to take several deep breaths as the potion does its job.

“You can thank me by not risking your life and acting like a brainless Gryffindor as soon as the opportunity presents itself,” Snape mutters and starts opening drawers.

Harry forces his face out of his hands, curious as to what his professor is doing and watches as the man places a shallow crystal dish down on the desktop. It’s not much bigger than Harry’s hand and seamless, its edges perfectly smooth. Into it, Snape pours a fine white substance that greatly resembles sand. It takes Harry longer than it should to identify the sandy substance as *salt* but he thinks he can be forgiven for being as slow as first life Snape had thought him. Just this once.

Once the dish is full, Snape extends one hand across the desk and holds it out, palm up, and makes a barely there *give me* gesture with the curve of his fingers.

“What is it?” Harry dares to ask as he drops the small, blood stained bundle into Snape’s hand – and nearly snatches it back the moment it is out of his presence, feeling oddly bereft.

Snape stares at him for a long moment. “A spell,” he finally says and dumps it from his hand down onto the dish of salt.

“A spell?” Harry can feel his entire face scrunching with confusion, interest overpowering the pounding at the base of his skull. “How is that a spell? I’ve never seen anything like it before.” Or heard about it. And he spent years being best friends with Hermione Granger.

Snape raises an eyebrow. “No,” he drawls, faintly amused. “I imagine you haven’t.”

He doesn’t explain any further.

The git.

Harry narrows his eyes.

Snape ignores him and turns back to the bundle and the bowl of salt.

With quick, almost delicate movements, he unknots the cloth and the whole thing flutters open with a deft twist of his fingers and Harry can’t stop himself from leaning over the desk to get a closer look.

*I was right*, is his first thought upon staring down at the contents of the so-called ‘spell’ and it parallels his conversation with Hermione so nicely that he nearly laughs.

The spell is made up mostly of herbs. There’s at least three, he thinks, but he can’t be absolutely certain because they’re muddled together, the dried ones crushed into increasingly small pieces. He recognizes the nettle, though, the distinctive fuzzy stalk and jagged leaves lying amongst the carnage of greenery and something shredded: off white and almost woody looking. There is also a piece of what looks like solidified honey: smooth around the edges with delicate bubbles forever suspended inside of it. The cloth itself is tightly woven but fluid, slinking through Snape’s fingers like silk, which it just might be. Now that he can see



the full expanse of it, it is obvious that it has been torn from a larger piece of fabric. Three sides of it are rough and jagged, fraying and fuzzy with the force exerted on them and the final side is tidily turned under, neatly hemmed in a way that makes Harry think it might have once belonged to a piece of clothing.

Like a shirt.

“Amber,” he murmurs to himself, trying to make sense of it, “and nettle.” He steals another glance at Snape, hoping the man will give him some sort of answer. Instead, the man has gone utterly still, his face very carefully blank as he watches Harry. Only the slight tilt of his head betrays how focused he is on what Harry is doing.

It's an unnerving thing, to have the entirety of Severus Snape's attention.

Probably dangerous.

Harry turns back to the spell. He aches to touch it, to pick it apart and look at it. To pick it up and hold it in his hand... He gives his head a quick shake, sharp enough that black spots bloom across his vision and he's forced to grab the edge of the desk so that he doesn't fall over. On the other side of the desk Snape makes an abortive gesture – as if he started to reach out to catch Harry but stopped himself.

“...Rosemary,” Harry adds after the spots have cleared. He can see the silvery-green edge of their needles towards the bottom of the herb pile. Their dried, woody scent is mostly lost beneath the brighter more bitter crush of the nettle. “And some type of root...?”

“Dong quai,” Snape's finger traces the lines of the woody, shredded substance without touching. “More commonly called ginseng or angelica.” His finger moves over a little until it is hovering over a pile of leaves so dried and broken that they have practically become dust. “Mullein,” he murmurs and Harry feels his brow furrow again. They're all herbs he's familiar with. Rosemary and nettle are both some of the most often used in potions, well known from enhancing and cleansing properties. *Ginseng* rings a few bells, though he's not quite sure what from. Something from his sixth-year lessons as really the clearest thing he remembers about it is the Prince's instructions to shred the root rather than slice it. Snape's fingers move again, tracing the reddish-brown lines on the fabric.

“Runes,” Harry realizes after watching for a moment, though damned if he knows what they mean. The closest he's ever gotten to learning about runes is sitting next to Hermione while she does her homework.

Mentally, he adds *learn runes* to the ever-growing list of things he must do.

Snape tips his head in acknowledgement and then, with another deft twist of his fingers, the entire spell is flipped over, the contents falling into the salt. Harry jerks in his seat, one hand unconsciously reaching out. Snape catches it and curls his own fingers around Harry's to keep him from touching.

“Don't,” he orders and draws the finger of his other hand through the spell and the salt, mixing them together with a sharp, slashing movement.

Harry feels it like a literal snap, as if someone has stomped on one of his ribs. Only there is no pain, just the odd sensation of something giving way. “What was that?” he asks before he can stop himself, his eyes going to Snape’s.

Snape is watching him again, head tipped in curiosity. “All spells must end eventually,” he finally says. “I just helped this one along.”

“But what type of spell was it?” Harry asks, rubbing at his chest as soon as Snape lets go. Snape gives him nothing but a bland, unyielding look in return and Harry lets out an unhappy huff.

It isn’t until later, until Snape has seen him back to his dorm and dosed him with his evening potions, until the rest of the boys have long since fallen asleep and left Harry dozing in and out of consciousness as he lays on his bed with Inigo wrapped around one arm like an exotic bracelet that Harry’s mind begins to put the pieces together.

Protection.

Protection *and* healing.

Protection and healing specifically for *him*, Harry is willing to hazard a guess.

But why keep it secret, Harry wonders as sleep begins to drag him more fully under. Why refuse to answer Harry’s questions?

*[Patience, darling. There is plenty of time for that.]*

The darkness beckons.

Harry sleeps.

# Sixteen

## Chapter Notes

It is stupid o'clock in the morning but I'm posting this anyway. It's been a stressful week and is promising to be an even more stressful weekend so finishing this up and getting it to you is my gift to myself. (I hope you enjoy it!)

Thank you so much for your continued support. I am constantly blown away by the love this not-so-little story gets. I hope wherever you are in the continued shitstorm of 2020 that you are safe and healthy. Particularly any readers located along the US's west coast as the entire thing seems to be on fire these days. I grew up in that area and it has been terrifying and heartbreaking this past week to watch places I love go up in flames. My heart is with you.

*9/12/2020: as a rule I try not go back and edit things too much - I'm doing this for fun and am not aiming for perfection by any stretch of the imagination - but there were some definite "I wrote this at ass o'clock in the morning on my phone until my battery almost died before I overcame my laziness to go get my laptop" vibes in certain spots that were making me twitchy. Is that going to stop me from writing and posting when I should be asleep? No, no it is not.*

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Now that Halloween has passed them by the year seems to be moving double time. Harry swears he doesn't do much more than blink and November is gone, streaming past in a flurry of homework, research, and a handful of letters exchanged with Mr. Abbott that resulted in an obnoxiously penitent letter from the Editor of the Daily Prophet and a not insignificant reparation of five hundred galleons deposited into his account. After talking it over both with Mr. Abbott and with Snape, Harry had decided to forgo pressing legal charges – *this time* – in favor of keeping the state of his affairs out of public record and Dumbledore's eyes. Something Harry deems prudent because ever since the troll incident the Headmaster has adopted the awful habit of crossing paths with Harry and his group at least once or twice a week, making sure to single out Harry with an overly familiar smile of approval and a cheerful "Hello, my boy!".

Harry hates it.

He hates it even more once he realizes that it must be because he has *proven* himself to the old man – that Dumbledore has surely interpreted his going after Hermione as a singular action that proves his *goodness* despite the house that he had been sorted into.

*You did a very brave thing*, Dumbledore had told him, a magnanimous statement obviously indicative of his belief that Harry is not *really* a Slytherin.

Most encounters, however fleeting, with the Headmaster leave Harry internally fuming and longing to march right into the man's office and spend literal *days* word vomiting all of his frustration and anger and betrayal out *in parseltongue*. Just to drive the point home.

He doesn't, obviously, but he can dream.

That is not the only consequence of the troll incident.

Notably, the Monday after Halloween the Board of Governors and the DMLE descend upon the school. And by the Board of Governors and the DMLE Harry means that Lucius Malfoy and Amelia Bones along with two aurors, their distinctive red robes glaring against the sea of student black, are spotted striding up the main staircase in the direction of Dumbledore's office ten minutes before the first class of the day.

"Isn't that your dad?" Harry asks, nudging Draco.

"...and Aunt Millie!" Susan exclaims, grinning broadly. "They must be here about the troll!"

"The troll?" Harry blinks at her and back at Draco when the boy gives a very decisive nod of his head.

"It almost killed you! Of course, I told father," Draco exclaims, clearly offended by the idea that Harry hadn't *expected* him to tell his father. "I didn't know if Dumbledore would do anything about dangerous creatures wandering the school. Father's on the Board of Governors. He'll fix it."

*He'll fix it*, a phrase uttered with the unwavering conviction of a child with perfect faith in an adult to take care of things. It conjures a mental image of Lucius Malfoy that is wildly different than anything that Harry had seen from the man.

Well, almost anything, he corrects silently. In his mind he can see the image of a haggard and unkept man searching for his son, so desperate to find him that he walks a battlefield unarmed – a battlefield where he is likely, for one reason or another, to come under fire from both sides.

It's beyond odd to suddenly see the relationship between Draco and Lucius in this light. For so long, Draco had wielded the term *my father* like a weapon – something used to threaten or punish. And then he hadn't and Harry had assumed it to be because of shame: his father had been caught, put in Azkaban, revealed for the scum he really was. It had all seemed so simple. But this...

*He'll fix it.*

"Oh," Harry says and hopes that he doesn't sound as shocked as he feels. Because he's never had that. Not that he can remember anyway. He's seen it though. He's seen it in the Weasley family and in the way that Hermione had spoken about her parents.

It all looks so different now. The world that been so solid beneath his feet isn't there anymore. It's not like when he found out that Dumbledore had been keeping him alive only

to die at the proper moment. It's not like when he *had* died and then found out that the old man simply expected him to accept it and go back to fulfill his destiny.

It's not like that.

But it's a little closer than he'd like to admit.

Distantly he wonders if this will ever stop. If he'll ever find his equilibrium again or if is going to spend the rest of his – apparently very, very long existence – constantly feeling the ground ripped out from underneath him over and over and over again.

“I sent Aunt Millie a note on Friday after Draco told us what happened,” Susan tells him. “A troll shouldn't have been able to get in the school.”

“Oh,” Harry says again and this time he knows he sounds as surprised as he thinks he does because Blaise gives him an odd look.

“You can't imagine it would be kept quiet,” the other boy remarks, still watching him. “Most of the school was talking about it and half of them probably sent letters to their parents on the rumors alone.”

But that's exactly what Harry *had* thought. After all, no one had cared about the troll last time. It had been a slightly terrifying oddity but nothing had happened outside of some light property destruction. Had his stay in the hospital wing changed so much? Or is it simply the fact that this time he happens to be friends with the Head of the DMLE's niece and the son of a school governor? Is it simply a matter of people actually *knowing*? He, Ron, and Hermione had never spoken much of their confrontation with the troll and as none of them had been injured the rest of the school had never known that anything had happened except that they had suddenly become friends.

Except, that's not right either. All of the students – well, everyone but Hermione – had been in the Great Hall when Quirrell had burst in. Surely one of them had written to someone outside the castle about. Surely *Draco* had mentioned it to his father even without a friend being involved.

So what is different?

And, more importantly, does it matter?

Harry looks up the stairs, past the sea of students, past the tall, dark haired man leaning against the bannister with a pair of sunglasses perched on his nose. The aurors are easy to spot in their signatory crimson but it is the figure of Lucius Malfoy on the stairs in fine robes so dark green they are nearly black, head tilted politely to the side as Amelia Bones says something to him and gestures with one hand, that catches his eye. The man is a Death Eater. In another life he plants a dark artifact on an eleven-year-old girl which unleashes a basilisk on a school full of children, attacks a group of children with clear intent to capture, torture and possibly even kill, and helps Lord Voldemort rise to power.

But right now, in this life, he is just a father acting in defense of his son.

Not a good man but not just a bad one either.

As bloody insane as it sounds, in this life, it feels as if he is acting in defense of Harry as well.

The oddity of the thought is enough to make him dizzy.

“You really don’t have a very high opinion of people, do you?” Mandy leans against his side and the relief having someone holding him up, however accidentally, is enough to make the corners of his eyes burn.

Harry blinks.

“Ummm...”

Mandy rolls her eyes. “It was a rhetorical question, idiot. How are you holding up?”

Harry latches onto the change of subject with no small amount of relief. “I’m fine. Honestly. I feel pretty normal, I’m just not allowed to cast in class.”

“Speaking of, we should probably go so that we’re not late,” Hannah says. “Are we still on to feed Blaise’s plant later today?”

“I promise, dear Hannah, that I won’t feed Mr. Grabby without you,” Blaise promises, laughing. Hannah bounces on the balls of her feet and punches the air in excitement.

“You realize,” Harry says to Neville, who has turned faintly pink at this exchange, “that if you don’t get her a plant that she can feed for her birthday she’ll probably be crushed.”

“I kn-know,” the other boy nods his head vigorously. “I a-already h-have one i-in m-mind.”

“Do you think I’ll get to see him before they leave?” Draco asks as he falls in on Harry’s other side once the Hufflepuff and Gryffindor members of their group have left for their own classes.

“Your dad?” Harry clarifies and Draco nods. Harry swallows the slightly incredulous, slightly hysterical laugh that tries to burst out of his throat. “Draco,” he says seriously, “I’m pretty sure your dad won’t leave the castle without coming to say hi.”

“Really?”

Harry nods. “Really. We should get going though. We have to get all the way down to the greenhouses.”

“Want me to carry your bag?” Mandy asks.

Harry sighs. “I’m *fine*,” he promises.

Blaise pats him mockingly on the shoulder.

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Harry is right. Lucius Malfoy doesn't leave the castle without coming to see Draco.

He nudges Draco and jerks his chin at the entrance to the Great Hall. "See? Told you."

Draco twists around, nearly falling off of the bench in his enthusiasm, and his entire face lights up as he spots the pair that are walking towards where they are all eating lunch at one end of the Slytherin table. They eat breakfast and dinner with their own houses but they have fallen into the habit of eating lunch together. The others all come to the Slytherin table – a fact the Slytherins don't particularly care for but after single, incredulous glance at Snape, who simply stared down at them like they were all idiots, the very first time it had happened the snakes handle it much better than the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs had when they'd tried to sit at their tables. They don't bother trying to take a turn with the Gryffindors. That is something that would only end in disaster. And probably detention.

"Father!"

Lucius is close enough now that Harry can spot the way his mouth twitches into an answering smile before he can stop it all the way.

"Draco," he greets much more sedately but there's a warmth to his voice that Harry doesn't think he's ever heard before. Apparently, he's not the only one because Amelia Bones is giving him a look that Harry would call *blank, but surprised*. "I trust you are well."

Draco starts to nod but stops himself and gives a very careful tilt of his head, obviously an imitation of the man standing behind him. "I am." The other boy is still smiling like someone has lit a *lumos* inside his skull. "Madam Bones," he adds after a second, twisting the other way to give her a small bow from his shoulders.

"Heir Malfoy," the woman replies with a respectful tip of her head.

Susan grins. "Aunt Millie! You're here!" and goes to the woman when she opens her arms for a hug. Hannah pops up from her seat and hugs the woman as well, greeting her familiarly.

"Draco," Lucius chides gently. "Introduce us."

Draco's ears turn pink.

"Of course, father. You know Blaise," Lucius nods his head, lips bracketed in lines that on Snape would mean *I want to smile but that would ruin my reputation so I'm going to look serious instead*.

"Mr. Zabini."

"Sir," Blaise greets easily and pops another dumpling into his mouth.

"Susan Bones and Hannah Abbott."

Lucius offers them an elegant, sweeping bow. If their arms hadn't been wrapped around Susan's aunt Harry is pretty sure the man would have kissed the back of their hands. It seems like that sort of bow. "Ladies."

“Mandy Brocklehurst.” Mandy even deigns to put her book down, a sure sign that she’s taking this seriously, and offers the man a friendly smile.

“A pleasure. Any relation to Edward Brocklehurst in Archives?”

“My grandfather, sir.”

“Delightful, I’ll be sure to mention that I have seen you the next time I am down there.” Mandy smiles.

"Thank you sir!"

Draco gives the ceiling a long suffering look before moving on. “Father, Neville Longbottom.”

The look Lucius gives Neville is sharper, more assessing. Harry wants to bristle so instead he forces himself to take a deep breath. They are not meeting in battle. They are not on opposite sides.

“Heir Longbottom.”

Neville mumbles a greeting that might be “Lord Malfoy” or maybe “Mr. Malfoy” even though everything he knows about his grandmother makes Harry think that she’s a bit of a traditionalist when it comes to decorum.

Harry likes to think he’s polite. Most of the time. When he wants to be. A childhood with the Dursley’s had forced that on him, however begrudgingly, but he’ll be the first to admit that he had no idea what *decorum* was until he looked it up instead of working on a potions essay after Hermione had used it a half dozen times in the space of two days and he still had no idea what she had been talking about. And even then, he’d just read the definition and immediately filed it under the heading of *Pureblood Bullshit* and *Another Reason Why Malfoy is a Prat* because he couldn’t think of any logical reason for there being more rules than *Please* and *Thank You*. At the time it had struck him as a way for others to make themselves feel superior to other people. And maybe it is that. Maybe it’s that for a lot of people. But he’s had his world upended enough in recent months that he’s willing to put in the work to learn all the rules that he had forever brushed off. He’s willing to try to understand them and use them before he draws a conclusion on whether they’re complete bullshit or not. He wants to put in the effort and decide if they belong. If he belongs with them.

Also, he’s willing to admit – out loud even, even if it is just to Inigo – that taking everything as a personal slight has just gotten too exhausting. He’s tired of fighting everything. Tired of being a soldier when he doesn’t understand the war he’s walking into.

That’s why when Draco introduces him last – a sign that he considers Harry the highest-ranking member of the group, despite the fact that Neville is a pureblood and from a house that is at least as prestigious as the Potter’s – he offers the man a seated bow and greets him with a polite, “Lord Malfoy.”

If Lucius is surprised by Harry’s correct form of address, he doesn’t show it. Instead he offers Harry a rather regal inclination of his head and returns, “Heir Potter. Draco has written much



about you,” he sweeps his eyes over all them as he speaks but Harry is well aware that the man is still speaking to him even if none of the rest of the kids are. “He speaks very highly about you,” he adds when Hannah makes an excited sort of squeak.

“We are pretty awesome,” Mandy deadpans and Merlin help him, Lucius’ mouth actually *twitches*. He’s not sure he’s ever seen the man smile and now it’s been twice in the space of five minutes.

Harry pinches his leg subtly under the table. Hard.

It hurts.

Real then.

Amelia laughs.

“Susan does as well,” she admits and Susan mutters something that Harry is fairly sure is an embarrassed “*Aunt Millie!*”. “I have to get back to the office,” she adds, hugging Susan more tightly, “but I wanted to stop by so that I could put faces to all the names filling up Susan’s letters.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Madam Bones,” Harry adds, not wanting to leave the woman out. He’s not actually sure what the official protocol is when it comes to her. He hasn’t gotten that far in his etiquette books. The Bones aren’t part of the Sacred Twenty-Eight or holders of hereditary seats on the Wizengamot but he’s fairly certain they’re an older, respectable, salt-of-the-earth type family and Amelia is in a position of no small power.

At some point in a different future she had been considered the forerunner for Minister of Magic, the clear favorite in the face of the war the wizarding world could no longer deny was happening right in their laps, and Voldemort had murdered her for it. Personally.

Harry is beginning to notice a trend. Tom Riddle likes to deal with his enemies – the ones he really sees as a threat – on his own, which begs the question: had Dumbledore not been a threat by the end or had Voldemort banked so completely on Draco failing and no one daring to assist him?

“Likewise, Heir Potter,” Amelia Bones has a serious face and exudes a calm, no nonsense air but when she smiles it’s like the sun coming up over the horizon.

“Are you here about the troll?” Hannah asks now that the formalities are out of the way and seven pairs of curious eyes look at the two adults. They’re not the only ones. Daphne and Millicent are listening from where they sit a little further down the table on the other side of Greg and Vincent and Harry can practically feel the way the entire Ravenclaw table goes quiet at his back. Whatever Lucius Malfoy and Amelia Bones tell them is going to be all over the school by dinner.

“Did you figure out how it got in?” Susan demands, mouth settling into an unhappy line that is mirrored by her aunt. “I didn’t think something like this was supposed to be able to happen.”

“It is not,” Amelia replies, obviously unhappy, “and we did.”

The two adults share a look and Lucius takes over. “There was a... small issue with the wards that allowed it to slip in. The issue has been corrected and the Board of Governors will be contracting a Warding Master to take a thorough look to ensure that there are not any other such weak points,” the man tells them, voice level and calm. “It won’t happen again.”

Harry’s eyes narrow.

They’re not lying.

At least, he doesn’t think that they’re lying. They likely did find something wrong with the castle’s wards but Harry knows that look. It’s the sort of look that Snape and Pomfrey had exchanged at his physical. It’s the sort of look that he had seen Dumbledore and Snape or Dumbledore and McGonagall or - insert any two or more adult members of the Order here – exchange it often enough. It means that they know something, something that they’re not going to share. Something that they think Harry is too young to know.

Harry hates that look.

“Promise?” Draco demands.

Lucius gently taps Draco on the shoulder with the head of his cane. Harry gets the feeling that it’s the Malfoy in-public equivalent of a bop on the nose. Or maybe a forehead kiss. “I promise. I will pay for the Warding myself if I have to. I will not leave in a place of danger, Draco. You know that.”

“And please, if there is ever something that makes you feel unsafe, write your parents immediately. Or, if you feel more comfortable, write to me,” Madam Bones add and her eyes flick in Harry’s direction. He thinks that she’s talking to him but by the way he tenses on the bench beside him Neville obviously thinks the same thing.

“Of course,” Susan agrees instantly.

“I knew you would fix it,” Draco tells his father. “So, I wrote my letter right away. Professor Quirrell was kind enough to post it for me so that I didn’t have to leave the Hospital Wing before I heard how Harry was doing.”

Lucius’ eyes widen in surprise. “He did, did he?” He glances up at the staff table where the man in question is nibbling delicately at a roll. “I’ll have to extend my gratitude. Such dedication should be rewarded.”

Lucius and Amelia exchange another look.

Harry hates it.

---

Harry spends much of the next week quietly panicking about what changes Lucius Malfoy and Amelia Bones might bring to the school. It’s a quiet, conflicted panic: a scattered anxiety that rises and falls in waves. On one hand, the part of him that had always wondered if there

were any actual competent adults in the world is ecstatic at the idea of something being done to make Hogwarts less dangerous – to fix whatever issue their investigation had uncovered. That same part of him is also laughing hysterically, *bitterly* over the fact that in this incidence the competent adult is *Lucius bloody Malfoy*. On the other hand, the idea of something changing, of the school being made safer, terrifies him. Will whatever they do force Dumbledore to move the stone? Will it accidentally expel Voldemort from where he sits on Quirrell's head?

For over three months now Harry has existed in quiet lull of knowledge, the memories of his first life giving him the framework of simple steps to take to sidestep the path of the Gryffindor Hero he had sought to be for the last seven years. He has hesitated to change anything in the broader world, focusing his changes on things almost entirely within his purview: his house, his friends, his attitude towards learning, and a general open-mindedness to the society and people around him. He is too battered, too sore, angry, and grieving and to change anything. He is too busy trying to understand a world that no longer makes sense to launch straight into changing said world.

He must change himself first.

No.

He must deal with the changes that have been wrought in him. He must come to terms with them and face them.

*Overwhelmed*, does not begin to describe how he feels most days.

Such a simple word does not begin to describe the idea of being the Master of Death, of being quasi immortal and reliving his own life because he, *Harry Potter*, has the power to do that.

It can't possibly encompass the lingering feelings of anger and fear and resentment towards Albus Dumbledore and the boy that Harry had once been. Feelings that bubble up with no warning and at the least provocation. Feelings that steal all reason from his head, leaving nothing but emotion so thick and conflicted that he shakes with it.

It doesn't account for how, with his loss of faith in Dumbledore, comes his loss of faith in what Harry has always thought of *right* or *good*. It doesn't account for how the revelation of his purpose and subsequent death has broken him right open until, beneath all the grief and rage, he has become a well of empathy for those who had never warranted such attention from him.

It doesn't account for how it is all too easy now - especially when he has shut himself in the trunk flat and is looking at the timeline of his life and the summation of everything he thinks might be important spread out around him – to see the game Dumbledore had played from the positions of the other players. It's easier to take their places on the gameboard. It's even easier to step back from the game and find the view to be drastically different from the outside.

He can see it now, all too clearly, the logic of all the paths that lead to destruction.

*Save everyone. Kill everyone. I don't care*, Death had all but told him and Harry finds it easy – *so bloody easy* – to see the path that leads to that and he knows, he *knows*, that someone there is a Harry that has done just that. And not just one Harry but many Harrys, more than he could probably begin to count, that feel the cut of betrayal and fury and extract the price of their pain from the flesh of those around them. Harrys that leave the world desolate and barren, a smoking ruin drifting against the endless blackness of space.

And it terrifies him. It terrifies him because it would be *so easy*.

Just as terrifying are all the other possibilities between the life he had lived and absolute destruction.

That terror has spread to other things. Having the power to choose, to purposefully direct the fate of the wizarding world has left him paralyzed. The great irony, when his mind clears enough to let him think properly, is that he has always had this power but now he has knowledge to go with it.

Knowledge that is not perfect but is but the view of a single perspective. Knowledge that is mixed up with fluctuating pain, with grief and rage.

Imperfect, but all that he has to guide him.

The quiet fear that maybe, just maybe, the life from which he has come is the best possible outcome haunts him in the moments of exhaustion just before he drops into sleep.

His fear and uncertainty has paralyzed him, has made him nearly as stagnant as the world around him.

He has let himself drift in a holding pattern for too long.

And now things are changing.

Now he is beginning to see what his earliest changes have wrought.

Now he is wondering if he can live with the consequences of those changes or if they will upset everything so thoroughly that he will be left wandering as blind in this life as he felt in the last.

He wonders if it matters.

He sits up at night and stares at the lake. He wonders if he should just kill Voldemort: resurrect him and kill him dead and move on to some other...reality, some other life completely. If he should just take himself and Tom out of the picture before they can fuck the world up even more.

But then he thinks of Draco, who was so worried about him that he had used the power of Lucius Malfoy – a power he had only ever known as a threat to be resented and feared - in Harry's favor.

He thinks of Snape, who has cared for him and assisted him and berated him. Who, under different circumstances, has done more for Harry's well being in two and a half months than all the other adults in Harry's life for the past seven years. Combined.

They are the same as the Malfoy and Snape that Harry had known and yet they are completely different.

The same ingredients mixed up in a different quantity and a different order to form something entirely more palatable.

He thinks of a little boy in an orphanage and a man who wanted to live forever and a monster who had aimed his wand at Harry and killed him.

He thinks of a mangled baby, crying beneath an insubstantial bench.

He remembers how he felt the day of his first quidditch game: terrified and nervous, palms sweaty, stomach churning, so dizzy with anxiety that it had been a miracle he'd made it to the pitch without passing out. His legs had shaken as he mounted his broom. He had been sure that he would slip off and, if not fall to his death, at least make a horrible spectacle of himself. He remembers how he had looped through the air, high above the rest of the game. How he had both relaxed and grown more nervous with the feel of the wind on his face. He remembers how, even in the air, there had been a part of him that had been certain that he was going to be the one to mess it all up, that Gryffindor would lose because of him. Because of what he did or didn't do.

But then he had taken a deep breath, dived down into the game, and started to play.

It hadn't gone how he expected it to. The Slytherin players had been even more brutal than he had expected. Someone had tried to literally jinx him off his broom. He had caught the snitch but caught it in his mouth after tumbling off his broom and skidding across the grass.

It hadn't gone as expected but that hadn't stopped him from reacting, from trying to analyze the game around him to predict where he needed to be, how he needed to fly – a skill that he had gotten immeasurably better at the longer he had played.

Harry takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly and thinks of nothing but the way the air had felt on his face as he had spiraled toward the ground.

*"I am tired of being afraid,"* he tells Inigo. He doesn't want to spend his entire life in fear of what had happened or what could happen. He wants, simply, to just *live* and that's never going to happen if he just hovers here, paralyzed by the what-ifs and the unknowns.

He's waited long enough.

It's time to dive.

---

Harry decides the fate of the wizarding world at three am on a Sunday in late November.

It's a dramatic thought, even for him, but it feels entirely too appropriate as he stands in his flat and stares at the wall. He's moved his makeshift bed and Inigo's terrarium over by the kitchenette leaving the full expanse of the wall, some eighteen or twenty feet, for his plotting. He's transfigured the entire thing into a blackboard and earlier in the week pinched a few pieces of chalk from Binns' classroom that have probably been sitting there for at least a decade, if not longer. With it he has turned most of the wall into a timeline of his past life: a brief summation of events stretching from when the *Fidelius* broke and Voldemort attempted to kill him to when he *actually* killed him. Or came as close as he could get. The neatness of his handwriting probably leaves something to be desired but he charmed the chalk different colors and organized everything as logically as he could.

Hermione would be so fucking proud of him.

On one side of the board he has the words of the prophecy inscribed, though he suspects that the only binding power they have over him now are in the form of Dumbledore's belief and reach. Beneath that he has a list of the horcruxes that exist at this point in time: diary, ring, locket, cup, diadem, and Harry himself. Even in the relative safety of his trunk he can't bring himself to write their locations. Identifying them at all feels risky enough, a constant prick beneath his skin that tastes all too much like the panic that had filled him during his most recent trip to limbo.

On the other side, beneath his brief account of the Battle of Hogwarts, he has a list of changes he's already made and what – if any – results they have had so far. There is also a list of not quite connected things that he wants to change, wants to make *better*. Things that range from clearing Sirius to getting Neville a new wand. But really, it's the words in the center of the wall-turned-chalkboard that hold his attention.

*Tom Marvolo Riddle* is written front and center and circled. Twice. With '*resurrect*', '*unicorn blood*', and '*sorcerer's stone*' scrawled beneath it. The words '*map*' and '*cloak*' are written above it.

Harry has spent the last several hours furiously writing out this information. It's not the first time he's written most of it. He's filled dozens and dozens of pages of his first journal by this point but there is little rhyme or reason to it: memories and thoughts as they come to him – stream of consciousness musings filled with ink blotches and tear stains. He's thought through it all more times than he can count, his mind turning it over and over again whenever he has a free moment. And frequently when he doesn't have a free moment. But there had been something... some sense that if he could just get it all out of his fucking head and be able to stare at it all at once that it would suddenly start to make more sense.

It doesn't.

And yet...

"So this is it? The grand plan?"

Harry jumps at the voice but manages to keep from pointing his wand at the man who saunters up next to him, hands shoved deeply into the pockets of his trousers. He looks the same as Harry remembers from Limbo, all artfully tousled black hair, neat but noticeable

scruff, and dark walnut eyes. Though he feels distinctly taller as they stand side by side. A fact easily explained once Harry remembers that *he* had been taller in Limbo as well.

“Death,” he greets slowly, confused but not surprised. Not really.

Death grins. It’s adorable and terrifying, a flash of white teeth against full lips and tanned skin. “Hello darling.”

“I’ve seen you around,” Harry ventures, curious. He’s spotted this form, this body encompassing Death, several times over the past few weeks: lounging on the stairs, sitting in a window, or even taking a turn at the telescope at the top of the astronomy tower.

“Mmmm. Just getting you used to me” Death explains. “There have been some complications. Plus, you always do badly with a voice in your head unless you’re practically unconscious. Have to work up to such things, hmm?”

“Complications?”

“Of course, that’s what you fixate on,” Death mutters as he prowls forward. “It’s nothing bad. Not really. It shouldn’t interfere with all of... this,” he waves vaguely at the wall. He has a piece of chalk in his hand. “It actually helped. Helps?” He shakes his head. “Fuck tenses. It will help with all of this.” He gives the chalk a little twirl. “Probably.

“Probably.”

“I mean, it doesn’t always but statistically it’s in your favor, darling.”

“What are you talking about?” Harry’s voice cracks and comes out much more like a squeak than he would like. Brilliant.

“Ah. Well,” Death spins the chalk between his fingers, weaving it around his knuckles before grasping it firmly and turning to the wall. “When I brought you to the Inbetween I may have exacerbate the drain of your magical core to achieve it. Harmless really – especially for you. Or it should have been but then you had to go and *push* yourself.”

Harry still doesn’t know what he did, exactly, but he knows the precise moment that Death is talking about. He can still taste the panic and the fear and the determination rising up in him at the sight of Snape’s blood trickling to the floor. Even now, it makes him twitch.

“I’m sorry,” he murmurs, even though he’s not. Not even a little. “It all got mixed up in my head for a minute.”

“It does that,” Death agrees quietly, watching him. “I’m told that it gets better after a while. Especially once you have the first several millennia under your belt.”

*Millenia.*

The word hits Harry with enough force to rock him backwards.

“Do I... do I really? For *that*...”

“Not always, but most of the time,” Death’s hand is gentle on his shoulder, steadying and cool, crisp air flooding his lungs. “You are a creature of survival, darling. You always have been. Having the guarantee of being able to live as long as you’d like doesn’t change that.”

“But *millennia*...” Harry can’t fathom it. He has lived much of his life wondering if this month, this week, this *day* was the point when his luck finally runs out. He has a hard enough time wrapping his head around the fact that Dumbledore is over a hundred, let alone imagining that he will ever live that long.

“Doesn’t even scratch the surface. Especially when you have someone to share it with.”

As if pulled on a string, Harry’s gaze is drawn back to the name on the wall and, perhaps for the first time since he decided on this mad course as he sat, confused and more than a little hysterical beneath a tree in the park, the sheer *enormity* of what he is about to do washes over him. He is the Master of Death and he will live as long as he wishes to. He, Harry Potter, who holds a piece of another’s soul in his own, will live *for as long as he wants*. He has and he does and he will until thousands of years are mentioned like one might think *just a second*. As if they are so miniscule that they might be unworthy of notice. And, unless steps are taken, so long as Harry lives, then he will as well.

*Tom Marvolo Riddle.*

Enemies.

They have been enemies. In Harry’s mind they have always been enemies – two men cut from the same shadow. And they might go on being enemies, millennia spent tearing at each other’s throats over and over and over again, laying waste to entire civilizations and worlds in their quest for survival.

Harry wonders if it makes him a bad person that even that thought brings him a great deal of comfort – a surety of something familiar, even if it is in the form of a madman trying to murder him, long after everything else he has ever known turns to dust.

But it doesn’t have to be that way.

Even in his first life it hadn’t needed to be that way.

Voldemort had offered him peace once, had offered him... perhaps not an alliance, not really, but at least a way out of the conflict they had found themselves locked in.

And maybe it had already been too late. Maybe the sheer, illogical, destructive madness that had taken root in Lord Voldemort by the time he rose again had already been present but it hadn’t seemed that way. Standing at the end and looking back, the Voldemort on the back of Quirrell’s had seemed much more *present* and rational. Egotistical and cruel but not...not broken. Not a caricature of evil to go bump in the night. Not someone who had left the womb a fully formed unfeeling monster.

Just a man, terrible and great.



Lord Voldemort had offered Harry his hand once, had offered him a place by the Dark Lord's side. Harry had refused it and sealed it with murder. He had snubbed it so thoroughly that the offer had never been made again.

He wonders if the offer will be better received when it is his hand extended.

"Does that bother you?" he asks Death. "I mean you're...you." Harry motions helplessly at the man. At *Death*. It feels a bit wrong for Death to be mastered by someone who constantly defies it.

"Not in the slightest, darling." Death squeezes his shoulder. "All things end. Everything dissipates into the dark eventually. Even you. There is no rush."

Harry turns into the being's embrace, nearly – but not quite – tucking himself under Death's arm. He clears his throat, chest suddenly suspiciously tight. "So...you were telling me about the complications?" he finally manages to ask, dragging them back on topic.

Death lets go of his shoulder with another squeeze and takes several bouncing steps back to the wall. "I was!" he declares cheerfully and he gives the chalk in his hand a delicate spin, weaving it over and around his fingers before putting it to the dark surface of the chalkboard. He moves quickly, flowing, his handwriting unbearably smooth and almost delicate looking – certainly much neater than Harry's – as he writes out three words.

Another name.

*Severus Tobias Snape.*

Harry's heart freezes inside his chest.

"What about Snape?"

"Mmm, such a cunning man, Severus Snape," Death murmurs. Gently, almost tenderly, he runs his finger in a line beneath the potions master's name. "Always such a puzzle. The consummate survivor who wishes for nothing more than to let go. As you recall, we were talking about your *push*. If you had been a normal wizard such an action would have killed you. Your magical core has a natural cut off point, a place where it is so close to empty that if you get close to it your magic turns against you and renders you unconscious in an effort to protect itself from being entirely used up. If you can hold and push past that to use up what little magic is left to you then you start tapping into more vital, more mortal forces. If any of your friends had attempted such a thing – if Severus himself had attempted it – they would have died." The look Death gives him is very serious. "You went even further. You drew straight from the Void itself. Even tangled up in Tom's horcruxes, a different you would have very likely been rendered a squib."

"But I wasn't."

"No, darling, you weren't."

“Snape,” Harry whispers, remembering the weight on his chest, remembering bloodied palms and a song that had rumbled around in the man’s chest and down into Harry’s soul. He remembers drifting in the Void and he remembers being pulled back, gentled and settled back into his skin by midnight skies and golden stars. “Snape did something.”

“You, *this you*,” Death emphasizes, “would have been fine. You are the Master of Death. Young, unpracticed, but the Void is yours to use. You would have been fine. I knew that. You...well, you didn’t know it but you didn’t need to. Severus Snape did not know that.”

Harry is almost afraid to ask but he does anyway, “What did he do?”

Death scratches at his chin. “Think of your magical core like an organ – a magically powered heart if you will,” he begins. “You had not only used up your natural charge but you were overloading your system with more magic than it should have been capable of holding. Snape created a feedback loop. He connected you to his core and helped direct the stream of magic through him as well as feeding some of his own magic back into you in an effort to stabilize your core and keep you from reaching for magic that should, to his knowledge, be too dangerous for you to use. The theory is sound, of course, if unorthodox. The man has impeccable control when he wants to and an innate understanding of magic that precious few will ever possess. This, however, was not enough to stabilize you.”

“But you said...”

“Yes, *you* would have been fine but your body didn’t necessarily know that. Snape certainly didn’t. Did you know that there is a way to remove someone’s magical core from their body?” Death asks suddenly and Harry blinks.

“Er...no? That sounds awful though.” And entirely too dangerous. The thought of someone like Bellatrix or Umbridge getting their hands on such an ability is enough to make him feel sick and faint.

“Oh, it is. Absolutely revolting,” Death agrees calmly. “Very intense. Very time consuming and it requires an *enormous* amount of power to perform. It’s only happened once in the last thousand years. But it is actually possible and over time the tales of it have become twisted and pruned until some wizards believe that it is how muggleborns acquire their magic. Not that that’s important to our story. What is important is that years and years ago Snape witnessed this ritual being performed.”

Harry nods. Of course he has. Three guesses who had been performing it and the first two don't count.

“Voldemort.”

“Mmm, clever Tom Riddle has always been fond of pushing the boundaries and Severus remembered. It is not a ritual he could ever manage to perform but it gave him enough of an idea that he bastardized it on the spot and used it to stabilize you and bring you back.”

“He...removed part of my magical core?” Harry wrinkles his nose and feels his lip curl back in a snarl, torn between dismay, confusion, and an instinctive, unthinking rush of fury.

“Oh, goodness no. That wouldn’t have been helpful at all,” Death waves away his concern with a brush of his hand. “No. He removed some of his own.”

Harry stares. “He...*what?*”

“He tore off a bit of his magical core – not much just a little piece – and patched it into you. It wasn’t magic moving through you, it was magic that was *in* you. Fooled your core into thinking it was exhausted but not broken. He doesn’t know it quite yet but you left a bit of the Void in him in return.”

“*Oh fuck,*” Harry mutters. “Oh Merlin. Oh shit. Oh... does this mean he’s mixed up in the whole horcrux mess now too?” he screeches, whirling about as the thought occurs to him. “Is Snape now part of this weird soul thing that I have going with Voldemort?”

Death looks amused. “...No. Technically.”

“Technically,” Harry repeats flatly.

“Technically,” Death repeats and holds both of hands out in front of him, palms up. He raises and lowers them as if they’re two sides of a scale. “The soul and the magical core are separate things. Muggles don’t have magical cores but they certainly have souls. Dementors have magical cores but they certainly do *not* have souls – not of their own, anyway.”

“...but?”

“But a wizard that has lost their soul? Not really able to perform magic anymore. They’re separate things, yes, but for those that have both they’re rather tangled up in each other. So, no, technically Severus is not part of the whole soul sharing thing you and Tom have going on but he’s also not *not* part of it. You won’t be able to resurrect him, not like you can Tom, nor will his connection to you keep him from dying in a spectacular potions accident or if, say, someone throws an *avada kedavra* at his head.”

“...but?” Harry prompts again.

“But he is bound to you both. Bound twice to you and thrice to Tom. Bound by magic, oath, and blood.” Death tells him quietly. “Three is a powerful number. Additionally, both you and Tom have left your magic in him. *You* have left a piece of the Void itself in his heart. That is not something to be treated lightly. The Darkness does not consume itself, darling. Severus is not impervious to death but neither will it seek to claim him in the natural course of things – he will not weaken or age. He will not die unless he seeks it or it is inflicted upon him by outside forces.”

“Oh fuck,” Harry says again, staring at the names on the wall. “Oh, Merlin’s fucking balls. He’s going to kill me. Oh, shit. That’s how I’m going to die. Snape is going to bloody *murder me.*” He buries his face in his hands and tries to take a deep breath. It doesn’t work. His chest is too tight, his ribs caving in on his lungs and crushing them, an invisible fist tightening around his throat until he can hear his heart pounding frantically in his ears.

Oh bloody, buggering *fuck.*

He had just been trying to *help* and now he's, now he's...

"Breathe, darling," Death's voice is gentle in his ear, one hand brushing up the line of his spine. "Come here, my dear. It's alright, darling. Just come here and take a breath." Harry feels frozen, paralyzed as Death's hands pull him forward, the eldritch being tucking Harry into his chest and wrapping his arms around him. "It's alright, Harry," Death promises. "Just breathe."

The cold of Death's hand slipping beneath the soft cotton of Harry's sleep tee and pressing between his shoulder blades is enough to shock him into taking a breath. He gasps, inhaling sharply and unsteadily, his entire chest screaming and stuttering, unable to remember what it is supposed to do.

"There you go," Death murmurs. "Keep breathing, darling. Just like that."

Harry sucks in another breath and another and another, gradually matching them to the guiding rumble of Death's voice as it echoes around in the chest beneath his ear.

"He's going to hate me," Harry finally manages to whisper, clutching at the fine white fabric of Death's shirt. "I finally got him to see something besides my father and he is going to *hate me*."

"It's possible," Death agrees, but the terribleness of his agreement is tempered by the gentle stroke of his fingers up and down Harry's spine. "Unlikely, but possible."

"Unlikely?" Harry wants to laugh. It comes out as something closer to a sob. "I've trapped him. I've... I've..."

"If you think that Severus Snape wouldn't willingly sacrifice his soul for you, in any life, then you haven't been paying attention," Death tells him but Harry shakes his head. This Snape, maybe. *Maybe*. But the Snape of his first life wanted forgiveness, wanted to put an end to the man who killed the woman he loved. He had been Harry's more than he had been Voldemort's or Dumbledore's but that meant very little when it hadn't been about them at all. Not to him. "For better or worse, he has always, will always orbit you. Because of who you are, because of who he is. The three of you are always so tangled up. That's my fault, I suppose."

"So, what... he's just going to accept it? Be thrilled with this near immortality that I've accidentally gifted him?"

Death can't hold back his laugh, and the bark of it rolls around the room like thunder. "Oh, absolutely not. I mean, technically, it's possible but unlikely. *Extremely* unlikely. At least at first." Harry is pretty sure that Death can feel his skepticism because the being laughs again. "Severus is cunning and pragmatic and very, *very* adaptable. The probability of him coming around to the idea quickly is high as long as you address the matter correctly."

And there's the catch. Harry sighs. "I'm going to bollocks that up," he mutters. "I know it. How the fuck am I supposed to know how to tell him?"

“Well, I don’t recommend just marching into his office and saying ‘Oh, and by the way, you’re never going to get old or sick again. Congratulations!’ . That never goes over well.” Death pauses and steps back, holding Harry by his shoulders and staring at him intently. “Do you really want to know? How to tell him?”

Harry stares back. “Could you really tell me that?”

Death laughs. “Darling, I am the Endless Darkness. I am without beginning or end. I have stood watch over infinite existences, am watching infinite existences, and will watch an infinite number of existences. I am in everything and at the end of everything. I could answer any question you might pose.”

And oh, isn’t that a dangerous thought. More dangerous than living for as long as he might wish. So much of Harry’s life – both the old and the new – hinge on knowledge: on having it. On getting it. And here Death is, just...offering it. Like it is nothing.

Harry shakes his head, shakes it so vigorously that his barely calmed stomach rolls and he suddenly feels dizzy. “No,” he says. “No...that. Sometimes, maybe, but I don’t... I don’t want to just coast through life, having someone hand me everything. I don’t... I know what that does to a person,” he swallows roughly. “I don’t want to become Dudley. Or Malfoy. I mean, I’ll probably still ask things because it would be stupid to ignore such a resource but I’d rather, I’d rather do most of it on my own if that’s alright.”

Death beams, indulgent and fond and, Harry thinks, just a little bit pleased. “Whatever you want, darling. Whatever you want.”

Harry takes a slow, deep breath. “Okay,” he says and his voice hardly shakes. “Okay.”

They stand in silence for a moment. It should be awkward. It probably looks awkward. Death still has his hands curled around Harry’s upper arms, his thumbs sliding gently across the fabric of his sleep shirt. The touch is firm and cool, both grounding and freeing.

“Is that everything?”

Death makes a questioning noise deep in his throat.

“You said ‘*complications*’. Is that everything?”

“Mmm. For now. I’m sure you’ll probably create more complications at some point. You’re terribly good at it,” Death tells him.

“It’s a gift,” Harry deadpans. “But...it won’t compromise my plans?”

Death shakes his head. “Not in the slightest. Not that you have explained your plans to me yet.”

Now it is Harry that laughs, unexpected and unbelieving. “I suspect that you already know exactly what my plan is.”

“Eh. No two realities are ever *exactly* alike,” Death dismisses, turning them both towards the chalkboard wall. “I might recognize the broad outlines of it but this moment, this plan has never existed before and will never exist exactly like this again. So explain it to me, darling. Walk me through it.”

“Alright,” Harry huffs, giving in. It seems silly to not take advantage of Death’s presence, of his infinitely more capable brain – does he even *have* a brain? – to troubleshoot his plan. The rest of what he learned this morning can be set aside for later, for when he has a moment and the energy to *freak the fuck out*. It feels like a theme to this new life. A constant, exhausting theme.

“Alright,” he says again and points to a word on the board. “Well, the first thing I need to do is steal back the Marauder’s Map.”

## Chapter End Notes

Random but semi related worldbuilding tidbit: The ritual to remove someone's magical core was most recently accomplished by Lord Voldemort who, more or less, did it to prove that he could. Before him the last time it had been completed successfully was when Merlin was stripped of his powers and entombed.

# Seventeen

## Chapter Notes

The last few weeks have been exhausting and I'm sure I'm not the only one to have found them so. (Thankfully, I am well and my family is well but it has been...exhausting.) Wherever you are, dear reader, I hope you are well. I hope you're hanging in there. I hope that in the ever evolving shitstorm of 2020 that I can bring a small bright spot to your days. Your support certainly brings light to mine.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*“Alright. Well, the first thing I need to do is steal back the Marauder’s Map.”*

*Death lets out a little hum. “Why the map first?”*

*Harry steals a glance at him, worried that he has already mis-stepped somehow but there is nothing but genuine interest written on his face. Interest and all the patience in the patience in the world, as if he would be content to simply stand there forever and let Harry look at him.*

*He decides to take the being at his word. “Because outside of being caught by Dumbledore – or Snape,” he tacks on begrudgingly, “while I’m inside the school the map in hands other than my own is the single greatest risk to my plans.” Both for now and those that will, hopefully, come later. “The twins obviously don’t spend a lot of time looking at it – not like I did – because I’d like to think that they would notice Pettigrew attached to their brother for three bloody years. And at this point they don’t even know who Tom Riddle is. I’m not sure they ever knew,” Harry adds with a shrug. “But if the twins are smart enough to figure out how to make the map work than others will be too and I can’t risk having my movements tracked. Plus,” he adds fiercely, staring at the words formed by his untidy scrawl, “the map is mine and I want it back.”*

*Death’s smile is wide and full of teeth. “Of course,” he murmurs fondly. “Of course, you do.”*

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The hardest part about stealing the Marauder’s Map is getting away from his friends long enough to actually do it.

The obvious solution, of course, is to steal the map back at night while his friends are all sleeping. Harry considers this approach for all of three seconds before dismissing it. Stealing it at night comes with the greater risk of being caught, both out of the dorm by a professor – and now that he’s actually in the man’s house and know how he runs it, Harry would bet all of his gold in Gringotts that Snape has some sort of monitoring charm to alert him should any

of his snakes escape the house after curfew – and *in* dorm by the Weasley twins and Gryffindor house in general. Both of which would be bad. Very, *very* bad.

The second most obvious solution to the problem of his friends would be to perform the theft after one of his standing appointments with Madam Pomfrey. Harry's tendency to wander hasn't been completely cured by his desire for flying under the radar and his appointments vary enough in length that no one expects him – in the common room or wherever else they might be meeting – at any one specific time. He is also less likely to be apprehended by a professor roaming the halls but *more* likely to draw notice from the student body as he wanders so far from his own dorms. Not to mention that the Weasley twins and the rest of Gryffindor will likely be in the tower, *awake*.

Harry dismisses the second obvious solution almost as quickly as the first.

Which leaves him with options of either stealing it during mealtimes when his absence *absolutely* would be noticed by students and professors alike or while the bulk of the older students are still in class and his friends *definitely* expect him to join them.

Bollocks.

Well, technically he supposes he could just *ask* for it. They would give it to him, he thinks, especially if he revealed that his dad was Prongs. *Especially* if he told them his dad was Prongs. It is certainly the easiest of any possible option but then the Twins would know that he has the map. He doesn't want them to know who has it. He doesn't want *anyone* to know he has it.

Harry's pretty sure he's probably blowing the whole thing out of proportion but he's willing to acknowledge that dying made him paranoid. Well, *more* paranoid.

Though is it really paranoia at this point? Or just hard-learned caution?

*Yes*, he decides.

It doesn't really matter. Paranoia or caution, the result is the same and asking the twins is dismissed as an option before it even forms clearly as a thought in his head.

Which leaves him back where he started: trying to avoid his friends – and everyone else - while he sneaks into Gryffindor Tower during the middle of the afternoon.

Harry spends exactly three days making increasingly wild and convoluted plans before he realizes that in an effort to have a plan, he is being a fucking idiot.

"Simple," he mutters to himself as he rips the outline of his latest idea – something revolving around tempting Neville and everyone down to the greenhouses with an exotic, just arrived plant and a broken nose on his part - from his journal and lights it on fire. Wordlessly. Wandlessly. "Damn it."

He glares at the parchment for half a minute before he pulls out his wand and puts the flames out with a small fountain of water.



Simple. He can do simple. Simple is his middle name.

Harry lets out a shaky breath.

Right.

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“Oh, seriously?” Harry growls as he digs through his bag, carefully pulling out rolls of parchment and stacking books on the table in front of him, fingers sweeping the seams at the bottom of his bag.

“F-f-forget something?” Neville asks.

Harry scowls down at the empty bag perched on his lap. “Yeah. My potions essay. It’s not in my bag.” It’s not, technically. It’s shrunk down and sitting in his pocket.

“Restart it?” Mandy offers dryly.

“I could...” Harry acknowledges unhappily, “but I was almost done. I just needed another inch or two.”

Mandy wrinkles her nose. “Ugh. I can see your dilemma.”

“You could work on something else,” Susan points out but Harry shakes his head.

“This is due tomorrow. I just want to get it done.”

“Go check the dorm?” Blaise offers. “It probably just fell off your desk or something.”

“Yeah,” he agrees and pushes away from the table. “Probably. I’ll be back in a bit, I guess.”

Frustrated, Harry walks out of the library. Alone.

So far, so good.

He ducks into an empty classroom around the corner after verifying that no one’s watching and casts a disillusionment spell on himself as well as silencing his feet. There. With Snape and the Weasley twins both tied up with classes he should be safe from detection as long as he doesn’t run into Dumbledore.

It feels weird to take the path to Gryffindor Tower. Outside of a few exploratory jaunts with the rest of the group Harry hasn’t had any reason to come higher than the fifth floor save for the once a week visit to the astronomy tower – which is in a completely separate section of the school from the Gryffindor’s dorms. In hindsight, having the first time he retraces the steps of a lifetime be a moment when he’s really supposed to hold his shit together is not the greatest plan. He should have come up here sooner. Alone. Together. *Something*.

His feet know the way. Six years of muscle memory carrying him forward while he finds himself staring at familiar walls hungry and desperate for sights that used to mean *home* but oddly distant as well, as if he’s looking at it all through a telescope from far away.

Wonderful.

For better or worse there is no one actually going in or out of the Gryffindor common room when he arrives so he's forced to tuck himself into the little alcove near the portrait of the Fat Lady – carefully, as to not accidentally give away his presence by brushing against the tapestries hanging from the walls – and wait. It gives him time. Time to settle.

*Get a grip*, he tells himself sternly. *You've been doing this for months now.*

He inhales slowly and lets it go, carefully silent on the exhale.

Now is not the time to get distracted.

He's after a snitch.

It feels like forever – long enough for him to focus on the feel of the wind against his face and settle the churning in his stomach and the numbness that sort of tingles at his fingers and face – but it's really only five minutes, *ten* at most, before a second year Gryffindor comes bobbing along. And not just any second year but Katie Bell.

Merlin, but she looks tiny.

Logically, he's always known that she is only a year above him but Katie had always seemed so big and grown up in his eyes. Probably because she was already on the quidditch team when McGonagall had plunked him down in front of Wood and pretty much said, "Here's a seeker for you." But here she is, still with the last bits of childhood roundness to her face and her pulled back in a ponytail and adorned with a red ribbon.

Harry gives himself a quick little shake and barely manages to keep from slapping himself.

*Focus.*

He falls in behind Katie and follows her the last dozen feet to the portrait of the Fat Lady. Knowing what's coming he focuses on taking slow, silent breaths and – after a brief pause for the girl to greet the portrait and give her the password – he slips into the common room behind her and immediately flattens himself to the wall next to the door.

It hits him in a riot of color and sound, all of it achingly familiar. The squishy red chairs and couches clustered around the room. The thick red and gold rug before the fireplace. The two sets of stairs leading up to the dorms on opposite sides of the tower. The high arched windows and the flutter of thick tapestries. The ebb and flow of laughter and conversation, interrupted by the occasional screech or the sound of exploding snap cards... exploding. Over in their corner Ron sits with Dean and Seamus. They have their homework out but none of them are working on it. Ron has Dean cornered over a chessboard and Seamus is sketching away furiously in a obviously muggle sketchbook.

He'd forgotten that the other boy liked to draw, much more use to paying attention to him because he's lit something on fire.

Harry gasps and clenches his fists so hard in the pockets of his robes that he can feel the blunt edges of his nails biting into his palm.

*Focus.*

It gets better, he reminds himself. And he knows it does. *He knows.* He can go entire days now without seeing the dead lined up on the floor of the Great Hall.

He shuts his eyes and counts to one hundred, breathing in and out with every count of ten. He lets himself have that long to free fall through his memories, to stumble at the sight and sounds of what had once been home and now feels vibrant and there but fuzzy and *wrong*.

He had not been in the twins' dorm frequently, preferring to ignore all spaces that he didn't consider his own, but he'd been dragged in their often enough by Ron or the twins themselves for one reason or another that he has no trouble finding the right room. It's just as he remembers it. Lee is the only other boy in their year so it's just the three beds in a row. Lee's is on one end, an enormous terrarium sitting to one side housing the spider the size of a small cat, and looking positively tidy compared to the explosion of books, papers, clothes, and what feels like every random thing one could think of over on the twins' side.

Harry pulls his wand from his pocket. "*Accio*, Marauder's Map," he commands, not really expecting it to work. The twins aren't the sort to leave something valuable where it can be summoned, not even at thirteen, but even if it's locked up it should...

The trunk at the foot of the bed in the middle rattles rather promisingly.

"Gotcha," he breathes.

He casts quickly, the spells falling out of his mouth in rote. They're primarily post-Hogwarts level spells that Hermione had taught him once upon a time, spells that she had put together through her research and – he suspects – careful, methodical interrogation of the Order's aurors that are meant to reveal the presence of various hexes, curses, and wards.

The worn trunk practically glows in response and if he really focuses, he can practically see the lines of magic tangled around the trunk and woven through it: a shifting, living net that is vaguely reminiscent of a tangle of Devil's Snare.

Harry sighs, unsurprised. None of it's harmful, not really, but if he's not careful he's going to end up turning a bunch of funny colors and/or sporting some very uncomfortable boils. He stares at the trunk for a moment, thinking. His wand hums in his hand, warm and alive and feeling a bit like static shocks where his fingers wrap around the wood.

For a moment he thinks about trying to do to the trunk what he did with the troll but he dismisses that thought quickly. He's not sure what sort of magical residue that leaves behind and what ways people have to track individual magic but he's pretty sure that if the entire dorm room turns up frozen and shattered that Snape, Dumbledore, and McGonagall will inevitably draw a connection between that and his 'accidental magic'. Which would defeat the whole purpose of sneaking in here.

He could undo the spells. He thinks. Probably. It would just take a while – not much but still more than he probably has. Or...

He focuses on the trunk, on the faint of hum of magic he can sense surrounding it, on the warmth of his wand in his hand, and on how much he wants to be able to get at the map inside. He can practically see it: the familiar folds of thick parchment bumping against the cage of rudimentary protections, can feel the way it would sit in his hands, weathered and soft with frequent handling. The map is *his*. The Marauders are incapacitated in one way or another. It belongs with him and there is nothing but buzzing weave of magic between them.

He focuses on that, on the hum and buzz of it, of the way it feels warm and skitters across his senses like the residue of a lightning strike when he takes a step closer. He focuses on how much he *wants it gone*.

“*Depulso*,” he hears the word before he realizes that he’s saying it. It just falls out of his mouth on the exhale, a breathy little sigh that pulls his magic out with it. There’s a brief moment of panic somewhere in the back of his head because the banishing charm is for *objects*, not magic, but he pushes it away before it can distract him. One lesson he has learned, and learned well, is that *distraction* and *magic* make for a terrible, horrifying combination. Instead, he leans into the sensation, into the rush of his magic leaving through his wand. It is the same, yet different, as the sensation of Halloween, of his magic spilling out from the hollow above his heart. This is warmer magic and it moves with purpose. Out of his wand and down around the trunk: once and twice and once again more until he can almost feel the twins’ magic beneath his: both fragile and tenacious.

*Pop!*

It's not an audible sound, not really, but he feels it in his ears like the shift of pressure.

Harry blinks and moves his wand through the motions of the detection spells, mouthing them quietly.

The trunk remains, unadorned and mundane, protected by nothing but a lock.

Huh.

He takes a step forward.

*Click!*

The lid pops open. He barely has to extend his wand, the mere thought of an *accio* hovering in his mind and suddenly, there it is.

Harry catches it out of the air and smiles, the folds falling open in his hands.

“I solemnly swear I am up to no good,” he breathes and grins at the lines of ink that burst into being beneath his wand.

He’s in and out of Gryffindor Tower in a quarter of an hour, the map secured in the pocket of his trousers. In an abandoned classroom near the library he removes the disillusionment

charm and resizes his potions essay and, clutching that in his fist, he returns to his friends.

“You found it!” Hannah grins as he slides back into his seat and Harry can’t help but return the gesture, his lips spread so wide that it feels like his face is breaking.

“Yeah,” he agrees. “I found it.”

---

*“So you get your map. Then what?”*

*“Unicorn blood.”*

*“Interesting,” Death murmurs and Harry can’t stop himself from glancing up, from checking if the being is genuine or if he simply humoring Harry like a small child. Death stares back, dark eyes soft but gleaming, still content to wait. “Why unicorn blood?”*

*“Well...” Harry lets out a shaky breath. “I have a theory,” he admits. Truthfully, he has lots of theories but this one in particular is a lynchpin of hope on which most of his reasoning turns. Slowly he gathers his thoughts and tries to lay them out in a way that they make sense, unable to escape the sensation that if he just explains it the correct way than it will make his theory true. “Unicorns are... pure. They’re good: really, truly good in a way that isn’t really comprehensible. Where a phoenix’s tears heal, a unicorn’s blood strengthens, right? That’s why Voldemort started killing unicorns and drinking their blood. Getting his body back was taking too long and he was getting too weak. Hagrid said it was a curse – that killing something so pure put a mark on you that could never be removed. That you were doomed to a half-life.” Harry takes a deep breath and wraps his arms around his waist, hugging himself as he stares, unseeing, at the wall. “I think that curse is what drives Voldemort mad.”*

*“Drives?” Death prompts gently. “You don’t think him mad already?”*

*Harry laughs, something sharp and broken as he squeezes himself tighter. Death’s arm is a cold but comforting weight as it comes around his shoulder, beckoning him closer.*

*“Yes. No,” he laughs again. “I think Voldemort...I think Tom is a lot of things. I think he’s angry and cruel and tired and desperate. I think he is terrified. I think he’s always been terrified. I don’t know,” Harry waves his hand vaguely and leans into Death’s side. “Maybe I’m projecting but I think he’s been taught over and over again that he’s different. That he is freak,” Harry spits the word with so much venom that he shakes. “And no one has ever bothered to show him otherwise. Not in the muggle world and certainly not in ours. I’ve seen the memories and I know that where Dumbledore looked and saw nothing but an unfeeling monster I saw a desperate child who hoped, just for a moment, that he had found a place where he would belong. And I got to watch that hope die.”*

*He still dreams about it sometimes, buried amongst the nightmares of Voldemort’s resurrection and Sirius falling through the veil and Dumbledore begging Harry to stop feeding him the potion. He dreams about the look on Tom Riddle’s face when Dumbledore sets his meager belongings – stolen or otherwise -on fire. He dreams about the way the boy had folded in on himself, about the way the burgeoning light in his eyes had gone out.*

*Would Harry have been any different? If, instead of a boisterous half-giant who had brought him cake and blustered at his abusers, he had been told about Hogwarts by a person of authority who believed that Harry was the criminal Vernon and Petunia delighted in painting him as? If his delight at finding the reason for all the strange things that happen around him had been crushed by Dumbledore making all of his carefully collected broken toys and tattered books burst into flames?*

*Maybe Dumbledore had learned from his mistakes after all.*

*The very idea makes Harry snort.*

*"I think he was and is a terrible man – great," Harry offers wryly, "but terrible. But I don't think he's broken. I don't think he is beyond reason. Not yet. I think that something happened between when Voldemort possessed Quirrell and when Voldemort rose from that cauldron." At the time they had all blurred together into the great faceless, formless cloud of Lord Voldemort that consumed his life but now that he has taken the time to look back there is very clearly a division separating the man into 'before resurrection' and 'after resurrection'.*

*That's not to say that the Tom Riddle that existed before resurrection had been a good person. Harry's not sure it's possible for the man to be a good person - Harry's not even sure he knows what good is anymore – but the resurrected Voldemort had been a creature crazed: blind and drunk on bloodlust, hyper focused and demanding in ways that didn't even make sense.*

*"I think it was the unicorn blood. I think he couldn't escape the stain of existing on ill-gotten blood and it...warped him. Because everything I know about Tom Riddle suggests that he was logical and cunning, cold and distant but equally passionate and so fucking brilliant. But the resurrected Voldemort that I fought against? He was none of those things. I think that's the price he paid for daring to kill a unicorn." Harry takes a deep breath and looks up at Death. "You say you know everything so I'm asking: am I wrong?"*

*He's not sure what he will do if he's wrong. Go forward with his plan, most certainly. He's committed now. He'll kill the Dark Lord if he has to but he would rather find a way for them to exist together in a world marked by a great deal less killing and mass destruction. Finding out that Tom Riddle is exactly what Dumbledore believes him to be – a monster beyond hope or help – would be a blow that Harry is not sure he could recover from. Because if Tom is forever destined to become what he did then what hope is there for Harry – Harry, who is so entwined with the Dark Lord - to be something different?*

*"You're not wrong," Death says.*

*"Oh." Were it not for Death's arm around his shoulder, Harry would have collapsed beneath the weight of his own relief. "Well that's... that's..." Good does not feel big enough to cover it.*

*"I mean, it's not that simple, darling – that's not everything," Death continues with a wave of his hand. "There's the horcruxes, the modifications he made to himself – both intentionally and accidentally - the learned sociopathy, and the sheer mindfuck of existing without a body for a decade all piled up on top of some truly shitty mental health but you're not wrong."*

*Harry wants to laugh. He wants to cry. He does neither. "I can work with not wrong," he murmurs. "Not wrong is good."*

*Very, very good.*

*But it also means...*

*"I can't let him kill a unicorn," Harry announces. "He hasn't done that yet, has he?"*

*Death shakes his head. "No, he has not. He recognizes the danger but he and Quirrell are growing dangerously weak. Soon, he won't feel that he has a choice."*

*"Right," Harry acknowledges with a bob of his head. "I'm going to ask the unicorns to give it to me."*

*"And if they don't?"*

*Harry sighs unhappily. "Then I'm going to spend a truly shocking number of galleons to buy some. But it will better, I think, if it's freely given specifically for him."*

*"Well," Death hums again. "You're not wrong."*

---

Talking a unicorn into gifting him some of its blood presents Harry with two main problems besides the obvious issue of *talking it into giving him blood*. First, being able to find the bloody things in the extensive sprawl of the Forbidden Forest and second, getting away from his friends. Again.

Hagrid could probably tell him the answer to the first but Harry is wary of approaching the half giant who introduced him to the wizarding world. He loves Hagrid, he does, but the man is Dumbledore's through and through and if Harry, after having never spoken to the Groundskeeper – to his knowledge, anyway – were to suddenly pop up and starting asking questions about unicorns... well. He imagines that the Headmaster would hear about it.

Which would be bad.

So, Hagrid is out, which means that Harry is on his own. Unless he wants to ask Death – a possibility which makes Harry wary for a different reason. Death would tell him. Death would probably *lead* him to the unicorns if asked and somehow that just seems *too* easy and the ease of it makes Harry nervous. So he shelves the idea of Death for several days and retreats to the library and the Depository, reading through books on magical creatures as quickly as he as he can get his hands on them. It's fascinating and he's unashamed to admit that he's distracted more than once by the non-unicorn information but after three days, having absorbed enough information on the gleaming white creatures to write an essay that would do Hermione proud, he's forced to admit that he simply doesn't have enough *time* to find the unicorns on his own.

He can almost feel Death's arm wrapped around his shoulders the moment after he realizes this and hear the endless being's low laugh tickling at his ears.

Harry rolls his eyes.

Which leaves him with problem number two.

The issue of his friends does not prove nearly as troublesome this time. This time, slipping away after one of his shorter physical therapy sessions – Tuesday's appointment isn't nearly as grueling as Friday's – is the perfect answer.

He leaves as he normally does and even goes as far as taking the stairs from the entrance hall that lead down to the dungeon before ducking into an alcove just beyond the first corner. Once there, he takes a discreet look at the map to ensure the way outside is clear, disillusioning himself – and Merlin, he really misses his cloak – and heads back towards the secondary entrance most commonly used by Hagrid and the first years. It opens out on the northwest side of the school, facing out towards the lake with the bulk of the Forbidden Forest stretching to his right. Overhead, the waning moon glows beyond a faint cloud cover, dousing the entire world in a kaleidoscope of grays and silvers. It hasn't snowed yet, not properly, so at least he doesn't have to worry about leaving a path of his footprints behind him.

The air is cold against his face and he raises the hood of his cloak against the wind sweeping up the rise of the hill and pulling at him. Something eases at its touch, the bite of it making something in relax like a dog coming home. Or perhaps like finally being able to stretch out muscles that he hadn't known were cramped. It smells like the Void, Harry realizes after a moment of thought. It smells like that endless, indescribable place - like ice and snow and darkness.

"A beautiful night," Death murmurs from beside him and Harry turns, unsurprised at his sudden appearance. How could he be when he can feel the whispers of the expanse swirling about him? Death is in everything, or so the being had said. Tonight is the first time that Harry finds himself believing it. It's impossible not to. "Hello, darling."

"Death," Harry greets with a smile of his own. This is the third time they have met and there's still a corner of Harry's brain that is more or less reduced to blubbling, babbling mush if he starts to think too long the specifics of the situation and who he is speaking with but the rest of him is quietly awed at someone who effortlessly and possessing of no expectations is just...there. For *him*. It makes him shake a little. "Can you lead me to the unicorns?" Harry asks and Death grins: a slow, sly thing that is both pleased and full of teeth.

"Of course." Death's hand is cool against Harry's, his grip gentle but sure as he twines their fingers together and gives a gentle tug. "This way."

Harry goes.

Death moves quickly, picking his way unerringly over the uneven ground. Harry grips his hand and follows in his footsteps as he winds his way down the hill the castle sets upon and across the expanse of half manicured, leaf strewn lawns that cover the ground between the castle and the forest. They don't speak. Not only unnecessary but unwanted on a night like this, when the grate of human voices have the power to rob the world of the magic that hangs suspended in a spell that can never be replicated: deep and endless and still.



They have been walking through the forest for at least half an hour when Death draws to a stop.

“There,” he murmurs, drawing Harry up next to him and leaning down so that when he points Harry can easily follow the line of his finger. Faintly, in the bits of moonlight that manage to filter through the twist of barren branches and pine he can the barest hint of luminescent white. “I can’t get closer without upsetting them. Not like this, anyway,” he adds and Harry feels the quirk of his mouth more than sees it.

“That’s okay,” Harry bobs his head. “You’ll wait for me?” The idea of having to find his way back to the castle on his own is daunting.

Death squeezes his hand. “Of course, darling.” It takes Harry a moment to make himself let go of his hand but Death doesn’t seem to mind, quietly standing with in Harry in the shifting shadows of the woods. He would probably stand there until the earth died. He would stand there even longer, waiting for Harry.

The idea is both warming and terrifying.

Harry takes a deep breath and let’s go, taking the first step forward on his own. A stick cracks beneath his feet and he winces, the noise unbearably loud.

“*Lumos*,” he breathes and focuses on only letting the smallest bit of his magic to move through his wand. The tip glows faintly at his urging, just barely enough to let him make sense of the shadows at his feet. Even that feels too bright. He doesn’t like the way it intrudes, the way it makes him feel like curling up inside. But he has to see or he’s going to fall flat on his face, scare the unicorns and then where would he be?

*Alone in the fucking forest.*

Well, Harry amends with a glance behind him. *Not alone.*

The herd of unicorns is a smaller one: a handful of adults so white that it almost hurts to look at them. There are two juveniles as well, the hints of gold still clinging to hooves, manes, tails, and even the hollows of their flanks. He thinks there might be an actual foal hidden there in the shadows of one of the adults. Harry has less than a minute to take in the sight of them nestled down in beds of moss and dead leaves before one of the adult stirs. A male, likely the herd stallion, with a horn as long as Harry’s arm. They might be light creatures but Harry doesn’t doubt that it could gut him in half a second and leave all of his insides scattered across the clearing.

It huffs at Harry as it gives itself a mighty shake that sends his hide rippling like waves of starlight. Harry swallows nervously and takes another step forward before bowing – *deeply* – and then lowering himself to the ground. The earth is cold and damp beneath his knees, the muffled noise of dead and dampened leaves catching the attention of the other unicorns as they begin to stir, the stallion standing angled between them and Harry.

“I mean you no harm,” Harry whispers and his voice sounds loud in the clearing, less like thunder and more like the feeling that hangs in the air behind it, “and I am sorry to disturb

you but I have come to beg your favor.”

The stallion huffs, one foot digging unhappily at the half-frozen ground. Behind the other adults have gotten to their feet and circled around the unmistakable flash of gold, horns pointed out. The juveniles watch him, dark eyes bright with curiosity.

Harry leans forward and sets his wand on the ground before him. Cut off from the flow of his magic the *lumos* fades and leaves them in naught but moonlight.

*Highly intelligent*, all the books had agreed on that.

*They are highly perceptive*, Newt Scamander had written, *and posses a greater understanding of our words than we do ourselves. A greater purity cannot be found and the light of it burns away imperfections until nothing is left but the truth.*

He very desperately hopes that Newt Scamander is as right about this as he is about most things when it comes to magical non-humans.

“I make a petition on behalf of another,” Harry tells them and once he starts talking he can't stop. The words fall out of his mouth one after another, relentless and more frantic than he would like but he can't stop them. Wouldn't stop them even if he could. “There is a man in the castle. He is weak, without a body of his own. You probably know who he is. He is not a good man – or he wasn't. I don't know that he will ever be a good man but he is a brilliant one and powerful, powerful enough to change the course of the future. I've seen it,” he tells them, licking his lips nervously as the stallion draws nearer, lips pulled back and teeth gleaming. “I've lived it. The whole world gone mad. Hogwarts turned into a warzone, the grounds covered in the dead. Human and creature both. Entire generations lost. I plan to stop it. I plan to make sure we never get there again. That's my promise, regardless of whether I have your help or not. But I can't do it alone. I'm powerful but I don't know how to use it. I don't have the experience. I don't have the knowledge or the leverage. I need that. I need *Him*. Will you help me? Will you please help keep him strong until he can be returned to his body?”

The stallion is in front of him now, so close that Harry can feel its breath on his head, his vision consumed with the strong white legs rising up to the deep chest and the powerful arch of its neck. A single dark eye stares down at him and he feels it right down to his soul. It feels like legilimency and yet is completely different. Legilimency had felt like having his head battered in. This is *more*, an all-encompassing pressure that just squeezes and squeezes and *squeezes* until he's condensed and reduced to practically nothing.

And then it stops.

Harry falls to his hands and knees, gasping in the frigid air as if he has not breathed in minutes. Hours. Maybe he hasn't.

Something warm hits the top of his hand.

Harry blinks.

There, pearlescent and shining, is a drop of blood on the back of his hand. A glance upwards reveals a small, thin cut on the stallion's flank. The silver-blue blood is dark in comparison to the white of his coat, bubbling up in a steady stream and trickling down the creature's side.

"Thank you," Harry breathes, stealing a glance at the stallion's face. *"Thank you."*

With some fumbling he manages to pull a vial from his pocket and enlarge it with little more than a thought as he staggers to his feet. Carefully, gently, he presses the lip of the vial just below the cut and watches as the miraculous liquid flows into the charmed glass. He collects nearly a liter before the stallion pulls away. More than twice what he'd dared hope to collect or feared he might have to buy. Reverently he replaces the stopper and seals it shut.

"Thank you," he says again and his voice breaks, cracks right down the center. "You don't know what this means to me."

Or maybe the stallion does. It lets out another huff, lips drawn back in disdain as it paws at the ground. Harry doesn't need to speak unicorn to understand. He has been given a gift. It will not happen again.

Unicorns are creatures of light and purity, of strength and life and unwavering good.

Tom Marvolo Riddle is not.

Harry is not.

Harry never will be. He has ascended to a different pinnacle.

But for now, just for this moment, they were able to meet in the dark and the quiet of a forest and Harry will never forget.

"See," Death murmurs when he returns, their hands fitting together seamlessly. "I told you that you would get it, darling. Now, let's get you back to the castle before Severus begins to look for you."

---

*"The odds are in your favor. Technically. Unicorns are Light Creatures and you definitely are...not but you're also still a virgin, darling, and you look like a child." Harry sputters uncomfortably, feeling himself go bright red. Death just pats him on the back absentmindedly. "And your intentions are admirable. Always an important thing with unicorns. Let's just assume your success there. So, step one: map. Step two: unicorn blood. What's step three?"*

*"Step three?" Harry rubs his hand over burning cheeks. "Step three is something reckless."*

*"Oh?" Death perks up and turns to look at him, mouth quirking upwards in blatant amusement. "Darling," he teases, "I thought you were giving that sort of thing up."*

*"So did I," Harry mutters, a smile of his own pulling at his lips. "Apparently you can take the boy out of Gryffindor but you can't take the Gryffindor out of the boy. I don't see any other way forward though – not that gets us to where we need to be." Harry sighs. "Where I want us to be."*

*“And what is this reckless thing that you think you must do?”*

*Harry leans forward and lays his hand on the wall, fingers spread wide enough to cover the sloppy curves of his handwriting. The chalk is dusty beneath his skin, dry in a way that clings. He'll be dusting it from his hand all day.*

*“I have to speak to the Dark Lord.”*

---

“Are you sure you don't want to come home with me?” Draco asks, peering at him intently as they gather in the entrance hall. “You'll be more than welcome at the Manor.”

Somehow, Harry doubts it but he's also certain that both Narcissa and Lucius would try to make him feel welcome for their son's sake despite any misgivings they might have on welcoming The Boy Who Lived into their home. Maybe someday he'll get to build memories of Malfoy Manor that don't feature torture and desperation but it won't happen this holiday season.

“Thanks Draco,” Harry tells the other boy sincerely, “but I'll be fine. I'm looking forward to it, actually. Don't sneer at me,” he adds when Draco does exactly that, though it lacks the bitter edge of their last life. If anything, Harry is beginning to view the nose-in-the-air, I'm-better-than-you-peasant look of superiority as an action of affection. “I'm serious. Good food, a few presents, the castle practically empty and two weeks to do whatever I want? It'll be the best holiday I've ever had.”

It's not until he says the words that he realizes that they're the truth. He thinks of most of his Hogwarts' Christmases fondly – except the Yule Ball in the fourth year, perhaps – but they are tainted in their own by how things turned out, by what everyone had become by the end.

“That's sad,” Mandy tells him bluntly and Blaise gives him a speculative look over her shoulder.

“You can come home with me if you want. Any of you,” the taller boy adds with a flick of his eyes to where Neville is standing, hunched in his cloak and staring at the doors like he expects them to bite him. It is obvious to anyone who knows him that he is of mixed feelings on leaving for the break. Knowing that a trip to St Mungos waits in his future, Harry can't say that he blames him. “*Mamma* loves having people over.”

“Oh, we'll have do something later in the break!” Hannah pipes up as she and Susan join them. “It would be so strange to go the whole two weeks without seeing everyone. You sure you don't want to come with? Or you could go with Susan!”

“You could finally justify Aunt Millie having a dedicated guest room,” Susan nods along as if she hasn't just been volunteered for hosting someone in her home for two weeks. “She'd be thrilled.”

It's tempting, Harry has to admit, and any other time he would probably take her up on the offer. Or Draco. Or Blaise. And maybe next year he will but this year he has important things to do.

“I appreciate the offers. Really, I do,” Harry smiles at them and automatically leans into Hannah when she bounds over and gives him a hug. “But I’ll be fine. Maybe the next year.”

Draco’s look is nothing but suspicious. “Promise?”

Harry doesn’t laugh. He doesn’t but it’s a close thing. “Promise.”

Satisfied by that the other boy gives him a nod and a hug, which seems to be a signal for the rest of the group to start hugging Harry as well. It’s kind of stifling but he endures it, something warm swelling in his heart at the blatant affection. When he finds himself facing Neville he hugs him a little harder. “It will be okay,” he murmurs and Neville stares at him, pale faced and wide-eyed. “And if it isn’t, you can always run off to Hannah’s. Or Blaise’s.”

“Y-yeah,” Neville agrees with a glance at Blaise. “I know.”

“No one will need to be running anywhere if you do not *get on the train*.” Snape’s voice makes everyone except for Harry jump but Hannah beams at him regardless.

“Hello professor!” she greets and Snape glares hard enough to make some passing Ravenclaws move a little faster, their eyes widening as they throw worried glances over their shoulders. Snape’s glare is a fearsome thing but there’s no actual venom to it that Harry can see. Hannah must see the same – either that, or she’s simply decided that Snape isn’t much different than Blaise’s carnivorous plant and that the best way to approach him is with crooning and snacks.

Oh, Merlin, Harry would literally *pay* to watch Hannah offer Snape a snack and passively aggressively bully him into eating. He would pay *so much*.

“Happy Christmas!” Hannah continues, still beaming.

“Unless I have missed the passing of several days, it is not Christmas Miss Abbott,” Snape pauses, lips twisted in a sneer, “and I doubt you will have a happy Christmas unless you manage to remember how your legs function and get down to the train.”

“Of course, sir,” Hannah nods like they’re sharing a great secret, just the two of them. “We just had to say good-bye to Harry. He’s staying behind!”

“I am aware.”

“We’ll all be staying behind if we don’t do as the professor says,” Mandy tells them. “So make up your mind because if we’re staying I’m letting Thea out of her carrier.”

A very plaintive yowl rises up from the wicker carrier resting at Mandy’s feet.

Snape’s mouth twitches.

“Yes, yes, we’re going,” Blaise says, waving his hand. “You sure you want to stay?”

Harry sighs. He wants to be annoyed, he really does, but instead he knows he’s smiling. Something small and *real*.

“Yeah,” he says. “I’m sure. I’ll see you lot in a couple of weeks. Now get.” He makes a shooing motion with his hands and with a chorus of laughter, and another round of good-byes and a shouted mess of “Happy Christmas” and “Blessed Yule” directed at Snape the group finally departs the nearly empty entrance hall and hurries after the line of students making their way down to Hogsmeade and the train station.

Beside him Snape relaxes. Just a little.

“I must see them all to the station,” he says suddenly and Harry blinks.

“...okay,” he manages when it becomes obvious that the professor is waiting for a response.

“I will be out of the castle for a good portion of today and again tomorrow evening. There are two other Slytherin students staying over the holiday: Mr. Anderson and Mr. Entley are both seventh years.” Harry nods. He’s pretty sure he knows who Snape is talking about. He doesn’t spend a lot of time with the upper years obviously, but he recognizes the names because Thorfinn Rowle has the annoying habit of belting out the names of his friends and dormmates every time he enters the common room and they happen to already be there. “If, for any reason, you need something go to my office. The wards will let you through and make me aware of your presence.”

It takes Harry a long minute or three to realize that Snape is giving him a safe place to retreat to, safer even than the dorms. A safe place and a way to call for help should he need it while his head of house is gone. He swallows roughly.

“Thank you, sir. I’m sure I’ll be fine though.”

Snape raises a disbelieving eyebrow. “Ambitious, Mr. Potter?”

“That’s what the Sorting Hat said,” Harry replies cheekily and is rewarded with the faint twitch there, off the side of Snape’s mouth that says he wants to smile but isn’t letting himself.

After Snape leaves, striding out into the cold, fat flakes of snow beginning to drift down from the sky, Harry heads up to the owlery to visit Hedwig and distract himself, the jitter of anticipation and nerves beginning to make his stomach churn.

Tonight. He has to act tonight before Quirrell and Voldemort do something that can’t be undone.

If he doesn't think too long on it he's fine. He's fine.

Harry swallows and runs a finger down the sleek, downy lines of Hedwig's feathers as she nibbles at his hair.

He's fine.

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It’s only eight in the evening but with most of the students gone the castle is quiet and dim in their absence. Fewer candles light the corridors and even the portraits seem to be quieter,

their conversations a low hum as Harry passes by. He feels a bit like he had that day in the Forbidden Forest, the day he had died, except he doesn't. He had felt hollowed out and numb. It hadn't been shock, he'd been beyond that, but it hadn't been dissimilar. He had been empty, everything but his true purpose stripped away and discarded. He had been nothing. He had been inevitable.

He feels inevitable now, every step he takes silencing the bubbles of anxiety that fizz and pop in his gut. He feels like he has been circling for months: a hawk searching for its prey from high in the sky. Around and around and around it goes. But now he's found it and he's entered that final curve before he turns toward the ground. With every step he takes he feels surer, more solid inside his own skin.

This is where he is supposed to be. This is what he's supposed to be doing.

A single vial of unicorn blood – one of two dozen, the other twenty-three carefully stored and hidden in his flat – shifts in his trouser pocket.

The whole of the castle seems to be holding its breath as he makes his way to the sixth floor and one of the entrances to Quirrell's office. He pauses in front of the enormous oak door, the inky black of the hardware polished until it seems to suck in the light, and forces himself to take a deep breath.

*Knock. Knock. Knock.*

Harry raps on the door firmly, but politely. It's likely that Quirrell isn't even in his office but unless the castle changes the configuration of things for every professor – a distinct possibility, he admits – then the man's private quarters will be attached to his office and hopefully he'll either hear Harry knocking or have some sort of ward up that will alert him to a student's presence. He hopes, anyways.

Harry really doesn't want to start this off by pounding on Voldemort's door.

A slightly hysterical giggle falls out of his mouth. Oh, Merlin.

*[Breathe, darling.]*

He's managed to get himself under control – or at least managed to stop himself from falling into hysterical fits of laughter in the middle of the corridor – by the time the door opens.

Quirrell looks like shit.

The man has always been a bit pale but he's practically waxen, all hollowed out and translucent and... and...

Harry blinks and the image wavers, the more familiar image of Quirrell – pale, but round cheeked and looking more like he should be one of the students instead of one of the professors.

“Oh,” says Harry as he eyes the glamor that's slipped into place. “You're very good.” That's to be expected though. Harry doesn't know much about Quirrell as a wizard but Tom

Marvolo Riddle has never been a slouch.

Quirrell's eyes narrow. "M-Mr. P-p-potter. W-what c-can I d-do f-for you?"

Harry tips his head slightly to the side and stares up at the man. For once he doesn't try to make himself small, unnoticeable. This is not a time to be overlooked. "Can I come in professor?" he asks, "I was hoping to talk."

He's pleased and rather surprised when Quirrell steps back to let him in.

The office is... nice. Of all the variations he has seen it pass through, from frills and lace and pink plates to every dark magic detector known to man, this is probably his favorite. It's a comfortable room of shining wood and soft brown leather, shelves full of books, and neat stacks of parchment sitting on the man's desk. There's a rug on the floor, rich and blue, that Harry's feet practically sink into as he walks across it and a fire glowing warm and red in the fireplace, the mantle adorned with pieces of rock and crystal and stone statues nearly indistinct with age. It feels calm and comfortable. Safe.

Not exactly how he would have pictured an office shared by Lord Voldemort. He would have expected a great deal more dead things, a more general air of intimidation and greatness. Something like Snape's office, if he's being honest.

Behind him the door clicks shut.

"W-w-well, P-potter?" Quirrell asks after several moments of staring at each other in silence. "Y-you w-w-wished to s-speak to m-me?"

"My apologies for being unclear, professor, but it is not you that I wish to speak with," Harry replies with a shake of his head. He lifts his eyes from Quirrell's face and stares past it to the brilliant, deep purple of the man's turban. He doesn't need to imagine a snake anymore to make this work. Talking so much with Inigo has given him the confidence and ability to let parseltongue fall out of his mouth, smooth and easy as he adds, "*I'm here to talk to you, Tom Marvolo Riddle.*"

Harry can practically feel the wind whistling past his face: a hawk after its prey, a seeker diving for a snitch.

This is how it begins.

## Chapter End Notes

... and it only took ~120k words to get them to speak to each other!

Next chapter picks up right where this one leaves off.



# Eighteen

## Chapter Notes

My birthday is this week and as a gift to myself I gave myself permission to ignore the real world for a bit and finish up this chapter. In my notes this chapter is described as "Harry and Tom talk. It doesn't go how Harry expects."

Also, IndigoPari drew [THIS](#) lovely picture of Harry's ring and I <3 it!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The reaction to his words is instantaneous.

One moment Harry is standing across from his professor and the next he is not.

Quirrell is an unremarkable man. That's not a commentary on his competency or ability, though Harry certainly has opinions on both, but a statement: Quirrell is unremarkable. And he has probably taken care to remain that way. He is of an average height and rarely stands straight to begin with. He's always curled in on himself, just a little: head lowered, shoulders rounded. He speaks little outside of classes, probably because of his stutter, and when he does it is quiet and brief. Outside of his stutter the most memorable thing about him is the fact that if you don't notice the faint lines beginning to form around his eyes he could easily pass for a sixth or seventh year student.

The man across from Harry right now might be wearing the same face, the same body, but it isn't Quirrell. In less time than it takes to blink, Quirrell is gone and Harry is left with someone else.

Someone much more familiar.

It's not the right body but that doesn't matter. Harry would recognize that sharp, predatory elegance anywhere, in any form. Recognize that posture, the careful position, the artful tip of their head. It's not the right wand but that doesn't matter. Harry would know that loose grip, that carefully casual grace anywhere. He sees it in his sleep. It doesn't matter that it's still Quirrell's body and a golden hued wand. Harry knows who this is, would know it blind and deaf just from the way magic suddenly creeps around the room like a rising tide.

Voldemort.

*There you are*, he breathes to himself and fights the urge to weep and laugh beneath the flood of relief – conflicted and fear tinged, but relief all the same – that washes over him.

*"How do you know that name?"* the man demands and it's Quirrell's voice but Harry has never heard it sound like that: stutter free and almost lyrical. It still feels odd, feels *not right*

to hear parseltongue in its mellow tenor instead of Tom's rumbling baritone.

*"You told it to me, years ago,"* Harry replies evenly.

*"I am quite certain that anyone I told that name to is decades older than you,"* Voldemort purrs in response, tipping his head further as he studies Harry with a look that surely sees all the way down to his soul. *"They are all silenced, one way or another. Loyal. Imprisoned. Dead. I have told no children. Not since long before you were born."*

*"You told me that you hated it,"* Harry replies calmly, thinking back to that day in the Chamber of Secrets. *"You told me that you hated being named for your worthless muggle father and so you abandoned his name and made one of your own choosing. I know who you are, Lord Voldemort."*

If he thought to catch the man off guard again he has failed. Instead, the Dark Lord sweeps closer, wand twisting between his fingertips as he circles. *"Then I am afraid you have me at a disadvantage,"* he murmurs as he prowls around and around him, forcing Harry to continuously turn to face him. *"You wear no glamor and have not been transfigured. Not Polyjuice either, I suspect. There is very little magic on you at all and what there is... a metamorphmagus perhaps?"* He muses. He's close enough now that Harry can feel the shifting air currents caused by his passing. Harry shivers. *"Tell me who does Dumbledore have sneaking around inside the body of Harry Potter? And how can you possibly speak to me thus?"*

*"No one,"* Harry growls and holds out his hand. Urggrat had said that the ring would be visible to those who knew of it. Surely it counts if Harry tells them that it exists. *"I am no one but myself. Harry James Potter: Heir Peverell, Heir Slytherin, and Heir Potter."*

The soft, silent punch of an exhale is one of the most gratifying things Harry has ever heard. The frozen, stunned look of surprise on Quirrell's face is enough to almost make him feel bad for springing it on the man like this. Almost.

Harry's not stupid. He's under no illusion of besting Tom Riddle. Not in an all-out duel and certainly not in a Slytherin battle of cunning and wit. The only weapon he has in this discussion is the truth itself. If he has any hope of getting Tom on his side, of getting him to *listen* then he's going to have to keep the other man off balanced just long enough to make him interested. To make him hungrier for answers than for anything else – even more than the chance to kill his prophesized enemy – and then to give them to him.

*"How?"* Voldemort demands, staring at his hand.

*"Peverell is easy enough to explain. Ignotus' granddaughter married a Potter. As for the Slytherin connection..."* Harry shrugs because honestly he's still baffled. It might be because of the horcrux. It might not. He doesn't know. *"Maybe they mixed in with the Potters somewhere or maybe my mum is descended from a squib line. I have no idea. It was a surprise to me too. I've always been able to speak to snakes though. I thought all wizards could do it until everyone made a big deal of it in my second year."*

Quirrell's eyes narrow speculatively. *"You are a child. A first year."*

*"My body is. I'm older than I look."* Not much, but enough to count. If he bothers to count the Horcrux he could argue that part of him is over sixty.

*"Fascinating."* Voldemort prowls closer, close enough that Harry can feel the heat of his skin and the ruffle of the man's breath against his hair. *"You killed the troll,"* Voldemort murmurs in his ear. *"Dumbledore insisted it was accidental magic but it wasn't, was it? You still smell of the Void."*

*"Dea..."* Harry pauses, remembers who he is speaking with and corrects himself, swallowing roughly. *"Darkness is in everything."*

*"Dangerous words to speak in this place,"* cautions Voldemort. *"Dangerous words for just a child."*

*"I'm not a child,"* Harry insists. *"I've never been a child. You saw to that."*

The corner of Voldemort's mouth ticks upward. *"Angry?"*

*"Not anymore,"* Harry admits, ignoring both the build and relief of saying it out loud. *"I've made my peace with their ghosts. I spent years seeking vengeance. Thinking that I had to. I know how that story ends. I didn't like it."*

*"You think to know the future?"* Harry thinks the disdain in Voldemort's voice is a little much for someone who hunted down and tried to murder a toddler based on a few lines of prophecy.

*"I've lived it,"* Harry retorts and holds his arms out in welcome. *"Fill me up with veritaserum, put me under any oath you wish my answer stays the same: I've lived it. I spent seven years being the Gryffindor hero. Seven years fighting against my parents' killing. Seven years fighting for the future of the Wizarding World. Not that there was much left by the end."*

Voldemort pauses in front of him, so close that Harry can smell nothing but the garlic Quirrell keeps in his turban, and tips his head down so that they're nearly level with each other. *"So now you've come to destroy me before I regain my power."*

*"No,"* Harry shakes his head so hard it hurts. *"I told you, I don't like how that story ended. I'm here to save you."* Voldemort raises an eyebrow. It looks odd on Quirrell's face. *"You're weak."*

In retrospect, the wand in his face is not unexpected.

*"I am not...!"*

*"You are!"* Harry cuts him off. *"Protest all you want, Tom, but I know how much it hurts to be possessed! Granted, I fought it which I don't think is the case with Quirrell but that doesn't change that you're weak. I know you're weak,"* Harry repeats firmly. *"I saw beneath your glamor."*

The glare on Quirrell's face is sharp enough to strip the flesh from Harry's bones. *"All the more reason to kill you."*

*"You could,"* Harry agrees softly. *"I don't recommend it."*

*"Oh? Because it's evil? Because it will taint my soul?"* The Dark Lord scoffs. *"Why should Lord Voldemort spare your life, Harry Potter?"*

*"Because I have a piece of your soul living in my head,"* Harry tells him bluntly and, reaching up, he pulls Quirrell's wand forward until he can feel the tip of it digging into his scar. Voldemort's face is frozen, the glamor fading away until – even though the bone structure is all wrong - the gaunt, skeletal face that is left looks closer the Dark Lord's snake face than to the masquerade of Quirrell's health, emotions flashing through hazel eyes faster than he can catch. *"Right here,"* he murmurs. *"It's part of me now. It's been part of me for as long as I can remember. Your horcrux."*

The name of it, the name of what Harry is, hits Voldemort like a blow.

*"How? How did you... Dumbledore,"* he hisses, scrambling, fingers digging into Harry's scalp as he clutches at his head. His hands are warm, practically feverish, as he frames Harry's face with them, the wand digging awkwardly into his ear and the side of his cheek. Quirrell doesn't start burning as they touch so that's a relief. Harry hadn't thought he would, had thought his mother's protection perhaps neutralized by Harry's own intentions – or maybe even by Voldemort's – but still, it's nice to not accidentally burn someone he's trying to ally with to a crisp.

*"They're safe,"* Harry promises lowly, gently. *"I swear it. Dumbledore doesn't figure out that you have horcruxes for at least another year, possibly longer, and if I have my way the incident that allows him to make that connection will never happen. They're safe, Tom. I'll keep them safe."*

*"Why?"* The question isn't even a whisper, it's barely a brush of the air in front of Quirrell's lips.

Because I want to put you back together instead of destroying you, Harry thinks.

Because I'm tired of fighting you.

Because you deserve to live outside of Dumbledore's whims, just like I do. Just like Snape does. Just like the whole of the wizarding world does.

But he doesn't say any of that. Instead, he offers the simplest of truths, *"Why would I not protect what is also mine?"*

It had been one thing to destroy them when he thought he was doing good. When they had been attacking him or simply formless: some vague piece of magic attached to an object.

But then...

Limbo. The baby beneath the bench, so desperate and alone.

Even now, Harry doesn't understand. He doesn't understand how Dumbledore could just expect him to *leave* it there. He doesn't understand how the old man had thought to form him

into someone who would kill, who would *die*, for what he saw as his – his world, his friends, his *family* – but then expected him to just leave that defenseless, mangled bit of him (*of Tom*) to cry itself into nothingness.

He could have gone back and lived the life he had fought so hard for, he could have gone forward and ended or perhaps met Death and experienced a different existence entirely but he hadn't. He'd chosen to pick up the horcrux. His horcrux.

Diary, ring, locket, cup, diadem. Him. Tom. They all, one way or another, belong to Harry. No. They are all *part* of Harry and Harry is a part of them.

Dumbledore trained him to do the impossible and then expected him to accept that nothing could be done.

He doesn't understand. He doesn't think he'll ever understand.

So he offers up the simplest and most basic of truths because he thinks Voldemort needs to hear it almost as much as he needs to say it.

And it is this, of all the things that Harry has said since he walked into Quirrell's office, that breaks the Dark Lord.

If it's any consolation, Harry is pretty sure that Voldemort is even more surprised than he is.

The only warning Harry gets is the brief tightening of the grip on his head and the way Quirrell's eyes widen minutely and then he falling. It's not stress or surprise knocking him off balance, it's more like the man suddenly simply *can't* stand up, his entire body just *dropping*. Harry catches him under the arms and holds him up and Merlin, the man weighs next to nothing. He feels delicate in Harry's hands, fragile in a familiar way that makes Harry's stomach churn uncomfortably. He knows what starvation feels like, how the limbs narrow until there's nothing left but the barest strings of flesh connecting joints that press too sharply through taunt and papery skin. His entire body is overly warm, not just his hands, which seems counterproductive to limited resources. Quirrell's body should be chilled, not fevered, but he is, his entire body like a furnace slicked with a sticky sheen of sweat, heart galloping unevenly in his chest.

"*Oh,*" Harry says gently, "*what have you done to yourself? Come on, let's get you sitting down.*"

In his arms Quirrell's body is beginning to recover from whatever dizzy spell has come over it and with that is a renewed sense of strength because now Voldemort *struggles*, trying to get out of Harry's hold. It should be awkward and ridiculous: a grown man and an eleven year old boy half grappling as the latter tries to carry the former over to the nearest chair but between their various stages of ill and recovering health the disparity in ages and sizes is rendered irrelevant, making the whole thing a little more evenly matched than Harry would like.

He's made it halfway to the chair but his nose is bleeding from being smacked with Quirrell's head and right now the Dark Lord inhabiting his body is throwing himself in the opposite

direction, using every bit of his body's diminished weight to drag himself down to the floor like a toddler pitching a fit in the middle of a shop aisle.

"Fucking hell!" Harry roars, parseltongue slipping when Quirrell's teeth find their way into the flesh of his arm, biting down so firmly that even between the padding of his robes and flesh he can feel the jar of the man's teeth against his arm bone. "Would you stop fighting me? I'm trying to *help you!*"

He's not sure if it's the crack of his voice: too deep for his small, scrawny chest or the words themselves but in his hands Voldemort ceases struggling and Harry just throws him the last few feet into the enormous leather chair.

"*I'm trying to help you,*" he repeats, dropping to his knees so that he can look into Quirrell's glassy eyes, listen to the frantic staccato of his breathing. Fingers shaking, he manages to get the vial out of his pocket and hold it up between them. "*Unicorn blood,*" he explains. "*Freely given. I'll give you whatever oath you wish to prove it.*"

In hindsight, given his bloody nose and the no doubt perfect indent of Quirrell's teeth in his arm coupled with the knowledge that Tom Riddle had grown up in a poor orphanage, had been little more than a street rat, he should have been expecting the attack. They stare at each other for the space of several minutes, the heavy silence of the room broken by their discordant breathing and the rush of Harry's blood in his ears and then Voldemort *lunges*.

Startled, Harry jerks back, but he doesn't go far enough and the Dark Lord gets his hands around Harry's face and squeezes, wrenching his head around but not...but not...

*Oh no*, Harry has the time to think before he's trapped beneath a hazel gaze.

And then Voldemort is in his head.

It's different than all the times in the future-past when the man has utilized their connection to manipulate Harry and it's different than his occlumency lessons with Snape. Those had hurt, had felt like a direct, pointed attack: a spear to the brain that Harry had been helpless to avoid even when he knew it was coming.

For the first time Harry realizes that despite their mutual dislike and distrust, Snape had been taking it *easy* on Harry because this... *this* is so much more.

If Snape's legilimency attack had been a spear, Voldemort's is a tsunami.

Later, once he has rested, Harry will look back and see the obvious improvement in his occlumency abilities. He will realize that he has managed to build shields around his mind: flimsy and rudimentary, perhaps, but definitely far more than he has ever managed before.

But that won't come until later.

Right now, he can't help but buckle beneath the force of Voldemort's attack and go down with him, dragged along and thrown about like debris bouncing off of boulders and buildings and sucked down to the bottom by the force of the current.

Snippets of the past several days pass before Harry's eyes: Draco laughing over dinner, Blaise prodding Inigo off of his Transfiguration essay with the point of his quill, Hannah beaming up at Snape, the sight of them all walking down towards Hogwarts...and then he finds the unicorns.

...White in the moonlight, a flash of gold, the length of Harry's wand lying in the snow, the words falling out of Harry's mouth, the bead of the stallion's blood as it wells out of his body. The slow crunch of leaf and twig beneath Harry's feet as he makes his way back through the woods to where...

No, Harry thinks and throws them sideways, spiraling end over end until they crash into something else.

...White in the moonlight, stretched out and limp on the forest floor. A dark shape hunched over it, wet sucking sounds piercing the air. The face on the back of Quirrell's head, the hiss of Lord Voldemort's voice. The way Quirrell's flesh burns to ash beneath his touch. The screams....

...Harry's screams, the pain ripping through his arm as Wormtail drags the knife downward, laying half his arm open practically to the bone. The way steam had bubbled and spilled out of the cauldron, the way it had burnt up, vanished into smoke and vapor and left nothing but a monster that used to be a man. Tall and pale, with thin lips and no nose and eyes that gleamed crimson in the failing light and...

No.

...The long stretch of the corridor in the Department of Mysteries. The glow of the prophecy orbs on their shelves. The gleam of Lucius Malfoy's hair as he holds out a hand and demands the prophecy that sits in Harry's hand. "No!" the force of Harry's scream ripping from his body as Sirius falls, empty eyed and already gone, through the whispering edge of the Veil. The scream of pain in his scar, tearing him open until blood trickled down into his eyes, the hiss of Lord Voldemort's voice in his head, crawling amongst his thoughts, seeking to subdue him, to *own* him...

...the twisted shriek of the Horcrux dying, the crack of the locket breaking down the center and shriveling beneath the tip of Gryffindor's sword...

...the thrash of the basilisk, the burn of its fang and the wash of blood and venom as he shoves upward...

...the spurt of ink, blooming out over his pages, warm and iron tinted, like blood...

... "*The boy must die.*"

...Tall and serene, an island of calm amidst Hagrid's cries and the Death Eater's jeers. Just the two of them, no matter how many other people are actually there. It's just them. Inevitable.

... "*Avada Kedavra.*"

...the white of limbo, the press of nonexistence, the quiet nothingness. A baby, squalling and twisted, bloody and terrible beneath a bench. The weight of it in his arms, the brief sensation of its fingers, twisting and gripping and holding on so tight it hurts and...

... “No.”

Harry heaves, gasping for breath as he collapses forward, colliding with the edge of the chair hard enough that it jars his teeth and leaves half coagulated blood smeared across the leather. Quirrell’s hands are still holding his face, though they have eased their grip. They shake against his skull, fingers jerking as they push the hair out of his eyes. Harry inhales sharply, struggling to suck in enough air to soothe the pounding of his heart, and watches as some of those shaking fingers pluck the vial from his hand. Voldemort manages to thumb off the top of the vial but his hand shakes too much as he tries to raise it to his mouth, nearly spilling some of the precious contents.

“Easy,” Harry’s voice is hoarse, roughened as if he has spent hours screaming. Maybe he has. The hand still clutching at one side of his head tightens, inadvertently tugging at his hair. Carefully he reaches out and steadies the shaking limb and watches as the lip of the vial meets Quirrell’s mouth and the shimmering, pearlescent liquid slides out.

Voldemort swallows.

Harry’s heart stutters, stops. Just for a beat or two as a noise, wretched and grateful all at once manages to worm its out of his mouth and disperses against the leather. He doesn’t realize he is sobbing until he feels the hand in his hair tighten and tastes a mixture of salt and wet and blood on his lips.

“You mean it,” Voldemort whispers, his words slurring together. “You actually mean it.”

Harry nods against his hand and shivers as his thumb brushes across the scar on his head, the brief touch red hot: not painful or pleasurable or perhaps it’s not that, perhaps it’s both instead. He can’t exactly tell. “Yeah,” he manages to get out. “I mean it.”

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Eventually, Harry manages to stagger to his feet. Quirrell’s body is still half curled up in the chair, head tipped back, eyes closed. Still conscious, though. He’s stopped shaking, Harry notices, and there’s a bit of color in those too gaunt cheeks. Not much, but enough to make him look like he’s a real live person instead of a corpse. That’s good. He might be able to keep some food down. Harry pauses and looks around the office. Is there any food here?

Probably not and calling for a Hogwarts house elf seems risky – and not the good sort of risky – but most professors seem to keep stuff for tea in their offices. Or at least Remus, Barty-as-Moody, Dumbledore, and McGonagall all had. Snape does as well, though he only knows that because of his late night, post physical break down.

Keeping a careful eye on Voldemort, he fixes his nose and then cleans the blood from his face with the sleeve of his robe and a touch of an *aguamenti*. Thank Merlin he decided to wear a



set of his black robes. He always thought it severe and even ridiculous to see Snape – and later the Death Eaters – always swooping around in black but he's beginning to see the appeal. Black hides a multitude of sins.

After spending a few moments poking around Harry discovers a tray with a teapot and several cups tucked onto one of the bookshelves in the corner behind the desk. All but one of the cups are covered in a light coating of dust and that one has the dried dregs of tea still painted around the bottom edges. The teapot itself is over half full, the tea in it cold and bitter, the surface sporting a faint, murky skin. Wrinkling his nose in disgust, Harry is quick to vanish the contents and clean the whole thing with a *scourgify* powerful enough to leave the off-white china sparkling. Another moment spent investigating the surrounding area reveals nearly a dozen cannisters all approximately half filled with different blends of tea.

Unlabeled, of course.

Harry lets out a little huff of annoyance at that and carefully sniffs each of the teas, focusing on deciding which variety would be best in order to ignore the intermittent tremors of his hands or the occasional hitch of air in his chest. Most of them are dark, robust things: blends that stand up well beneath lots of milk and sugar. The earl grey is easily identifiable, as is the distinct smooth bite of chai. There's a malty sort of breakfast blend and something faintly fruity-floral that he's pretty sure is oolong as well as something that smells like Christmas in a tin: cinnamon and orange and cloves. There's even a variety that smells almost exactly like the plum pudding they had a few days ago at dinner, right down to the notes of vanilla and cinnamon and treacle. There's also something that smells a little more delicate, the rich notes of black tea lightened by hints of something floral in a combination that reminds Harry of the tea he had to make for Aunt Petunia's afternoon visits with the neighbors. Towards the back there is a nearly full cannister of chamomile, another that smells faintly of mint but mostly of cucumber, a mostly empty cannister of plain peppermint, and the sole green tea which smells delightfully of matcha, mint, and bright green apples.

Harry steals another glance at the curled-up figure on the chair, accounts for the time noted on the clock ticking away on the side of the man's desk, and hesitates over the peppermint before settling on the earl grey. Peppermint is not strong enough for this conversation, weak stomachs be damned. Further investigation even yields him a tin of familiar looking Scottish shortbread that McGonagall must have given to Quirrell at some point. It'll be a little on the rich side but it's probably better than nothing so Harry lays a handful of them out on a plate and carries the whole tray over to Voldemort, where he sets it down on the small table beside the chair and then pulls the other chair around to sit across from the man.

*"You're a time traveler."*

Harry jumps at the sound of Voldemort's voice and looks up from where he is busy pouring tea into two of the freshly cleaned cups. The man in question has managed to sit up, his hands folded neatly in his lap, fingers of one hand wrapped loosely around the length of Quirrell's wand.

*"Of a sort,"* Harry finally replies, daring a glance at his face. He's more relaxed now, the haughty lines softening enough so that the discordance of Voldemort's sharp looks on Quirrell's rounded face isn't so unsettling. The keenness is still there, the familiar sharp

intelligence is still watching him out of the wrong colored eyes. It's a look he's familiar with but one he has only seen once in person – and even then it had been on the face of specter, on a boy caught between life and death for fifty years. He's not stupid enough to think that this is who the Dark Lord is when everything is stripped away, that this is the truth of the man. Still, he's set aside the hardest of his masks and even this barest of glimpses is something.

*There you are*, Harry thinks to himself, inexplicably pleased.

Tom Marvolo Riddle.

*"The goblins called it...reincarnation via temporal displacement,"* he answers him with a shrug. *"I'm just rolling with it, to be honest. I've got enough that I'm trying to stuff into my brain as is without worrying over the theory of it all."* Going by the look on his face this is not an answer that Tom appreciates or understands. Harry sighs. *"It's not something that can be undone. I'll have plenty of time to think about it later. Sugar? Honey? Milk?"*

*"Two sugars and a splash of milk,"* the Dark Lord instructs and Harry nods. His own cup he leaves alone. He's never quite gotten used to adding anything to his tea, no matter the variety. It still occasionally astounds him that he gets to drink it hot and not whatever cold and bitter dregs are left in the pot or his relatives' cups.

*"Take a sip of this first,"* Harry instructs and hands over the potion bottle that he's carried everywhere with him for months. *"Stomach soother,"* he adds at Voldemort's pointed look. *"Snape's recipe. I still have occasional difficulties keeping down regular meals."*

After a moment of hesitation, Tom reaches out and takes the bottle. *"So what does that mean – from you're point of view. 'Reincarnation via temporal displacement'?"* he asks once he's handed the bottle back and picked up the cup that Harry has pushed across to him. For a moment he just sits and holds it, staring down at the steaming surface with something that might be discomfort. Harry wishes he knew why. Or if it's even real.

*"It means that you killed me and your horcrux,"* Harry tells him bluntly, *"and when I tried to put us back together I woke up nearly seven years in the past."*

Tom eyes him around the rim of his cup. *"You wake up seven years in the past and the first thing you do is change sides?"* He sounds amused.

*"No,"* Harry snaps out instantly, *violently*, because that's not it at all. *"I didn't change sides. I finally made my own side. I am no one's pawn,"* he spits. Not anymore. Not ever again. He'll leave first. He'll *die* first.

Tom takes a sip of his tea. Harry's pretty sure he does it to hide a smile. *"Then perhaps you might be my equal after all."*

Harry freezes. *"You didn't know that. You didn't...Dumbledore said you...of course you knew that."* He laughs because he can't do anything else. Of course, Voldemort knew more of the prophecy than Dumbledore said. Harry's head is full of imperfect knowledge. *"Did you know all of it?"* Harry shakes his head. *"Do you know all of it?"*

It will break him if he had – if he *does* - Harry thinks. It will make the memory of Sirius' death even worse.

"No," Tom admits quietly and Harry believes him. He has to or he might go mad. Madder. *"Just that. But even that was much too dangerous for people to know."*

"Why?" Harry asks, confused. *"Why that of all things and not..."*

*"Because of what I am and what it implies."*

Harry blinks at the force of the man's interruption. *"I don't... I don't understand."*

*"I am the most powerful wizard in Europe and quite arguably the most powerful wizard on earth – that is not pride or boasting,"* Tom tells him when Harry huffs at the sheer ego of the other man. *"It is measurable, recordable fact. You truly don't..."* He stares at Harry for a long time, brow knit together before he shakes his head in something that feels oddly like disappointment. *"Magical ability is not simply an either-or situation,"* he explains once it is obvious that Harry has no idea what he is talking about. *"Your core is measurable. The amount of magic you innately possess and can channel are quantifiable. So, when I say that I am the most powerful wizard alive, I am telling you that I have the highest recorded core value since the use of the Aryabhata Scale became widespread among magical communities twelve hundred years ago."*

Harry blinks again. *"The Arya...what?"* he asks.

Voldemort sighs. *"The Aryabhata Scale refers to the numerical system of measuring your innate core value and the equations used to calculate it. Given that you are born with your magical core already intact, if immature, one is able to calculate a fairly accurate approximation of someone's mature core value within a few months of a child exhibiting their innate – 'accidental' – magic. You see now the problem?"*

*"Er..."* Harry doesn't. He really doesn't. Which means it's probably really fucking obvious.

*"Sweet Salazar,"* Tom pinches the bridge of his nose and takes several deep breaths before opening his mouth, closing it, and eating a piece of shortbread instead. Once he's done that and taken a few long swallows of his tea he continues, *"It is well established fact to anyone who knows where to look that I... that Tom Riddle possessed a mature core value of twenty..."*

*"...and that's a lot?"* It doesn't sound like a lot. He's not really good at math, he's never allowed himself to be, and he's certainly never taken arithmancy or even cracked the spine of a book on the subject but twenty doesn't sound like a lot. There are a great many numbers bigger than twenty.

*"Dumbledore and the Dark Lord Grindelwald are both ranked at an eighteen,"* Tom says flatly. *"And it is their shared rank that led most of Europe to pressure Dumbledore into dueling Grindelwald in the end. Severus, if I recall correctly, is a sixteen. Most wixen calculate out between a twelve and a fourteen."*

Harry blinks. *"Oh."*

*"Yes, oh,"* Tom repeats dryly. *"So now, think of the implications of those lines 'The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches' when coupled with the knowledge of being my marked – my acknowledged – equal. It could, of course, have nothing to do with core strength. It could be referring to my equal in political power or pure physical strength or any number of other categories but you will find, Harry Potter, that when magicals think and speak of power, they are almost always talking about what you hold in here."* Tom taps his chest, somewhere just towards the center and above where his heart is.

*"Oh,"* Harry says again, beginning to get it. Dumbledore is already viewed as remarkably powerful – almost impossibly so in comparison to the average wizard. The idea of there being a wizard even more powerful than that is slightly terrifying. The idea that there are *two* wizards more powerful than the might of Dumbledore is...unfathomable. He thinks of his schoolmates, of the way they had reacted when they thought him the Heir of Slytherin. He thinks of the way even his own dormmates and friends had treated him when they thought him powerful enough to fool the Goblet of Fire. If the knowledge that he is Tom Riddle's – is *Voldemort's* – magical equal were public knowledge... well. He imagines it would inspire a great deal of fear and a great deal of defeat, for both sides.

He imagines that many more than Voldemort would have sought to kill him while he was young.

He imagines that many would have simply submitted to Voldemort's rule if they thought it unbelievable that there should be one man so powerful, let alone two.

*"And while precious few people know that Tom Riddle and Lord Voldemort are the same man, Dumbledore is foremost among them and he heard the entire prophecy – after it having such an influence on actions in his own life, core equality is exactly what he would take it to mean,"* Tom continues once Harry nods.

*"...and that matters?"*

*"Of course, it matters,"* Tom says as he refills his cup. *"How do you think I knew to come after you?"*

*"Because I... because I was born at the end of the seventh month,"* Harry points out what he feels is pretty obvious. *"Because my parents had defied you three times. Because you picked me!"* He gestures wildly, nearly sloshing tea onto his lap in an effort to exhibit the great number of reasons why Voldemort had chosen to try and murder him.

Tom scoffs and actually rolls his eyes, *"I didn't pick you. Dumbledore picked you as my equal. Look..."* he puts his tea down and gives his full attention to Harry. It's not a very comfortable feeling. *"At the time of the prophecy I was over fifty years old and I had spent the better part of four decades speaking out against the muggle centric politics beginning to dominate and take over our society. Trust me, the list of people who had defied me three times and gone on to have children was and is extensive. For Salazar's sake,"* he mutters with a sharp gesture of his hand, *"if the month of birth and having parents who fought – for any*

*given definition of the word 'fought' – against me three times were the only identifying requirements then Lucius Malfoy would be as good a match as you are."*

Harry blinks because...what? Hadn't Lucius' dad been one of the original Death Eaters. How does that count as defying Voldemort?

*"I don't..."* He begins and then trails off instantly because he doesn't know what to say. When he thought to come speak with Voldemort this is not what he had been expecting. Not at all. For one, there's a lot less yelling. And cursing.

*"Prophecy is powerful but it extremely biased,"* Tom says, a certain level of disdain filling his voice again. *"It relies entirely on being heard. All prophecies are self-fulfilling because the moment that someone hears them, they seek to fit them to things that have happened or try to bend future events to either fulfill or stop them. The power of a prophecy is not in their words but in those that hear them."* Tom leans back in his chair and crosses one leg over the other, balancing his cup on the curve of his knee. Harry watches it, horribly fascinated as the Dark Lord's words wash over him.

*"Consider this: the prophecy that ostensibly concerns you and I was give before you were born. Severus told me the portion that he heard in March of the year you were born. From your... memories,"* he gives a delicate nod at Harry's head after a brief, pointed hesitation, as if that could encompass the whole of what had passed between them, *"it is easy to see that in my future state I became obsessed with the prophecy. Even in your mind you refer to it as a weapon. But if it were the actual words that I was obsessed with why had I not simply retrieved the prophecy before our initial confrontation? I assure you that, despite what you or Dumbledore might think, it would have required no effort to walk into the Ministry and pluck it off the shelf at any point between when it was given and when I lost my body, but I didn't. Not once during those nineteen months did I go retrieve the words that supposedly foretold my fall."*

*"But...why?"* Harry asks. *"Why wouldn't you have? Why didn't you want to know?"* After so long of having scramble and scrounge and scheme for every little scrap of information on what was happening in his own life the idea of *not* acquiring information is incomprehensible.

*"Because the words were not important,"* Tom shrugs carelessly. *"It is how those that knew of them – Dumbledore, in this case, and even Severus – reacted to them that mattered. Dumbledore desires my demise. He has made it his personal mission to wipe me off the face of the earth and so it mattered not what I thought of the actual prophecy but what he did because it was him that I would have to counter. I would learn more from the moves he made than I would from the prophecy itself. Dumbledore is the one that decided that approaches meant someone soon to be born rather than someone presenting themselves to our struggle in a new light or arriving from a different locale,"* he continues pointedly, his tone making no allowances for interruptions. *"It is Dumbledore that decided that 'defied' specifically meant someone who had set themselves in direct opposition to me, who had spurned my desires for them. It is Dumbledore who decided that 'equal' meant someone of similar magical strength and it is Dumbledore who selected you and Mr. Longbottom as the likely foe mentioned in the prophecy."*

Harry feels his eyes widen. *"You know about..."*

Tom interrupts him with a sharp wave of his hand. *"Yes, I know of Longbottom's potential in the matter. Why else do you think that my followers were so quick to go after his family when I disappeared? They knew I was keeping an eye on them. And that was not because of his father's position in the auror department or both of his parents' presence in Dumbledore's Order. It was because young Neville Longbottom has been identified as the only other possible threat to me."*

*"But..."*

*"I came after you that Samhain night because Dumbledore marked you as the child most likely to be my equal,"* Tom continues relentlessly. *"After all, it is not until after you began to exhibit magic, until after the initial calculations on your potential could be run, that he hid you and your parents away. It is why I only sought to kill you then, after the choice had been made. Because if I hadn't then you would have been raised and shaped specifically as a weapon to counter me."*

And that had happened anyway.

Neither one of them says it but the man across from him has been in Harry's head. Not much, but enough to know how much Dumbledore had succeeded on that front.

*"But then why..."*

*"I can only offer conjecture because I am not...him. I am not the exact Voldemort that you knew but I suspect that I grew obsessed with the prophecy both as a way to lure out in the open and because in my...clouded state... it became increasingly impossible to properly think and counter whatever plan Dumbledore was forming."*

Harry doesn't want to believe him. He doesn't because believing him would turn so much of what Harry thought he knew, so much of what had ruled his life, upside down. The voice of his past life is demanding disbelief, demanding caution, screaming that *Voldemort* would never tell him the truth. And yet... And yet, like so many things these days, the longer he considers the Dark Lord's word the more sense they make. Part of Harry hates that. He hates it so much.

Once again, he finds himself with unsteady ground beneath his feet, the structure of his world flipped end over end.

"I'm so tired," he admits before he realizes what's happening. *"I'm so tired of this."*

*"It is nearing curfew,"* Tom offers after a soft pause, nodding to the clock that now reads a quarter to ten. *"If you don't want to draw Severus' attention you will need to head back soon."*

Harry wants to laugh at how closely Tom's words mirror Death's from weeks ago.

*"That's not what I meant,"* he says instead.

*"I know. It is still true, however."*

Harry can't stop the panic that wells up at the thought. He can't go yet. They haven't talked about...anything. Not any of the things he meant to. He doesn't even know where he and Tom Riddle stand. Are they going to be trying to kill each other? Are they going to go their separate ways? Are they going to work together? What, exactly, does *Tom Riddle* plan to do?

Some of his distress must show on his face. Either that or it's strong enough for Tom to feel even if he's not actually *in* Harry's head. *"We will speak again,"* the man tells him. *"We have time. Alliances are not built in a single evening."*

Alliances.

The word rings in Harry's ears over and over and over again until it all begins to blur apart and just like that, Harry deflates, his panic draining away like fluid from a wound.

*"Regardless, I certainly won't be doing anything like this."* Tom gives a vague, disdainful motion at Quirrell's body. *"My first plan – my only plan, currently – is to get my own body back. Given your earlier actions,"* he nods at the empty vial sitting down amidst the tea cups and the crumbs of shortbread left on the plate, *"I assume you are not opposed to helping me achieve that?"*

Harry blinks. *"I, er, no?"* he blinks again and thinks over the man's question. *"No, I'm not,"* he repeats more surely. *"I'm rather invested in you being...you. Actually you and not..."*

*"...him,"* Tom finishes and Harry looks down at the half empty cup clutched in his hands.

*"Yeah."*

The smile that Tom gives him when he finally looks up is not at all reassuring. *"I am him,"* he tells Harry, *"Just as you are the Harry that faced him."*

Harry shakes his head. *"That's different,"* because it is. It is so very, very different. *"I'm actually the Harry that faced him and he...he's just something you could become."*

*"He's something I already am,"* Tom corrects calmly. *"Dumbledore, he likes to preach of the goodness of people. Of how everyone has that spark of light and deserves a chance to prove it."* Everyone but me, he seems to add silently, but Harry hears it anyway, long since used to this failing of Albus Dumbledore – of the idea that everyone has good unless he decides otherwise. And he decided otherwise for Tom Marvolo Riddle long, long ago. *"And it may be true. In my experience I have found rather the opposite -that everyone is a monster. Some just control it better than others."*

Harry wants to speak up, to open his mouth and deny that, but he can't, can he? Because that's been his experience too. There have been times when he has been so *angry*, when he has wanted nothing but to hurt and destroy, to tear about the world around him and render those that hurt him down to nothing but twists of sinew and shreds of bone. Not just him, either. Hermione, who disfigured a classmate to mark her as a betrayer. Hermione, who delivered Umbridge up to beings that would abuse her without a single shred of hesitation.

Ron, who burned jealous and petty whenever his pride was bruised. Snape, who had simultaneously saved his life over and over again, who had perhaps single handedly done more for the Light than anyone else, and who bullied teenagers and was -is - vicious and cruel to those that he decided were not worthy of his affection. Sirius and his dad, widely recalled as good men, and yet who assaulted their fellow students for fun. Dumbledore, who had brought their entire world to ruin in pursuit of an ideal he had allowed no one else to see.

*"I am him,"* Tom repeats evenly, not looking away, not giving Harry anywhere to hide from his words. *"Strip me of my control and social niceties and I am him."*

Harry forces himself to take a sip of tea, forces himself to take several slow breaths. He forces himself to pause, to think for a moment before he replies. *"Then show me what you can do when you have control,"* he finally settles on saying, eyes bright and chin just out with the force of his challenge. *"Let me see what the world looks like beneath a man who knows how to control the monster inside of him. Let me see what you can do, Tom Marvolo Riddle, when you truly master yourself."*

For a moment nothing happens, nothing happens for long enough that Harry's heart begins to speed up in his chest, working itself up into a panic as it beats against his ribs but then Tom smiles. He grins, sharp and feral, too many teeth showing in Quirrell's soft mouth. *"That, I can do,"* he promises and Harry can't stop himself from offering him a sharp, relieved smile of his own. *"So, we are agree then? We will speak more on what was and on what could be and you will assist me in regaining my body?"*

Harry nods slowly. *"You still want the Sorcerer's Stone?"*

*"There are numerous benefits to using it as a basis in resurrection ritual."*

*"Then I can help you get it,"* Harry tells him. *"Assuming it is the actual Stone that Dumbledore has hidden here and not a fake."* That's a slightly upsetting possibility that occurred to him about a month ago.

*"It is,"* Tom assures him. *"My magesight is well documented - both as Tom Riddle and Lord Voldemort. He wouldn't be able to fool me with a fake. Not without delving into magics that he refuses to use. It's there. I can feel it."*

Harry's not sure what magesight is but he's pretty sure when Tom says that he can *feel* the presence of the Sorcerer's Stone he's not talking metaphorically.

*"Then I'll help you get it,"* Harry repeats and, after a moment's hesitation, holds out his hand. It barely trembles. *"To new beginnings?"*

Quirrell's hand is the wrong shape, his fingers shorter and wider, but the grip is firm in a way he doesn't think Quirrell's would actually be. Something sparks at their touch. It's a thin little spark of magic that races through Harry's fingers and up his arm until it itches with it: so cold it feels hot or perhaps it's the other way around.

*"To new beginnings."*



## Chapter End Notes

I talk a little bit about the system for ranking the strength of magical cores in the end notes of Chapter 6 of "Harry Potter and the Peanut Gallery" so if you're curious (or need a refresher) you can pop on over there. After much dithering and probably too much time spent reading about various mathematicians of the early middle ages I decided to call it the "Aryabhata Scale" after the early 5th century Indian mathematician and astronomer.

[Here's a link](#) to his wiki page but to sum up he was a rather brilliant man who was centuries ahead of his time in various branches of both math and astronomy - exhibiting a strong grasp of the place value system, noting that pi is an irrational number a whopping 1300 years before European mathematicians came to the same conclusion, and is the source of the terms "sine" and "cosine" in trigonometry. As an astronomer, he believed the earth to be a spherical body that rotated on its axis every day. He calculated the length of Earth's day down to 23 hours 56 minutes and 4.1 seconds by meticulously measuring the movements of the stars in relation to Earth. Further, he calculated the length of Earth's year as 365 days 6 hours 12 minutes and 30 seconds which (in comparison with our modern computations) is an error of 3 minutes and 20 seconds. His computations form the basis of a calendar that was widely used in India and the surrounding countries and is still the basis of the calendar used in Afghanistan and Iran. His equations for predicting the duration of eclipses remained more accurate than any other up through the 19th century.

For me, his work in plane and spherical trigonometry plus astronomy and its holding power as far as accuracy long after his death made him the obvious choice to cast as a wizard who also developed a way to calculate and measure the amount of magic a wizard/witch innately possesses and can use over a set amount of a time (say, a day). His methods would have likely gained some notoriety throughout the magical community and then become much more widespread in their use after they were translated from Sanskrit to Arabic in the early 9th century which allowed them to be easily dispersed throughout the Islamic empire. The Aryabhata Scale would thus be the standard of use for measuring magical ability throughout the Indo-European world (including the Europe centric North America and Egypt).

I firmly head canon that wizarding society was, by and large, much more global before the implementation of the Statute of Secrecy as magic would have afforded the ways to travel and comminute across larger distances with minimal risk. But as the muggle societies embarked on their colonial era and more "pure", strict forms of Christianity became prevalent magicals were forced to curtail their travels and interact with muggle mathematicians, philosophers, scientists, and artists less and less in order to avoid suspicion and/or persecution. With the launch of Europe's attempt to colonize and control the "uncivilized" areas of the globe much of the indigenous magical populations of the Americas, Africa, and Australia were completely wiped out. With the Statute of Secrecy not only would communications have practically ceased between muggle and magical academics and artists but magical communities would have become much more

insular, limiting their communications even with other magical communities for fear of violating the Statute.

# Nineteen

## Chapter Notes

Sound off, how is everyone doing? October and November have been pretty bumpy but hopefully we're all holding on. Stay safe!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Harry sleeps for nearly three days.

Not really, of course, but it certainly feels like it.

He has no clear memory of returning to his dorm after his conversation with Tom. There is just a vague sense of movement, of walking, and the familiar walls of the castle drifting by before he tumbles into his bed and promptly falls into a sleep deeper than he's managed in months. Years, even. It's not until he wakes up a full twelve hours later that he realizes he managed to sleep-stumble his way into the trunk and fetch Inigo and that realization only comes because the infuriating reptile sticks his tongue in Harry's ear. As such he doesn't exactly wake up as he simply crashes back into consciousness when he flails right off his bed and onto the floor.

"Ugh," he groans into the rug that doesn't cushion the stone floor nearly as much as Harry would like. "*Why?*" he manages to hiss at the gold and red triangular head peeking over the edge of the bed at him.

"*Why did you leave soft nest?*" Inigo inquires at the same time and Harry can practically taste how confused the snake is. "*The ground rock is cold.*"

Harry blinks up at him for several long minutes, his brain trying to make sense of things. "*What? I didn't want to...why did you taste me?*"

"*You were very still,*" Inigo tells him very seriously. "*You were hotbloodbeating but you were still like rock. Much longer than normal. Past eating time.*"

"*Just tired, I think,*" Harry tells him. "*I still feel like I could sleep for a week.*" Mind still groggy and slow he manages to haul himself to his feet and take the potions sitting in a neat line on his desk. The clock sitting next to the stack of texts reads 10:15 and if it didn't take so much energy to be surprised at how late he'd slept Harry would probably do that. But it *does* take too much energy so he settles for staring rather blankly at the plain black and white face of the clock, watching the hands tick around and around while he eats an apple that he'd stashed in one of his desk drawers weeks ago.

It's the first day of break. He should do something. He has an entire library of books that need to be read. He needs to write down as much of his conversation with Tom as he can

remember before he manages to forget something important. He needs to go over and analyze that conversation because it went...almost nothing like he had been expecting, if he's being honest with himself. He'd expected more shouting and cursing, maybe. More demands, certainly. But it hadn't been like that. Not once the other man had gotten inside his head enough to verify the truth of what Harry was telling him. After that it had been remarkably civil. Sharp, occasionally, but reasonable, the Dark Lord had seemingly been content to explain things to Harry. Things about the prophecy. Things about power. About the Ary... Aryabada? No. The Ary-*something* Scale – just the newest item in a long and ever-growing list of things that Harry had not known but which make a terrible amount of sense.

Because of course there would be a way to measure magical ability. Of course there would and of course it would be the mitigating factor in the prophecy, in the shape of Harry's life. Does everyone know these things? Is this scale one of those things that is so commonplace in the magical world that no one thinks to actually mention it? If he could talk to Ron and Hermione of his first life would they know of it? Half of him thinks that they would, that the ease with which Tom had rattled off the numbers proves it. Of course, that could just be Tom, though. It would be entirely like him, in any form that Harry has known him, to be aware of and teach obscure bits of magical lore that the public isn't privy to.

And really, what it *actually* means for Harry is almost as difficult to wrap his head around as the whole Master of Death situation. Is he the Chosen One because he is fated to be so? Or because Dumbledore made him so? Does the prophecy single him out or has he been formed to fit the prophecy? Does it really matter?

It doesn't, he thinks. In fact, probably the only thing about the whole mess that actually matters is that the Dark Lord marked him, Harry, as his equal. He's not even sure it's true – not sure he wants it to be true. Even inhuman and completely out of his mind, Voldemort's power had been unlike anything else Harry had ever felt and he's pretty damn sure that what he's felt is merely the tip of the iceberg. Already, Harry is wildly more powerful than he ever had been in his first life. Well, more powerful than he ever got to experience, anyway, his improved health paving way for the return of strength he hadn't even known he'd been lacking. Truly being Tom Marvolo Riddle's magical equal is a fact that Harry can admit he's not quite ready to face.

*And the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal*, the prophecy says and Harry has always thought it to be just another way to identify him, another way to prove that yes, Harry is the one it speaks of.

Only now, dazed and bleary and staring out at the lake, does it occur to him that it might have been meant as a warning.

To the Dark Lord. To the Chosen One. To anyone that might hear it.

What might the world look like, he wonders, if Dumbledore hadn't heard the prophecy. If Harry had never been singled out. If Voldemort hadn't felt the – very understandable, Harry is willing to admit – need to eliminate a weapon before it could be fully formed and aimed at him.

“Nope,” Harry says out loud, pulling his rambling, almost frantic thoughts to a halt. “I am too tired for this.”

And he will always be too tired to deal with this. There are some speculative paths that he should not, cannot, wander. Not if he wants to retain his own mind and not feel it slip from him completely, sand blown away on the winds of what-might-have-been.

He has enough what-ifs in his life dealing simply with the *now*.

“*Do you need anything?*” Harry asks, suddenly so tired that even standing up feels like too much effort. On the bed, Inigo twists in on himself, sleek coils winding round and round while his tongue flickers out, tasting.

“*Mouse?*”

Harry snorts and he crawls back into his bed. He very nearly decides that simply lying down is enough but it’s really not. Already he can feel the cool dungeon air pricking at his skin. Groaning, he manages to shuffle under the duvet and flops forward. “*You just had a mouse a few days ago, greedy thing.*”

“*Mouse is good,*” Inigo tells him seriously as he noses its way under Harry’s shirt and winds up his back, the smooth, dry rasp of scales against skin enough to make Harry shiver as the snake settles in the dip between his shoulder blades. Beneath him Harry burrows further into the comfort of his pillows, inhaling deeply of the scent of his own skin, of bright mint and citrus of the shampoo he likes and the musty scent of snake, of the faint, lingering touches of the lavender scented detergent that Hogwarts uses.

“*In a few days,*” he promises. He’s not sure if he’s talking to the snake or himself. Both, probably.

He closes his eyes and gives in, letting sleep drag him under again.

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He feels it the next time he wakes: a heaviness to the air, to the flesh on his bones and the blood in his veins. On Halloween, on Samhain, it had felt like smoke, like vapor hanging in the air and leaking out through the cracks as the lines between life and death – between realities – waned. It had smelled of decay and tasted like ash inside his mouth.

This is different.

It’s the same power, Harry instinctively knows. He can feel it in the way it vibrates through his bones and the way it hums as it rattles around his nerves. The hollow of his chest over his heart has gone cold, colder than usual, until Harry can feel the curl of the Endless Dark pressing up against his façade of flesh. It doesn’t smell of death but of absence, of nothing but hoarfrost and dark skies. He can taste snowflakes on his tongue before he even opens his eyes.

On Halloween it had felt like he was flying apart, pulled and stretched until he was formless and all encompassing. This is the reverse. Now, instead of stretched and flung, he is

condensed down to his barest, purest form. He is not scattered. He is a focal point.

He is not drifting in the Void. Instead, the Void fills him. Despite the exhaustion he can still feel dragging at his edge, Harry feels stronger than he ever has in his life.

The Winter Solstice.

Yule.

Harry smiles into his pillow and stretches languidly beneath the duvet, feeling the flex and curl of his muscles as they roll into wakefulness. He doesn't need to be able to see himself to realize, rather distantly, that he's not moving exactly like a human. Not entirely. The cold that has filled him up and - not energized him, because *energized* contains certain connotations of warmth and vitality that simply *aren't there* – fueled him, lending him flexibility where there shouldn't be and strength that he has never possessed.

It's hard to pull himself together, to make his flesh shift and move like it should. Harry is profoundly grateful that there is no one that he has to talk to, that his friends aren't here to see the otherness he can't quite mask. It's barely four o'clock but there's already a simple dinner laid out on the tables in the Great Hall and Harry forces himself to sit and eat a bowl of hearty stew and a crusty slice of bread. It feels odd. Unnecessary. Like ashes in his mouth and muddy silt sitting heavy in his gut. He has to focus, has to make himself remember to chew each bite. Has to remind himself that whatever this influx of power is that it won't be here for long. That he won't feel invincible forever. That his cage of sinew and bone must be cared for.

It's a relief to flee the Great Hall when he is done. He needs to leave. He needs to get *out*.

He barely pauses as he strides across the Entrance Hall, palming one of the candles off of the decorated trees lining the wall and pinching its flame out of existence before slipping it into his pocket. He doesn't know what he's doing. It's not even instinctive. He just reaches out and grabs it because he needs it.

Outside it is cold, objectively. He isn't dressed to go outside. He's in nothing but an open front robe thrown on over a cashmere jumper but he doesn't feel it, doesn't feel the icy air against his skin. Whatever is inside of him is far colder than the beginnings of winter in the Scottish Highlands. The snow is a few days old and more icy crust and mud harder and sharper than glass at this point than it is picturesque drifts. It has fallen and thawed and fallen again in the past few weeks. It will snow again on Christmas, he vaguely remembers, but until then there is this. A cold that is less pristine and more desolate, less beautiful. Harsher.

Harry walks down the steps, across the rolling, ice crusted lawn, and into the Forbidden Forest as the sun sinks below the horizon.

He doesn't think about where he's going, he just moves. Around him the forest grows silent as he passes until the only sound is the crunch of his feet against the icy debris on the forest floor. Each step is a relief and the further away he gets from the castle the more he feels like he is stretching – a violent, full bodied thing of pain and pleasure after spending weeks locked away in his cupboard without room to properly stand or move around.

He is an eleven-year-old boy striding through the woods.

He is an endless unfolding shadow.

He doesn't know where he is going until he there.

Harry stops so suddenly that if someone had been watching they might have thought that he walked straight into an invisible wall but there is no wall and there is no one watching. Even the birds and the beasts turn their eyes away until it's just him, just Harry standing in the center of a clearing in the Forbidden Forest.

No Hagrid. No Death Eaters. No Lord Voldemort.

Just him and the fading light and the quiet.

"Oh," he murmurs to himself.

Of course.

He had died here.

Harry Potter had died here.

The Master of Death had woken here, had solidified into being in the instant that the killing curse had kissed his skin, the very moment it had tried to tear his soul from the tangled web it is woven into.

It's easy enough to crouch and press the base of the candle into the frozen earth, to shore it up with chunks of stick and stone and ice. The flame he lights is golden, flickering and weak as it dances in the breeze. It is pressed in on all sides by the dark, casting shifting, leaping shadows upon the ground, upon Harry's hand and face.

He knows little of the traditions that surround the solstice, the rituals that are part of Yule. It hadn't been until Death had mentioned it that he even realized that Yule isn't simply a fancy name for Christmas. He doesn't know what he is supposed to do, what words he is supposed to say.

He knows from his readings that Yule is the celebration of light in the middle of winter, the acknowledgement that the even though the harsh grip of winter lies between them and spring that the longest night is passing and that light will come again.

It doesn't feel like that to Harry.

It feels like a culmination.

It feels inevitable.

On Samhain he is powerful because the line between light and dark, between Life and Death is blurred and thin. On Halloween, Death is powerful because it is in everything and it rises to the surface.

On the Winter Solstice he is powerful because it is the peak of darkness. It is the time when the natural light is driven away and the dark holds half the world in the palm of its hand. He is powerful because this is the Longest Night, because light and life surrenders to its touch.

Because he is Harry but Harry is dead, because life is fleeting and even it – even *he* – must give way eventually.

The flame gutters in the wind as Harry stares to where Death is kneeling, patient and serene on the ground across from him. The light flickers, dies. Winks out of existence between one moment and the next.

“Everything goes into the dark,” Harry murmurs and he can feel Death’s smile against his skin as the being leans across the smoking candle and presses a soft, searing kiss to Harry’s forehead.

“Everything, darling,” Death agrees and above them the sky stretches up and up and up until it disappears behind the stars.

---

Harry remembers getting back to his bed on Yule even less than he remembers getting back to it after he left Quirrell’s office. In fact, he is left with little more than sensations, the after-image flash of feelings imprinted against the inside of his eyelids. Returning to the castle had felt...frustrating. Confining. The moment in the forest had largely released the sense of being a focal point but the castle had still felt too small, too stifling to hold him even as exhaustion dragged at his feet like anchors. He thinks, *he thinks*, Death might have carried him at least part of the way but he’s not sure. The only thing he’s sure about is the way his heart beats in his chest, measured and absurdly loud against the quiet of his thoughts.

It's just him now, just Harry inside his skin.

It feels empty.

Hollowed out.

When he stretches, it is just him. Just his very human muscles doing their job.

It’s frustrating. Lacking.

He doesn’t like it. Or he wouldn’t like it, if he wasn’t so tired. Not liking something requires too much energy. Maybe he’ll not like it later when he’s... later.

Vaguely, he’s aware of stumbling across the room and downing his morning potions, of eating a croissant from the stash of food preserved in his desk drawer and then he’s crawling back into bed, asleep before his head even hits the pillow.

---

It isn’t until the morning of Christmas Eve that Harry wakes up and feels entirely present and aware inside his own body.



“Ugh,” he mutters into his pillow and, after taking a moment to locate Inigo, rolls onto his back and fumbles on the side table for his glasses. Thank Merlin he remembered to take his contacts out. It feels both odd and familiar to wear glasses again, the frames pressing into his nose and the curve of his cheeks. He blinks the rest of the sleep from his eyes and lets the room around him snap into clarity. The clock on the desk reads an almost respectable 7:30 in the morning. He lays there for a moment, slowly breathing in and out as he tries to gather the threads of the past few days and – perhaps unsurprisingly – fails entirely. In fact, the only thing he remembers with any clarity is what happened in the forest. Everything else is fuzzy, colored and weighed down the gray of a bone deep exhaustion and a relief strong enough to make him want to laugh, cry, and puke all in the same moment.

He did it.

He *did* it.

He had spoken, civilly, with the most powerful and feared Dark Lord in centuries. It might not have gone as he expected but Tom had taken the freely given unicorn blood. He had promised further conversation. Conversation meant to build an *alliance*.

Harry can't help it. He claps his hands over his face and laughs, laughs until he's breathless and gasping with tears beading at the corner of his eyes and wetting his cheeks.

It's not everything settled. It's not a plan or even an agreement but it's *something*. It's an opening. It's something different. Something that hasn't happened before.

Harry can work with an opening.

If he can hunt down multiple unknown horcruxes while on the run with limited resources he can definitely navigate a few discussions with Tom Riddle. Probably.

“*You're finally awake!*” Inigo observes as he slides up onto Harry's stomach. “*I didn't know humans did a long sleep during the cold.*”

“*Normally we don't,*” Harry replies, amused. “*I'm sorry I slept so much. Should we go get your mouse?*”

“*Yes,*” Inigo agrees, curling around and around on himself. “*Soft nest is warm and nice but mouse is better.*”

Once he has his familiar settled back in his terrarium, gleefully working on getting a rather large mouse down his throat, Harry manages to shower and dress like a functional person. He's still shaking a little: fine, intermittent tremors that might legitimately be because of hunger or they might be a residual side effect of the adrenaline crash that stole the last few days from him. Regardless, they're only visible when he picks up his potions, their surfaces rippling before he raises the vials and swallows their contents.

By a quarter after eight he has tossed his journal, some loose parchment, and some ink into his school bag, slipped the map into his trouser pocket, and made his way up to the Great Hall. Despite the reasonable hour it is practically empty. Over at the Gryffindor table Percy is

mechanically eating some toast while he looks *The Daily Prophet*. Fred and George are at the other end of the table, eating off each other's plates and sharing a single tea cup between them as they argue over something, fingers and quills stabbing at the bit of parchment laid in front of them. Ron is nowhere in sight. Probably still sleeping. There's a couple of Hufflepuffs huddled together at the middle of their table, consumed with a gleeful sort of chatter and a single, solitary Ravenclaw reading from a book propped up against a flagon of pumpkin juice but his fellow Slytherins are nowhere to be seen. Either they've already eaten or they're still sleeping. Harry doesn't particularly care either way.

Up at the High Table Snape looks up from breakfast just as Harry sits down and raises an eyebrow. Harry smiles in what he hopes is a cheerful, reassuring manner and reaches for the eggs. It would be just his luck if Snape decided that there was something fishy about Harry's sudden reappearance at the breakfast table. Thankfully, Sprout says something and Snape turns to her, releasing Harry from the demands of his eyebrow. He's not stupid enough to think that that's going to be the end of it, though. If Snape cares enough to question him in the middle of the Great Hall, he'll probably corner Harry later. Frankly, now that he's out of his room and clear-headed Harry's pretty damn impressed that he hasn't had to interact with a concerned Snape before this moment. Unless... had he?

No.

No, he doesn't think so. He's pretty sure that Snape, of all people, would have made a bigger deal of things if he'd been aware that Harry had lost entire days to a weird mix of relief and Dark Magic. He's also pretty sure that he would have remembered Snape no matter how much of a haze his mind was in.

At least, he hopes so.

Harry is about three bites into his breakfast when not one but two owls break from rafters and circle down to him. One is a tawny barn owl who imperiously holds out its leg for him to take the day's *Prophet* before it promptly snatches the piece of bacon out of Harry's hand and takes off with a sort of speed that leaves Harry blinking. The other owl – a positively enormous eagle owl with some of the most distinct barring on his feathers that Harry's ever seen – looks offended at the barn owl's behavior, his ear tufts bristling in a way that makes him look almost exactly like a certain Potions Professor about ten seconds before he snaps and verbally eviscerates someone.

"Hello there," Harry greets politely, holding out another piece of bacon in offering. As if to prove that he is not an ill-mannered lout the owl takes the bacon very, very carefully and offers Harry his leg in return. "Thank you," Harry murmurs absentmindedly, turning the heavy, cream colored envelope over in his hands. There's a seal on the back, large enough that the almost delicate looking set of scales that has been pressed into the plain black wax is clearly identifiable. The symbol is familiar enough from his correspondence with his solicitor but there are subtle differences and a stylized *APL* pressed below the scales is definitely different.

So... a lawyer of some sort. But not *his* lawyer. Harry eyes the envelope with all the trepidation he might afford a blast-ended skewt. Why would a lawyer be contacting him?

Harry nearly reaches for his wand to cast the familiar barrage of diagnostic spells but remembers last minute where he is. Out in the open. Where he's supposed to be a lowly eleven-year-old – a studious one but still a first year with less than half a year of schooling under his belt who would definitely not know spells only accessible in the Restricted Section or the shelves of Grimmauld Place's library.

...and now he's probably been staring at the envelope too long.

Stupid, stupid, he chides himself as he verifies with a quick flick of his eyes that his obvious dallying over his mail has drawn attention. Snape's, because Harry is pretty sure that Snape is always watching him and that that's as true for his last life as it is for this one, but Dumbledore's as well. The meddling old bastard is peering cheerfully down at the table over the edge of his half moon glasses and Harry fights the urge to narrow his eyes in response. Instead, he lets his gaze slip away. It's casual. It's nothing. Harry is not hiding anything and there isn't any sort of problem.

He rips open the envelope before he can let himself think about it.

The parchment inside is thick and weighty, the sort that's expensive just to be expensive. Once upon a time he would have expected Draco to use parchment like this. The Malfoys of his memory defining the word *pretentious* but he's learned better by now. They're still disgustingly rich. Draco likes the finer things in life and Harry has been inside Malfoy Manor and even dark and half full of feral Death Eaters and a broken Dark Lord it had been exactly as rich and showy as he had expected it to be, like looking at the pictures of Buckingham Palace in those magazines of Aunt Petunia's but the pointy chinned ferret isn't nearly as blatant at shoving his wealth in everyone's face as Harry had expected based upon their first life interactions.

This parchment is about as subtle as a bludger to the face. Whoever this lawyer is, he's wealthy and important and he wants everyone to bloody well *know* it.

The part of Harry that grew up in a cupboard and scavenged for stale bread crusts hates the self-important bastard just on principle. The newer, more recent part of Harry makes him stay his judgement. At least until after he's actually read the letter.

*Mr. Harry Potter*

*Hogwarts School of Witchcraft & Wizardry*

*Scotland,*

*It is my duty to inform you, a scion of the Ancient and Noble House of Black, of the passing of Lord Arcturus Black III on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of December 1991. Private funeral rites will be held on the 26<sup>th</sup> of December 1991 at 4 o'clock in the afternoon at the Castle Black. A public reading of his Last Will and Testament will follow at 7 o'clock. Should*

*you be unable to attend, a copy of Lord Black's Will will be made available for viewing at Gringotts or our office following its public reading.*

*By right of blood and the designation of Lord Black, hereafter referred to as the former Lord Black, transfers the title of Lord Black: Prince and Protictoris of Dyfed and all the lands, moneys, heirlooms, rights, and powers contained therein to his grandson Sirius Orion Black, son of Orion Madoc Black and Walburga Helene Black, hereafter referred to as Lord Black. In documents filed with our office on 1 August 1980, Lord Black designates one Harry James Potter, son of James Ignatius Potter and Lily Elisabeth Potter nee Evans, as his sworn heir. He is entitled to all the lands, moneys, heirlooms, rights, and powers contained therein. The heir and lordship rings have been removed from the former Lord Black's keeping and entrusted to Gringotts Bank until such a time as they can be claimed by their rightful owners.*

*Expect the formal paperwork concerning your status as Heir of Ancient and Noble House to arrive in the day following the reading of the former Lord Black's will. Our office stands ready to serve the family Black family as we have for centuries.*

*Sincerely,*

*Malcolm Avery, esquire*

*Avery, Pennoyer & Lynch*

*Attorneys at Law*

*217 Goshawk Hollow*

*Diagon Alley*

*London, England*

Harry blinks.

Stares.

Reads it again.

And again.

And once more for good measure.

This is... this is...

This is something he can't do here, alone at the Slytherin table without any other students to camouflage his actions from watching eyes. It's too much to home that all of this has gone unnoticed and Harry still hasn't quite grasped the skill of not showing his every emotion on his face. That will be a lesson that takes more than a few months to master no matter how much control he tries to exert on himself.

But *bloody hell*.

The Ancient and Noble House of Black. To be honest, he had always thought that it had just been a pretentious way for the Blacks to proclaim themselves elite even amongst the crowd of purebloods who insisted themselves to be the pinnacle of power and perfection. And it had been. It is. That's not exactly a surprise. What *is* a surprise is that it's also *true*.

Harry has no idea what a Protictoris is – it sounds very latin and very official, so it's probably important somehow – but he's not quite sure it matters when the title listed in front of it is Prince.

*Prince*.

Of Dyfed. Wherever that is.

That's probably where the Castle Black is. The *castle*.

Bloody, fucking *hell*.

Behind the meager screen of The Prophet, Harry bites down viciously on the inside of his cheeks to keep from laughing hysterically, from cracking open like a particularly bad egg here in the middle of the Great Hall.

He had known that he was Sirius' heir. *Technically*, to borrow from Death. He had just always assumed heir simply meant that Sirius had left him the Black fortune, a crazy, prejudiced house elf, and a moderately disgusting townhome in London.

Sirius had been a *prince*. He had been actual, titled nobility. He had known, surely. He had been raised in that family, raised as the heir and rebelled against it. Had he forgotten? Had Azkaban stolen it from him? Had he been... benevolently encouraged to keep quiet about it or abandon it entirely for the greater good? Or had he simply turned his back to it of his own free will and left it in the dust, a legacy he never wanted?

The part of his brain – the very, *very* small part – not consumed with holding on to the fraying threads of his composure desperately wants to know the answer, desperately wants to sit Sirius down and *ask* him. But he can't, can he? The Sirius that made those decisions doesn't exist – or won't exist.

Maybe he'll ask Death.

Except he doesn't want to use Death like an easy answer to everything. The idea – and reality – of his growing magical power is alarming enough but having all that knowledge at his fingertips, his with no effort expended or payment made? It's terrifying. And since he's

apparently going to have millennia to get used to the idea, he figures being fucking terrified of himself - of jumping in too deep, too quickly - is totally allowed.

Even for something as simple as this.

He doesn't collapse across the table and methodically bash his forehead against the polished and scarred surface but it's a damn near thing.

Calm.

Harry takes a slow, deep breath and then another and another, one right after the other until he can feel the rush of the wind against his face, the rush and tilt of the sky around him.

Calm.

Sure.

He might not be able to ask Sirius and he might not be sure if he wants to ask Death but he can retreat to the library after he's eaten and see if it holds any answers for him. He'd planned to go there already, feeling the need to do something after days spent in a haze but not quite feeling up to wandering up and down the far-flung castle corridors has he had in his previous life whenever he felt restless.

Besides, maybe if he goes to the library, he can avoid any curiosity over his letter. Considering one of the curious people is Snape he's not exactly hopeful but he might as well give it a shot. He's come out the winner when faced with worse odds.

Harry turns back to his breakfast and hopes that The Prophet hides the way his hands shake.

---

He doesn't even make it out of the Entrance Hall.

"Mr. Potter."

Harry sighs and resists the urge to make a dash for it. He's not first life Harry. He's not breaking into private storerooms or sneaking around after curfew or snatching books from the Restricted Section. He has absolutely nothing to fear from Snape except the possibility that the man might drag him to Madam Pomfrey if he's feeling suspicious about Harry's sleeping binge.

"Professor," he greets politely, tipping his head to give the man's face a quick glance. The man returns his gaze with stoic blankness and tips his head towards the stairs leading down to the dungeons.

"Walk with me."

It's not really a question. Or even a suggestion.

Harry follows and is not surprised in the slightest when, after several minutes of quiet walking, they end up in the man's office.

“Sit,” Snape orders as he flicks his wand at the empty fireplace and it roars to life, the sudden blast of heat into the cold stone room entirely welcome and, once again, changing the feel of it entirely.

Harry sits.

Snape retreats to the other side of his desk and slides into his own chair, tenting his fingers in front of his chin and studying Harry for what feels like a small eternity before he speaks.

“You received a troubling letter at breakfast.”

“Not troubling,” Harry shakes his head because it...wasn’t. At least, not in the way that Snape is probably thinking. “It was...”

“You don’t have to tell me,” Snape says, almost gently, when Harry trails off, trying to think of a word that could describe his emotions and yet mask them. “But if you’re receiving threatening letters than I certainly want to know. There are quite a few steps that we can take.”

Harry blinks.

Oh.

*Oh.*

Snape isn’t just curious. He’s worried.

Not worried enough to make the taciturn man angry – which seems to be his default setting - so that’s probably a good sign.

“It wasn’t a threat!” he hastens to reassure his Head of House. “It was just...surprising. Shocking,” he amends after a pause because it had been a surprise but surprise just doesn’t have enough devastating *oomph* to encompass the sensation of his world – once again – being turned on its head. Just when he thinks he has grasped the scope of his ignorance, of his own blindness, he is shown how wrong he is.

Snape raises a single, pointed eyebrow.

It’s the only question he’s going to ask, Harry realizes. The man isn’t going to demand to see his mail or force Harry to confess what had been so shocking. And he probably shouldn’t because he rather expects the man to blow at the mere mention of Sirius’ name – which is not a completely unreasonable action considering the years of bullying, the attempted murder-by-werewolf, and the belief that Sirius’ betrayal is the reason for the death of the woman he loved, his childhood friend. Harry is self-aware enough these days to acknowledge that he’s bloody scared of being linked to Sirius Black in Snape’s head, especially so early into things. Especially now before the Marauder’s innocence has been proven.

And yet, eleven-year-old first year Harry isn’t supposed to know of the bad blood between the two men. He isn’t even supposed to know who Sirius Black is, except for perhaps in passing given the photos and articles that Daphne’s mum has been sending him. There has

been nothing in the information he has been given or theoretically found within the sphere of the public eye that would give him any connection to the Ancient and Noble House of Black besides that of his grandmother.

Hoping that this doesn't promptly bite him in the arse and ruin everything, Harry retrieves the letter and holds it out to Snape.

The man's eyes widen in a blink and you miss it expression of surprise but he takes the letter and flicks it open, dark eyes scanning its contents. Harry waits nervously, hands gripping the sides of the chair so tightly that his knuckles hurt in an effort to control his shaking.

He has no reason to be afraid, he reminds himself. The Harry Potter that is right here, right now has no reason to be afraid.

He's afraid anyway.

Bugger.

"I can see why you found it shocking," Snape remarks after a moment. The only indication of the storm of emotions no doubt swirling around inside of him is the way his lips are pressed into a line thin enough to do McGonagall proud.

"I just..." Harry stares at the letter, now sitting open on Snape's desk, and settles for the simplest truth. "I don't understand."

"Hmmm," Snape's rumble – is it speculative? Agreeing? Harry doesn't know – echoes around the room. "You recall that your mother was in my year?" Harry nods. "Your father was as well – also a Gryffindor," he adds with an unpleasant twist of his mouth. Harry stays quiet, forces himself to remain silent and still when Snape lets his pause drag for longer than he probably intended. "His best friend was Sirius Black. They were cousins, I believe, but closer than brothers. Inseparable. He is your godfather."

Harry inhales so sharply he almost chokes and stares at Snape. "My..." He can't even get the words out. He doesn't even know what words he wants to get out or what words might actually come out if he keeps his mouth open so he just shuts it.

"He is currently serving a life sentence in Azkaban." Snape's jaw tightens, his throat moving as he swallows and Harry knows that he's thinking of his mum, of Lily. "You know what Azkaban is from your extracurricular studies, do you not?"

Harry nods shakily, too thrown by the fact that he is actually having this conversation with *Snape* to reflexively worry about what Snape thinks of him devouring books on the wizarding world as fast as he can source them. "Why..." he manages to get out because he knows he has to but also because he wants to, he wants to know what someone says when they actually choose to tell him this instead of leaving him to find out by overhearing others gossiping about it.

"For serving the Dark Lord," Snape tells him quietly, staring at where his own hands half curled on the desktop and Harry can't make out the look on the other man's face. It isn't



blank, it isn't controlled. It's just... empty. "For the act of betrayal that allowed your parents to be murdered."

Harry swallows. "Oh. But then why..."

"Why are you still the mongrel's heir?" Snape asks bitterly, a familiar vitriol edging into his voice. He closes his mouth with an audible *click* and takes a deep breath in through his nose, the proud line of his shoulders suddenly slumping enough that Harry is momentarily afraid that he's going to topple forward onto his desk. He doesn't but his lips are bloodless, his jaw clenched so tightly that Harry's surprised he doesn't hear the man's teeth cracking. "I don't know," he admits more quietly. "Presumably because he never bothered to change the paperwork or because he never expected you to survive."

"Oh," Harry says again because what does one say to that? In his first life he had ranted and raged but, more than anything, he had been hurt that no one had deemed to tell him about Sirius Black. That the entire world knew the man had supposedly broken free of Azkaban to hunt Harry down and finish the job for his master and yet not a single person had thought to warn Harry, had thought to make sure he knew, that he understood what was happening. No one had thought to check if he was okay. "What do I do?"

Another deep breath. "My advice? If you are still seeking to avoid the Headmaster's attention..." he pauses and Harry gives an almost violent jerk of his head. Dumbledore has given him both less attention than he had thought the man would give a Slytherin Harry Potter but still far more than he would like. Not to mention that the longer Harry thinks on things and goes over his memories but more he is certain that the Sorcerer's Stone had been a setup, a way to pit Harry against Voldemort and evaluate the playing field. He doesn't know if the old bastard is aware that Voldemort is riding around inside Quirrell's head or if he simply expects whatever remains of the Dark Lord to emerge in reaction to Harry's return to the wizarding world but it's been a growing realization that, one way or another, Dumbledore is probably going to attempt to orchestrate a confrontation. Even if Harry is a Slytherin disappointment. "...do nothing." He gives Harry a careful, considering look. "Students need the written permission of their legal guardians to leave Hogwarts during the school year. It would be best to wait until summer if you intend to add the Black ring to the one on your finger."

Harry feels his entire insides turn to ice. "You..."

Snape raises an eyebrow, dark eyes finally showing something besides emptiness as he takes Harry in. "I cannot physically see it, if that is what you are asking, though I can feel the... currents of its presence. It is expected, by those who know of such things, for you to wear the ring of your house."

"Oh," Harry repeats rather weakly and fights the urge to close his eyes and let his heart beat right out of his chest. "Okay."

Snape makes a considering sort of hum before returning to their initial line of conversation as if there hadn't been anything odd or unusual about Harry's reaction. "I would ensure that a copy of that letter gets to Mr. Abbott. He will certainly know more about any options you have and possess official advice on the matter. I imagine he might contact Mr. Avery as your

representative and open lines of communication. Avery, Pennoyer, and Lynch have been the Black family solicitors for several centuries and are on retainer indefinitely. You will undoubtedly have interactions with them in the future.”

“Okay,” Harry nods, grasping on to this simple, stable course of action with both hands and holding tight. If Snape doesn’t want to talk about Sirius Black, the betrayal of his parents, or the ring on his finger that Harry is absolutely not ready to let the world at large know about then that’s alright with him. “I can do that.”

“Is there anything else you wish to speak of? If I hadn’t seen you at dinner these past few days, I would have thought that Draco had successfully stolen you away.”

And there it is.

Harry ducks his head and hopes that he looks suitably sheepish for a shocked and probably slightly traumatized kid. “Just catching up on my sleep sir. Don’t worry though, Inigo made sure I got up to take my potions,” he adds at the twitch of the professor’s eyebrow that he catches out of the corner of his eye. A half second later he realizes that this is the first time he has directly spoken about his snake – and made a somewhat obvious reference to his abilities as a parselmouth – to the man, though he knows the professor is well aware of his reptilian companion. The handful of times he’s had to wake and/or dose Harry in the middle of the night have seen to that.

Snape gives him a long, flat look like he doesn’t believe him. Which is fair, considering Harry’s less than stellar track record with recognizing when he should mention that he’s not feeling well.

“No dizziness? Nausea? Pain?”

“None sir. Well, not any more than is normal,” he amends, not wanting to lie.

Snape looks like he wants to pinch the bridge of his nose but doesn’t. “Very well,” he says instead. “But I want you to speak to myself or Madam Pomfrey if continue to experience elevated fatigue.”

“Yes sir,” Harry agrees readily enough.

The professor gives him a vaguely suspicious look but he waves his hand at his office door. “Off with you then.”

Harry pauses at the door. “Professor?” Snape raises an eyebrow. “Thank you.”

Snape tips his head slightly in acknowledgement. “You’re welcome, Mr. Potter.”

They both know that they’re not talking about what Harry’s supposed to do in regards to the letter.

When Harry looks back through the crack of a closing door, Snape is hunched forward, elbows braced on the top of his desk and his face resting against the long, stained fingers tented before him.

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This time Harry makes it out of the dungeons and halfway up the stairs from the Entrance Hall to the third floor.

“Ah, my boy, there you are!”

Harry bites his cheek until he tastes blood to keep from screaming. “Headmaster,” he greets and refuses to look higher than the man’s shoulder. He wants to ask what the old man needs, wants to provoke him. Wants to shove the moment forward and get it over with.

He doesn’t. He won’t give Dumbledore the in that he wants. Not even a few measly words.

He can learn.

Harry keeps his mouth shut and he waits.

And waits.

And waits.

He refuses to look at the Headmaster’s face but he can feel the man slowly wilt next to him, can practically see the sparkle in his eyes dim and the beaming smile fade from his face.

And still he doesn’t say a word.

It takes at least five minutes, possibly closer to ten, before Dumbledore gives up after failing to prompt him into speaking with several less than subtle clearings of his throat. “Are you alright, my boy? You seemed distressed over a letter at breakfast.”

Harry deliberately counts to ten before he blinks rather rapidly and replies, “Oh, no, I was just surprised.”

They wait in silence for another few minutes before Dumbledore sighs – something Harry feels more than hears or sees – and asks, “Oh? Surprised about what?”

*Nothing*, Harry wants to reply. *It’s none of your business you meddling old coot. It’s my bloody letter and you have no right to know what’s in it.* But that probably wouldn’t be the smartest response. He also wants to just give the man a good kick in the shins. Also, probably not the smartest response.

But Merlin, it would be satisfying.

Instead, he shrugs. “That Lord Black has died. I think they’re telling me because of my grandmother? Draco says she was a Black.” All of which is technically true, which hopefully gets him neatly around the fact that every lie shows up loud and clear on his face. He’s always been a shit liar but he’s beginning to discover a knack for lying with the truth.

“Ah.” Harry doesn’t need to be looking at the Headmaster’s face to know that the man looks like he’s sucked on a particularly sour lemon. He can practically taste the old man’s

displeasure. “She was. A revolutionary young woman unafraid to buck against tradition. Quite unlike the rest of her house.”

Because Harry knows him, and knows quite well what he thinks of the Black family, he can hear the insidious little threads, the subtle emphasis meant to make him *doubt*. No. To make him disdain an entire branch of his extended family. Dorea Black had obviously proved herself in Dumbledore’s eyes when she had married Charlus much as Harry seems to have proved his worthiness with his stunt of apparent epic bravery in trying to save Hermione.

If Dumbledore – *great man, Dumbledore* who Harry had regarded as something as a savior and paragon of all that is good in the world since the moment he had heard about him -had said such a thing to Harry in his first life Harry knows, deep in his heart of hearts, that he would have never trusted or believed good of a Black for the rest of his life. That these few words would have set him against them more firmly than all of Walburga’s hateful screaming ever did. He would have dismissed them, just as he had dismissed Slytherins. Boxed them up nice and neat and never thought anything else of them ever again.

Sometimes he hates the child that he had been. Sometimes. Mostly it just makes him tired.

*Is that all, Headmaster?* He wants to ask. He wants this to be over with. Done. But if Harry says that than Dumbledore will probably say something like, *I was wondering if I might have a word with you?* Polite but utterly impossible to refuse. Not when the Headmaster is, arguably, in charge of Harry. In charge of the day-to-day world that Harry exists in.

He’ll probably say it anyway. Harry has been waiting for him to say it – or to send some condescending little note requesting Harry’s presence – since Halloween. He knows that he cannot escape conversation with Dumbledore forever but he is wary of the Headmaster. Wary and weary and angry and, if he is being honest with himself, afraid.

In a one-on-one battle, Harry is confident he can beat Dumbledore. Not because he is more powerful – though if what Tom says is true then he probably *is* – and it’s certainly not because he’s smarter or more experienced. Obviously, he’s neither. But he *is* the Master of Death and whatever that entails. He cannot die unless he wishes it and if he can manage to accidentally freeze a mountain troll to death, he is quite certain he could manage the same thing with Dumbledore. He does not fear death, not at the hands of Dumbledore. It is the control that the Headmaster has over his life that terrifies Harry more than anything. It is the fear that if given half a chance he will be left dancing to Dumbledore’s tunes once again. Even more, that it will happen and that *he won’t even realize*.

Harry waits, half terrified of continuing this interaction and half hoping that Dumbledore takes it further, that he turns into a scenario where Harry could demand his Head of House’s presence. The man would probably glower and sneer later but if needed he would stand at Harry’s side while Dumbledore asked his questions.

Or between them, if necessary.

He can pinpoint the moment that Dumbledore decided to speak down to the very second. He could feel it. There’s a slight shifting in the air, a subtle rustling of his robes as the

Headmaster straightens his shoulders and opens his mouth but it isn't Dumbledore's voice that cuts through the mounting tension.

It's Quirrell's.

"Ah, Mr. P-p-potter," the soft, quivering tone rolls between Harry and the Headmaster like the gentled clap of distant thunder. "There y-you are. I kn-know it's C-Christmas Eve b-b-but I h-hoped to st-steal a-a m-moment to d-discuss your l-latest essay?"

"Of course, professor," Harry replies politely, turning to cast a glance at Quirrell – and it is Quirrell. If the stutter and the soft, rounded voice hadn't been enough to inform him of that fact it is written in every line of his body. Even standing and walking the man is half curled in on himself, hands twisting nervously in the folds of his robes as he pauses on the stair above Harry, the smell of garlic so pungent that it makes his eyes water.

It is amazing how the same body, the same face and limbs, can look so drastically different.

It takes every bit of hard learned control Harry possesses to not step closer to the Defense professor. Every single bit of it not to step forward and push Dumbledore down the stairs. Either. Both. Harry is not picky.

He stands still.

He can learn.

"H-headmaster?"

Dumbledore waves his hand in front of his beard as if shooing away a fly, but Harry can tell he's displeased. No. Disappointed. "Of course, my boy. One should always take their studies seriously."

Harry tips his head in acknowledgement. "Happy Christmas, professor."

Dumbledore beams brightly enough that Harry can feel it: his own private, twinkling sun. "Happy Christmas, Harry."

Harry doesn't dare pause to take several deep, gasping breaths, one right after the other until they're two floors up. Quirrell eyes him from beneath his turban and Harry is too mixed up in relief and worry to let him do anything but observe him.

"Y-you sh-should be c-careful, P-p-potter," his professor finally says and Harry smiles. It's not a pretty smile or a kind one. It's sharp and regretful, biting and bitter all in one.

"As I can be," he promises and the soft snort that meets his response is almost enough to make Harry think better of the man despite his abominable teaching. "Thank you," he adds when he no longer feels like his chest is being crushed in a metal vise.

Quirrell gives him a long, steady look that is so at odds with the bumbling, stuttering incompetence Harry has to deal with in class every week. It's still definitely Quirrell, though. There's a sharpness, a presence in the back of his gaze that calls to the gentle throbbing of

Harry's skull but the body language is still Quirrell. The words are still Quirrell. There's just a knowing there, a competence that catches Harry off guard.

For the first time, he wonders just how much of Quirrell's bumbling eccentricity is real and how much is not.

"N-no," the man finally stutters quietly, nothing but sincerity in his tone. "Thank you."

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On Christmas morning Harry goes from dead asleep to wide awake in less time that it takes to blink, sitting up in his bed before the quiet *pop* of a house elf vanishing has time to fade from the room. It's dark. The room is saved from pitch blackness only by the faint luminescence of the lake behind him and the glow of a freshly stoked fire seeping in around the doorway. It's enough, barely, to make out the faint heap of packages laid at the foot of his bed, the silver paper on one of them faintly gleaming in the dark.

"*Lumos.*"

The room brightens considerably, leaving Harry blinking at the sudden light. Squinting, he scrambles for his glasses and once they're on, lights the candle sitting on the table next to his bed. The yellow glow is much more welcome than the blue-light white of the *lumos* and he lets the spellwork fade. It is exactly five o'clock in the morning. It's an unholy hour to be awake but the sight of a lopsided pile of presents sitting on his duvet is enough to drive any desire to go back to sleep out of his head. Leaving a grumbling Inigo curled up under the edge of his pillow, he climbs out from underneath his covers and inspects them. There are significantly more than he had received in his first life and it stuns him, more than a little, even though he is vaguely aware that his circle of friends and notable acquaintances is much wider this time.

Still, he pushes his surprise down and digs through the presents until he spots the familiar paper wrapped parcel bearing no tag. For a moment he just stares at it, wide eyed and disbelieving. He hadn't thought... He'd been afraid, he admits to himself, afraid that it would not come. That Harry himself, though potentially redeemed from his unfortunate sorting, would not be deemed worthy of what is rightfully his.

But here it is.

Harry rips the paper open with single minded focus, fingertips practically tingling as they skate across familiar cloth, as it spills out into his hands and hangs like water from his fingertips. The invisibility cloak. *His* invisibility cloak. Harry shuts his eyes against the tears that form and he holds the cloak to his face. He swallows roughly and feels the familiar slick sensation of the fabric against his skin and feels its presence settle into his bones, a key slipping into a lock with a *click* that he can hear echo through all the empty places inside of him.

Lying amidst the torn paper there is a piece of parchment bearing a note in familiar, looping handwriting:

*Your father left this in my possession before he died. It is time it was returned to you.  
Use it well.*

*A Very Merry Christmas to you.*

The rest of the presents are more in line with what he had expected. There is an assortment of candies from the bulk of his year mates: Crabbe, Goyle, Nott, Greengrass, Bulstrode, and Davis. Even Pansy gifts him with a single, solitary licorice wand and Harry finds himself more amused at the childish hostility than anything else.

Draco gives him a book on quidditch and a beautiful set of quidditch gloves, the supple leather buttery soft beneath his touch. The cheerful little note enclosed with it ends with, “It’s a pity you didn’t come to the Manor with me because then we could have played on the pitch with brooms that are younger than we are! We’re going flying as soon as I get back!” And Harry laughs quietly.

Hannah gifts him a nearly flat leather and brass wrapped box that turns out to be the wizarding equivalent of a lunchbox. Its inside is larger than the outside, though not by much and it has two distinct compartments, one of which has a cooling charm set in it. She’s thoughtfully stocked the refrigerated side with slices of cheese and cooked meats and the other side contains a croissant, a small bag of mixed nuts, a bright green apple, and an orange with a single, packaged chocolate frog laid on the top of everything.

From Susan he receives his own set of Exploding Snap cards packaged in a neat, stone lined box. The exterior is golden oak, polished until it shines.

Mandy’s gift is, unsurprisingly, books. In this she is as predictable as Hermione. The first is a rather heavy tome titled: *Aurors to Zoning: A Basic Guide to Navigating the Ministry of Magic*. It looks more like a textbook more than anything else and Harry’s convinced he won’t be able to read more than a page or two at a time before inevitably falling asleep. It’s exactly the sort of thing he’s been reading in his spare time and is, therefore, perfect. The second book is velvet covered and features heavy, glossy pages with bright, saturated illustrations curling around the edges. *Once Upon a Time* is stamped across the cover and inside is a table of contents containing what appears to be the names of magical tales from around the globe. Harry is considerably more excited to read this one even if it probably won’t prove as useful in the long run.

Of course, he wouldn’t have considered *Tales of Beadle the Bard* to be as important as it had been so what does he know.

When he opens Blaise’s gift, he finds himself staring at the plain back of a picture frame and when he turns it over his breath catches in his throat. It’s a stunning drawing of Inigo half coiled across the open pages of a potion’s book. There is no color, the whole thing done in gradients of grays – likely done in the same charcoals that Harry had gifted the other boy for his birthday – but Harry has no doubt that it’s a portrait of the snake currently sleeping under his pillow with only the pink tip of his tail sticking out from underneath the cushion. He would know those markings anywhere and Blaise has captured him perfectly down to the tiniest detail. Harry half expects it to slither off the book and out of the frame.

It is unexpected and utterly gorgeous and Harry has to swallow past the lump that has formed in his throat several times as he sets it in a place of prominence on his bedside table.

Neville's gift is not a plant, which honestly throws Harry for a moment. Instead, it is fountain pen in a felt padded case and Harry can't stop himself from picking up the slick, inky black utensil and holding it between his fingers. It's a little thinner than the pen he had bought during the summer, a little easier to grasp between his fingers, and he smiles at the delicate lines of a snake that wind around and around the top of the pen in shimmering silver. It's very impressive but the unspoken message of the gift means more than the gift itself.

He hasn't told the other boy about being a parselmouth or that he has a snake for a familiar. He hasn't told any of the non-Slytherins, though he has let the idea turn over and over in the back of his mind. He worries away at it a few minutes at a time before returning it to his background thoughts. He's not ready to make a decision, not yet, but he's slowly getting used to the idea. If anything, the non-Slytherin members of their little group seem to care little that they are snakes. In fact, they seem to think so little of it that Harry keeps waiting for the other shoe to drop. And yet, it hasn't. He's beginning to think that it won't. That it might just be safe to tell them.

He lays the case with the pen next to the portrait of Inigo and resolves to use it later when he writes letters to all of his friends and thanks them for their gifts.

Speaking of gifts, there are still two sitting at the end of his bed.

He has no idea what they are or who they're from, which is concerning. One is not much larger than one of his textbooks and wrapped in matte green paper and tied with a thin silver ribbon. The other is significantly larger, probably close to a foot long, wide, and tall and it is wrapped in a deep blue. He's not sure what but there's something about the larger package that makes his skin itch so he reaches for the other one first.

"Oh," he murmurs, pleasantly surprised to find a soft green scarf with silver tassels neatly folded inside a plain cardboard box. He's seen a few other members of his house – all upper years - wearing these exact scarves but he has no idea where they got them. The few times he had glimpsed them in his first life he hadn't even bothered to think where they had acquired them, only that it was probably some Slytherin way of flaunting the dress code and showing off their superiority. It's a mystery that is solved by the short note sitting on top of it written in Snape's spikey writing.

*It is my wish that all who rest within these walls find a measure of comfort, safety, and belonging.*

*Happy Christmas,*

*Professor S. Snape*

Harry wonders if the man realizes just how much of his inner workings that single sentence reveals and then promptly laughs at himself. This is Snape, of course the man knows. It's



probably intentional. Besides, who would believe that the swooping, bat like terror of Hogwarts gave gifts to those of his students who stayed over the Christmas break? Literally no one outside of Slytherin house. He's pretty sure most of the rest of the students would doubt that the man even knows what a present is. Yet here it is, a sign as sure as the Dark Mark if infinitely gentler that says *this one is mine*. Harry knows that he will have a smile for the next person that he sees wearing one, that there will be an unmistakable warmth and satisfaction when he winds it around his neck.

"You sly bastard," Harry murmurs with no small amount of admiration.

In his first life he had hated Snape. Hated him because he was cruel to Harry for seemingly no reason, hated him perhaps even more for his blatant favoritism of his evil Slytherins. For his bias when it came to Malfoy, if he is being honest. Snape had been a bully who had enabled other bullies. And in a way he's still that. But he's not only that and that's a truth that easier to see from behind him, sheltering the shadow that he's casts over all of them.

How many people owe quiet allegiance to Snape because of these actions? Not because he favors them in front of others, not because he sneers at the other students and docks points so quickly that the other professors can hardly keep up but because he gives them a safe space to retreat to? Because he's there in the middle of the night to pour potions down their throats when they need it? Because he warms his office and cushions his chairs for their benefit? Because he makes sure that they have something to open on Christmas – a gift that means something?

*Clothing is for family*, Harry remembers.

How many people owe Snape an unwavering measure of their loyalty? Not the obsessive, almost religious zealotry that drives powerful men and women to their knees, that makes them crawl across the floor and kiss the hems of their master's robes but the sort that is as much shield as it is weapon. How many times has Snape acquired information because people opened their mouths when others would have preferred they kept it shut simply because it was Snape that was asking? How many times had young Death Eaters held their tongues or pulled their blows when Snape knelt before the Dark Lord? How many helped guide him back to Hogwarts? How many have given him quiet favors without question or hesitation because of how he treated them at Hogwarts when the rest of the school reviled them?

Dozens, at the very least.

Shaking his head, Harry sets Snape's gift with the other and finally turns his attention to the last present, eying it with no small amount of suspicion.

"*It tastes like you*," Inigo remarks and Harry jumps a little at his familiar's sudden input.

"*You're awake*."

The snake slithers up his leg and spills across his lap, tongue flickering out as he weaves his head back and forth, coiling as if he expects the present to lunge. "*Soft nest cave got cold*."

*"How terrible for you,"* Harry remarks dryly and runs his finger down the line of Inigo's back, scratching gently.

*"Yes."*

Harry rolls his eyes. *"It tastes like me?"* he adds after a moment, going back to staring at the present.

*"Different but the same,"* the snake clarifies unhelpfully. *"Cold. Like old bones."*

Well that's not ominous.

Here, safe from prying eyes, Harry is perfectly content to grab his wand and cast a barrage of spells on the present.

It's not as helpful as he wants it to be. Instead, he's left glaring at the present. It's not dangerous – well, not obviously, anyway. It's not cursed, hexed, jinxed, or otherwise going to blow up in his face when he touches it. It's also not benign either. Not that he can tell *why* exactly.

*"I'm probably going to regret this,"* Harry mutters and, reaching out, picks up the present.

Nothing happens.

Well, that's not quite true. It tingles when he touches it, a zap that feels somewhere between static electricity and getting his tongue stuck on an ice cube. It leaves him oddly breathless and his scar warm where it cuts across his forehead.

Beneath the paper is a plain wooden box. It's old. Harry can tell just at a glance, its once sharp edges gentled and curved with age, the grain of the wood smoothed and polished by the touch of centuries worth of hands. Gently, cautiously, he opens it and is promptly struck dumb.

*"...bloody hell,"* he finally manages to get out, his voice squeaking and groaning past the shock sitting like a ball in his throat and an anvil in the middle of his chest. *"What are you doing, Tom?"*

Inside the box, on a cushion of midnight blue, is Rowena's diadem and slip of parchment.

*Do not make me regret this.*

## Chapter End Notes

Canonically, James' parents are Fleamont and Euphemia but I've obviously elected to ignore that for this fic. Mostly because long before I learned the canon I was attached to

the fanon idea of Charlus and Dorea being his parents. I just really like the idea of James genetically being a Black.

Dyfed is an actual, historical petty kingdom that existed in southwest Wales from the fifth through the mid 12th century, when it was incorporated into Pembrokeshire following the Norman invasion and rise to power. It is the historical source of the *Annales Cambriae* (Annals of Wales. The oldest copy dates to the 12th century but the original was suspected to have been compiled sometime in the 10th), which contains the first known reference to Mordred (also known as Medraut) and the Battle of Camlann where he fought with or against Arthur. The title of *Protectoris* (protector) is a title of nobility awarded during the latter years of Imperial Rome.

# Twenty

## Chapter Notes

So this fic has officially passed 17,000 kudos and I *cannot* emphasize enough just how much that blows my fucking mind. Just...a;lkdjfa;lkdjf;ladk. I have nothing.

Thank you, from the very bottom of my heart, for every bit of support for this crazy, rambling fic of mine. I adore you all. Wherever you are, whatever you're doing, whatever (if anything) you are celebrating at this time of year I hope it is wonderful.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Harry panics for five whole minutes. Maybe ten.

Fine. Twenty.

Harry panics for at least twenty minutes about the fact that he has a horcrux sitting pretty as you please in the middle of his bed. It's one thing to walk around with one nestled all cozy inside his head. It's another thing entirely to have one delivered to him on a cushion as a bloody Christmas gift. *A Christmas gift.*

Lord Voldemort has gifted him a one-of-a-kind priceless antique treasure that also conveniently houses part of his soul.

Harry puts his face in his hands and screams.

Silently.

Because there is no bloody way he is going to manage explaining this to Snape right now. Or probably ever. But mostly he's afraid of *right now*.

Letting out a whimper, Harry rubs at his face with the heels of his hands so hard that it hurts a little and opens his eyes. The diadem is still there. Just... sitting there.

Bugger.

Seriously, though. What in Merlin's name is he supposed to do with *this*? Sure, he had meant to gather up Tom's horcruxes and put them somewhere safe. Safe from Dumbledore, should he go looking. Safe from Tom as well, if needed, but he hadn't meant for it to be like this. Despite it being right under Dumbledore's nose the diadem had always seemed like safest horcrux – well, the safest horcrux after Harry himself – for all that it is, was, probably the easiest to get to. He had been content to leave it be for now, much more concerned about the diary and the ring. With both Sirius and Bellatrix contained in Azkaban the locket and cup are secure for the moment so gathering the horcruxes, while on his to do list, had been an

item slated for the future. For summer, at the very earliest, but possibly even further away than that.

But here he is.

The diadem is beautiful, he acknowledges. He's seen it twice before but he never actually *looked* at it either time. The first time he'd been too busy trying to hide the Half-Blood Prince's potion book so Snape couldn't take it from him and the second time he'd been more concerned about not dying. And then it had conveniently burnt to a crisp so really, this is the first time he's ever actually gotten to look at it. The main body of the crown is an eagle, delicate silver lines flaring out from the body and sweeping down to wrap around the wearer's head. The feathers of each wing are done in subtle detail, threads of silver woven with chips of blue stone that look familiar but that he can't remember the names of. The wings themselves are tipped in delicate quartz spheres: some as clear as glass and others smoky and opaque. The body of the eagle is a sapphire nearly as large as the palm of his hand and so blue it seems to glow, to burn as if someone has lit a fire deep inside its heart. Dangling from the body of the eagle in a line meant to fall over the wearer's forehead is a duo of stones: one a pale, translucent blue and the other another, though larger, piece of quartz.

It is elegant and beautiful, of flawless craftsmanship and possessing a distinctly feminine, if regal air. Harry wonders if it would look ridiculous on his head or...

Wait.

Harry narrows his eyes at the crown in the case. "*Oh, you are sneaky,*" he tells the horcrux. The diary had been friendly and all consuming – like a particularly good memory you were loath to stop reliving and become a little obsessed with – and the locket had been an insidious dark cloud that had hung over everything but the diadem, oh the diadem is *sneaky*: soft and delicate and almost unnoticeable. "*Don't do that,*" he tells it. "*I'm already resurrecting you. Keep your little mind controlling bits to yourself.*"

It should feel odd to talk out loud to an inanimate object but it doesn't. Harry knows better. The diary and the locket had both shown varying levels of being aware of what went on around them. The diary had literally been able to talk, to hold conversations and share memories. It might not possess a body to move or a mouth to speak with but this is still a piece of Tom Riddle and that is a warning all on its own.

And then he feels it. Gentle and coaxing, like ebb and flow of the lake lapping against the glass of his window. No. Like flying in the rain, a gentle drizzle that hits his glasses and beads across their surface, slipping and sliding one after another until he's watching the world through a river. He has no doubt that, if it wanted to, the horcrux could hit him like a hurricane, pummeling him into submission beneath a relentless surge.

Right now, it's just... tasting.

"*And that's enough of that,*" he tells it sternly, snapping the lid of the wooden case shut. The sensation of Voldemort's soul poking away at his mental defenses vanishes in an instant but

not before Harry feels a rush of... *allowance*? Permission, maybe. Tolerance. A subtle curiosity.

Lord Voldemort approves.

Or, he's at least willing to bide his time and watch how this plays out before trying to take control of Harry's body.

Yeah.

That, that seems more like him. Tom Riddle, even in such a miniscule part, is a man to hedge his bets.

Harry tries to figure out if he's pleased or offended by the Dark Lord's judgement. Both. Probably both.

*Definitely* both.

"Arrogant bastard," Harry mutters under his breath as he takes the diadem down into his trunk. The words come out more fondly than he meant them too. That's probably unfortunate.

It's not until after he has the diadem safely stashed away – tucked up in the cabinets beneath the sink of his kitchenette and warded as strongly as he can manage, which doesn't feel like nearly enough – that the full magnitude of what has happened hits him like a bludger to the head.

Tom Riddle has gifted him a piece of his soul disguised inside of a priceless artifact.

Tom Riddle has *gifted* him a piece of his soul disguised inside of a priceless artifact.

The emphasis is important.

Especially because Tom Riddle has probably forgotten more about gift giving etiquette than Harry has ever read at this point, let alone actually retained.

For a brief moment he actually entertains the thought that maybe the horcrux is repayment for the unicorn blood – a balancing of the scales – but only for a moment. The unicorn blood had been an opening move, a petition for the older man to seriously consider his offer of an alliance as well as a taste of the sort of thing that Harry might bring into their partnership and Tom had been very well aware of it. Ignoring the fact that such had been the standard in the negotiation of alliances for thousands of years, Tom had been inside of his head and Harry's intentions on the matter had surely been plain for him to see.

The unicorn blood is not a debt that Tom Riddle needs to repay.

No, this, this is something else. Something big.

*Do not make me regret this.*

Harry giggles rather hysterically. It comes out as more of a wheeze.

Bloody hell, he needs to get himself under control. It's not like this is the first time Voldemort has gifted part of his soul. He's given a piece to both Lucius and Bellatrix and even Regulus had been gifted with the knowledge of a horcrux's existence and been used to help protect it. Kind of. So, he's one of three or one of four, depending on how technical he wants to get.

It's something that he spent a lot of time wondering there in the cold and the misery of that fucking tent: what would prompt a man like Lord Voldemort to give away part of his soul? What would prompt a man like Tom Riddle to give a key of his continued existence away to people – people who could be bought, bullied, coerced, angered? Why had he done it? *Why?*

Dumbledore, he is sure, would tell him that it is a mark of Tom's arrogance – that the Dark Lord could not conceive of a world in which his followers did not follow his orders and respect his wishes perfectly. Even then, even *before*, Harry wouldn't have believed it. He would have accepted it, nodded along to this neat and tidy response and he would have known it was *wrong*. Tom is arrogant, no doubt about that, but it's sort of arrogance that exists for good reason. It's well earned. It's not Malfoy prancing around like he owns the school because his father is on the Board or otherwise acting like a complete git because his family is likely richer than actual countries. *Prominent* countries. No, it's the arrogance of a man who knows his strengths – who has *worked* to explore and develop them - and is not afraid to flaunt them.

*I am the most powerful wizard in Europe and quite arguably the most powerful wizard on earth – that is not pride or boasting. It is measurable, recordable fact.*

Tom Riddle is arrogant when it comes to magic, when it comes to knowledge, when it comes to power. Not people. People, even other wixen, are beneath him. They are pieces to be considered and moved in the way that benefits him the most – a trait he and Dumbledore share, in Harry's opinion, though he will never be brave enough to ever actually say it to either of their faces.

So why would he give away something so important to something so fallible? To the best of Harry's determination, it would be like Aunt Petunia giving her prized china and quite possibly her wedding and engagement rings to Marge's beast Ripper to keep safe. It's entirely possible that he might actually guard the bloody things but equally – if not more likely – that he'd destroy them with his blundering about.

See: Lucius Malfoy and the bloody diary.

Are they meant as a show of trust or, perhaps more likely, a reward? Are they a very high stakes test? Harry can certainly believe the latter and the former... well. He can believe that too. He's never broken off bits of his *actual* soul and gone around handing them out to people but he knows just how hard it had been – how hard it still *is* – to trust others with parts of himself, with his true thoughts and feelings and experiences. He doubts he is ever really going to *know* – not unless he finds enough Gryffindor courage to actually ask, which thanks but no thanks, he likes breathing.

It's unfortunate that there isn't an entry labelled 'horcruxes' in *The Art of Tradition: A Closer Look at the Intricacies of Magical Europe*.

Although...

Harry turns from where he is staring unseeing at the cabinet under the sink to the ever-growing towers of books stacked neatly along the far wall next to his makeshift bed.

Horcrux almost certainly isn't listed in any gift giving index but diadem probably is.

But would it have been meant that way or did it end up in Harry's possession because it had been the closest horcrux?

Harry barely has time for the thought to form before he laughs: a snorting, choking sort of thing. He has to remember that he's dealing with Voldemort, with *Tom Riddle*. The man might be prone to overly dramatic gestures and monologuing like the villain in one of Dudley's cartoons but even at the end, when he had been snake faced and devolving, flying apart into pieces, he had been one of the smartest people Harry had known. Mad, but brilliant. Terrible, but great. He wouldn't just give Harry a horcrux randomly, with no rhyme or reason. No. Any gift the Dark Lord gives is done exactly and with great purpose - probably more than one. As shocking as the gift of the horcrux is, it's not just the soul that is important here. Harry can feel it down to his bones. The object that houses it is important too. Ease of access would have had very little bearing on Tom Riddle's gift giving, Harry is sure.

Mostly.

"Ugh," he exhales as he presses at his face, hands digging into the softness of his cheeks so hard that he can feel the impression of his teeth.

He could be wrong, of course, but... oh, who is he trying to lie to? Now that the thought has occurred to him, he's not going to be able to let it go until he's satisfied his curiosity.

The book is in his hands before he even realizes he is moving, the pages easily falling open to the section on gifts from the near constant use he has given it in the past month as he figured out what to give everyone for the winter holiday. He flips past the first few pages of the index until he comes to the *Ds*.

No *diadem*.

Bugger.

Harry stares at the very disappointing and not all helpful heading of *Diamonds*, trying to not feel too put out and failing entirely, when something occurs to him. A diadem is a *crown*. Unable to completely squash down the little blossom of hope that rises at the thought he goes back a few pages.

There.

Six simple letters but it makes his heart stop for a minute, leaving him with a feeling not dissimilar to facing down a Hungarian Horntail with nothing but a wand and a broom clutched in his hands. He's not in the air, not yet, not where he feels comfortable or in control but he might get there. Or he might end up as a bloody smear on the ground.



It had been a much more appropriate feeling when he had *actually* been staring down a multi-ton dragon the size of a small house and not a book.

He is an absolute, fucking *mess*.

### **CROWN**

*A rare gift, a crown – or any variation thereof – was at its prominence between the fifth and thirteenth centuries, though it continued to have some popularity in pockets of Spain, Italy, and much of Central Europe through the end of the 1700s. It is a gift of great intimacy whose exact meaning is dictated by the status and situation of both giver and recipient. As a mark of sovereignty, it is custom for a smaller power to surrender their crown when submitting themselves to the authority and care of a larger power. So also, can it be gifted by a sovereign to the close members of their household to indicate their belonging and position. Most frequently, however, it is seen as a sign of great respect – a ruler relinquishing a measure of their authority and entrusting it to a political or romantic partner – and has frequently been utilized at the signing of treaties and as the concluding act in the spectacle of prominent noble weddings.*

*While the composition and design of the crown can no doubt lend more nuance to the gift, such matters change from drastically from region to region and depend particularly on the history and intent of giver, recipient, and even the crown itself.*

Harry stares at the page for so long that the words start swimming even though he is definitely wearing his glasses.

He knows. He has checked. Twice.

He blinks to clear his gaze and is surprised by the warmth of tears beading over the edge of his lashes and trickling down his cheeks.

“Oh,” he finally says about the time his legs give out from underneath him and he ends up on the floor. “Alright then.”

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Putting the cloak on, more than anything else he has done in the past several months, feels like coming home. He has felt nearly every emotion imaginable beneath the fabric that falls over his head and down across his shoulders, pooling around his limbs like water. Everything from joy to betrayal, grief to amusement, terror to conviction, caution to curiosity. He has laughed and cried and raged. In an ever-tightening spiral of a fate he had never asked for the cloak had offered him sanctuary, had let him wander the corridors alone and shielded him from those that sought to find him and use him for good or ill. This cloak hadn't just been a tool that allowed him to creep around the school when he really probably shouldn't have. It

hadn't just been a connection to his past – to his father and his father and his father before him. It had been his haven. Hidden away where no one could see Harry had been able to simply be *him*, whoever he happened to be beneath all of the expectations and assumptions heaped upon him.

He'd never had the chance to properly figure out who he was in his first life but he likes to think that he's making headway in this one. Or he's at least pointed in the right direction. He thinks. Probably too soon to tell for certain.

It's only eight-thirty when he slips from the common room and out in the chilled darkness of the dungeon corridors but it feels much later. The school is empty and quiet, the sun long since set and only the most commonly traveled of the main corridors are lit. It doesn't matter. Harry is pretty sure he could navigate most of his castle blindfolded – and it is *his* castle now. Here in the dark and the quiet with the invisibility cloak thrown over his head Hogwarts is *his*.

Despite his desire to just get this over with, Harry doesn't just head straight for the abandoned classroom where the Mirror of Erised may or may not be waiting for him to stumble across. Partially because the Slytherin pep talks that he's been giving himself must finally be starting to work because the idea of being so *obvious* makes the muscles next to his eyes twitch. Partially because he's not actually sure that it will be there and he kind of prefers to not think about the implications of that. Mostly, though, it's because he has no idea what he's going to see in the mirror. He doesn't think it's going to be his parents, not anymore. He loves them, he misses them, but he doesn't know them. He'll never know them as anything but other people's memories. The lack of them is no longer a gaping wound. He no longer hungers after them with a desperation that gnaws at his gut and makes his hands shake. But he doesn't know what will take their place, either, and part of him doesn't want to know. Part of him is scared to know.

He'd really rather not think about that either.

And yet here he is.

Harry sighs and takes a turn down another corridor at random. It's not an often used one but it's also not nearly as abandoned as his original eleven-year-old self would have thought. Frankly, the out-of-the-way abandoned classroom that supposedly, hopefully has the Mirror of Erised waiting in it is neither out of the way nor abandoned, at least not really. Sure, it probably hasn't officially been used for a few years but it's centrally located enough that it no doubt sees some traffic as a quiet study location or a hook up spot for older students who want some quiet privacy but can't actually be arsed to venture deeper into the castle.

After wandering around for the better part of an hour, poking into classrooms, broom closets, and the occasional dead-end corridor just to make a thorough show of *exploring*, Harry lets himself stumble upon the classroom.

*Find that Gryffindor courage*, he tells himself sternly and opens the door before he can let the faint, anxious panic stirring in his chest well up into something greater.

It's there.

The mirror is there.

He doesn't realize how sure he had been that it *wouldn't* be there until the weight of his relief forces him to lock his knees so he doesn't end up on the floor. Because he had been, he realizes in a rush. He had been certain that Dumbledore would have moved it – or not put it here to begin with. Even with the return of the cloak he had doubted. After all, outside of Dumbledore's new annoying habit of randomly popping up to passive aggressively congratulate him on not being a *real* Slytherin there has been very few attempts to maneuver Harry into discovering the presence of the Sorcerer's Stone and then protecting it from Voldemort. And maybe it's nothing. Maybe Harry really does just have the weirdest luck and Dumbledore didn't actually *do* much of anything during his first life besides make sure that he possessed the invisibility cloak. Maybe, but Harry really doubts it. Instead, if he had to guess, he would say that Dumbledore has been holding back, observing the unexpected creature that is a Slytherin Harry Potter.

Frankly, he has started to wonder if Dumbledore's new found caution and blatant disregard for Slytherins is going to come back and bite Harry in the arse by changing what someone needs to do to get to the stone. And it still could, he can admit that, but the mirror is here.

And so is Dumbledore.

He can't actually see the man, not really, but he's a great deal smarter now – or at least more observant. It took a while - nearly seven years - but he's finally arrived at the realization that just because he's invisible doesn't mean that there aren't other ways to track his presence. Obvious, mundane ways. In fact, Harry's quite certain that Dumbledore's knack for omnipresence is quite simply down to the fact that it never occurred to Harry to silence himself. Young and so used to thinking like a muggle, he had been lulled into complacency with the illusion of being unmade completely when he had only been made unseen.

So here they are, the two of them and the mirror. Harry is beneath his cloak, forcing his feet to shuffle across the floor like he remembers doing when he really was eleven, and Dumbledore standing along the wall opposite the mirror, which Harry only knows because he not only looks but is expecting the man to be there and knows what to look for: the odd sort of ripple of a disillusionment spell.

And the mirror.

That fucking mirror.

It's with a bitter taste in his mouth that Harry realizes that he is afraid of the thing. Absolutely bloody terrified. In fact, at this moment he'd be hard pressed to pick as to whether he's more afraid of the mirror or an entire horde of dementors. Dementors, at least, can be driven away with a flick of his wand. There is no escaping the mirror or what it shows him.

He doesn't technically have to look in it. He could just... pretend.

No.

That's a lie.

Ignoring Harry's long history of being too curious for his own good, he has to look in the mirror. The idea of *not knowing*, of leaving information about himself behind is unthinkable. Especially when it might very well be something that bites him in the arse later. Especially when it is literally the answer to the question he has been asking since he sat beneath a tree and thought of his life, since he woke up in his cupboard seven years in the past, since he told Dumbledore "No" and picked up a wretched, miserable baby: *What do I want?*

He thinks of the list – the list that he has written and rewritten dozens of times. He thinks of moving on, of going back, of dying completely.

He closes his eyes and steps in front of the mirror.

The cloak stays on. There's no way he'll be able to control whatever is on his face. He certainly can't control what is on it now – fear and anxiety and a no doubt obvious wish to be just about everywhere else.

Keeping his eyes tightly closed he forces himself to slowly, quietly take a deep breath and reaches for the sensation of sitting on his broom, high in the air. The game has just started. It's too early to really look for the stitch. Right now all he has to do is sit here and survey, maybe perform a few lazy loops. Nothing else.

He lets himself hover there, pulls the sensations of freedom and space and time around him like a warm blanket.

Exhales.

Harry opens his eyes.

At first, he sees nothing. Not in the sense that he's wearing an invisibility cloak and so he sees nothing but the room reflected on the mirror's surface but he literally sees *nothing*. The entire mirror has gone dark: a smooth matte black.

Except, no, it hasn't.

It's black but it ripples, shivers like the barest whisper of waves on the surface of the lake.

Except, no, it doesn't.

It's not just the surface of the lake but deeper and the longer that Harry stares at the mirror the deeper it goes: on and on and on in a downward and outward spiral. He's looking at the mirror but he's looking into it, beyond it. It feels like that moment in limbo when he had first caught sight of Death. It feels... it feels like after the troll, like something inside of him has unfolded, has sat up and stretched its limbs beyond the confines of its cage.

And then there is a man.

He is formed from the ripples and the spaces in between, dripping down from the darkness. There is something familiar about him, about the way he moves as he walks up out of the darkness to the surface of the mirror.

It's him, Harry realizes after several moments. Not Harry as he is or Harry as he was but Harry as he could be. *Will be*, part of his brain corrects as he stares at the reflection that is him but not him. This is the face that would have looked back at him in limbo had there been any reflective surfaces. He is sure of it.

Skin positively golden with health and sun exposure, he's older and at that age where the last bits of youth still cling to a fully adult form. He's taller than he ever expected to be though still not exactly tall. Broader through the shoulders too, no longer thin and a scrawny, perpetually half starved and still in the awkward, gangly stage of puberty. His eyes are still their recognizable, remarkable green. The horcrux scar is still on his forehead in a raised red line. He still looks a bit like his father there around his nose and mouth but his face is longer, the lines of his jaw squarer. The shiny strands of his fall around his face in feathered layers that tumble across his ears and sweep at curve of his jaw and the line of his shoulders.

It is him but not him and Harry doesn't know what it means to see himself like this in the mirror.

But then there is the second man.

Or at least the pretense of one.

Death coalesces into being directly behind mirror Harry, absent one moment and there the next. He grins out at Harry, tall enough that even as an adult the top of mirror Harry's head still only comes to the bottom of his chin, and rests his hands on the curve of Harry's shoulders. He can feel the cool weight of them and he knows that even if he can't see the being that he's there, he's here, behind Harry as he is now with long cool fingers laying over his shoulders and fanning down across his collarbone.

*[Hello darling.]*

Harry couldn't stop the blinding, beaming smile that he feels pull at his lips even if he wanted to. He doesn't though. Death's appearance eases something, unwinds a line of tension that had wrapped around his heart like Inigo likes to wrap himself around his mice.

*Hello*, he greets cautiously in his head, feeling a bit silly.

In the mirror Death beams back at him.

*[Oh, look at you trying new things. You are an ambitious one, aren't you?]*

*I have no idea what I'm doing*, Harry confesses, not for the first time.

*[You're seeing the deepest desires of your heart. It's a very pretty little piece of magic, if I do say so myself, and I'm flattered, darling, absolutely flattered that I made the cut.]*

The fingers on his shoulders squeeze gently and in the mirror Death rocks back on his heels, eyes gleaming.

*Of course, you did*, the thought slips out unthinking, something he would have normally censored and kept locked behind his teeth. It's overly sentimental and probably a ridiculous –

Death is *Death* and Harry is just Harry but also something more, an iceberg that he is just barely beginning to see the tip of – but he can feel the truth of it echo in his bones. He still has trouble wrapping his head around the whole Master of Death. Whenever he thinks on it he feels like he's scrambling around in the dark, trying to figure out the form and function of something that he can't really see and can only touch with numbed, clumsy fingers. He only knows enough now to realize that he knows next to nothing and that it will be years – *millennia*, he corrects absentmindedly, skittering away from it almost as soon as he thinks it – before he begins to truly map the shape and design of what he is becoming. Still, even knowing next to nothing he knows that Death is a part of him or maybe it's that he is a part of Death. Maybe it's both. Maybe it doesn't matter.

Maybe all that matters is that it's irrevocable. That it always has been and always is and always will be.

[*Oh, darling.*]

In the mirror, Harry raises a hand and lays it over one of Death's as two more figures drip out of the darkness lapping at the mirror's edge. The first to fully form and step forward is Snape. He's still in all black but it is far more casual than his usual wear, with sleeves rolled up nearly to his elbows and hair pulled back and piled in a messy bun on the top of his head, a few strands escaping to fall forward across his eyes. Eyes that look far more relaxed than Harry has ever seen them, the skin to the side of them crinkled ever so slightly with the smile – content and easy and still sharp enough to make someone bleed – that pulls at the corner of his mouth.

It actually takes Harry a few seconds to place the man that comes up on Harry's left. He's tall – taller than both Death and Snape – with thick, faintly wavy black hair just beginning to silver at the temples, a stern set to his mouth, and an intensity to his pale-eyed stare that makes Harry feel like he's being stripped away layer by layer and studied like some sort of specimen beneath a muggle microscope. It's the sharp slash of his cheekbones that give him away in the end. There's only one man Harry has ever seen with a face like that.

*There you are*, he thinks and stares at the visage that is neither the Tom Riddle nor the Lord Voldemort that Harry had known and yet somehow is both.

The two men crowd at Harry's sides, so close that he can almost feel the heat of them here on the other side, alone but for the Headmaster in a drafty classroom.

There are others in the mirror now, stepping out from between the ripples almost faster than Harry can track. Some of them are present with the almost touchable clarity of the first three figures: Draco, Neville, Blaise, Hannah, Susan, and Mandy are all there in stark relief. They are grown, probably a decade older than he ever got to see them reach in his first life, and so, so different than he remembers from the battle of Hogwarts. They are filled out and smiling, beaming with health and playful happiness. They are beautiful and proud and *alive*. Harry has never seen a grin that wide on Draco's face, has never seen Neville stand that tall or be so settled in his skin.

Others are vaguer: their edges hazy, their features indistinct.

There are two men at the edge there that he thinks might be Sirius and Remus and the slip of a young woman twirling off to the side, nearly knocking into Tom with every arch of her arms, is almost certainly Luna. He's pretty sure Quirrell is there in Snape's shadow and the man behind him with the shaggy golden-brown hair and the cigarette hanging out of his mouth looks so familiar that Harry spends the better part of five minutes trying to place him to no avail. There's a riot of curls even further back that might be Hermione and the shadow of two identical figures side by side that could be the Weasley twins. There are others, so many others that pull at Harry's mind: faces that he feels like he should recognize and yet he cannot. Whether that is the fault of his memory or the shifting, unfinished lines of their faces Harry cannot say for certain.

It's fascinating. It steals the breath right out of Harry's lungs.

He has no idea what it all means.

The Harry-that-might-be smiles at him, understanding flashing over his face. Leaving his one hand covering Death's, he raises the other presses it against his side of the glass. The fall of each incorporeal finger is echoed by Harry's heart pounding away at his ribs. He echoes the movement, the invisibility cloak sliding off his head and down his shoulders as he steps forward and lays his hand on the mirror.

It's like touching lightning. It's the initial gratifying rush of power being pulled from his core and out through his wand. It's diving from three hundred feet and feeling the snitch flutter against his hand.

It's the darkness, the Endless Void unfolding out and in and up and down in all directions, all at once, expanding faster than he can track. Rushing, rushing onward and backward without beginning or end. It's a riot of stars bursting into existence against the emptiness of space. It's the blaze of them, the burn, the burst as they go out. It's the rush of flame, the rush of blood in his veins, the rush of air whistling past his ears. It's a dozen voices, a thousand, a number he can't even comprehend. It's laughter and tears and *home*.

He can hear a child crying, can hear his own voice singing.

He can feel a joy so bright it makes his heart burst, a grief so sharp that he feels cut off at the knees.

He is surrounded by warmth and light.

No.

No. That's not right. He...

He holds it in his hands, feels the cold and the dark swirl around him, swirl through him: eddies in an endless river. He cradles the bright sparks of fire as tenderly as if they were a baby bird helpless and fallen from its nest. He shelters it in his palms while it burns and dies and burns again.

He holds it until there is nothing but ash.

He holds it until there is no one left in the mirror.

No one but him and Death and Tom and Snape.

He holds it until they fade away, until they scatter into ash and shadow and Harry is left in the expanding expanse. Until there is no one but Harry and Death.

Until even he fades away, Death's hands sliding down his arms and wrapping around his front to pull him back against the being's chest, dispersing them both into the dark.

Until only the black matte surface of the mirror remains, cold as ice beneath his hand.

Harry doesn't realize he's crying, great gasping sobs that shake his entire body and pull painfully at his ribs and tears that stream in an unending line down his cheeks until someone touches his arm.

He jerks away with a cry, throwing himself backward and tripping over the edge of the cloak. He crashes into desk and hauls himself around it, putting the furniture between him and... and...

"...my boy!" Dumbledore's voice breaks the cloud of sensation. Harry wants to roar at the touch of it, wants to snarl like some cornered animal. Beneath his hands the desk crackles, creaks and cries as ice races through the veins of wood. "Are you okay? Harry! Are you okay?"

The headmaster reaches for him again and Harry flinches, scrambling backwards until there's a desk and a chair and another desk between them. He has to get away, has to put space between them. He doesn't have control of himself. He's too... everything. Happy. Sad. Angry. Joyful. Grieving. Raging. It's all tangled up inside of him. It's dying and living and dying again.

If Dumbledore touches him Harry can't be sure that he won't do to him what he did to the troll.

No.

Worse.

Cool fingers curl over the edges of Harry's shoulders and squeeze gently. Harry nearly drops from relief, heart hammering so hard he can taste it at the back of his throat, can feel the too hot taste of copper and salt coating his tongue.

*[Easy, darling. I am here. I am always here.]*

"What did you see?" Dumbledore's demand cracks across the distance between them, his face twisted horribly between fear and fascination.

"I...w-what?" Harry manages to get out and it feels like he's dragging broken glass up the inside of his throat. He covers his face, rubs at his eyes and knows as soon as he touches it



that it's not just tears on his cheeks. It's blood, warm and tacky and painting lines from the corners of his eyes down to his chin.

Dumbledore doesn't see it though. At least... at least Harry doesn't think so. It's too dark, surely and the headmaster is distracted.

The man who had once been as good as his grandfather takes a single cautious step towards him, hands held out placatingly. "In the mirror, Harry," he says gently, almost kindly. Harry blinks at him, tries and fails to clear the tears and blood from his eyes. "It is an enchanted mirror that shows us the deepest, truest desire of our hearts," he explains softly, leadingly. "What did you see?"

Harry stares at the mirror, at the gleaming gold and glass rising so high above everything else in the room. "...my family," he finally answers hoarsely, too raw to tell anything but the truth. "I... my family was there. I never..." he trails off, unable to find the words. Unable to figure out what to say.

"Ah," the Headmaster hums and Harry doesn't miss the smile on his face, doesn't miss that it doesn't fade even as the old man warns him of the mirror's dangers.

Harry doesn't bother asking what Dumbledore sees in the mirror. Not this time.

Death doesn't carry him back to the dorms but it's a close thing. The being guides him there, though. A touch here, a soft tug there, leading him through the corridors and down the stairs. Part of Harry wants to find Snape, wants to curl up on the chair in the man's office. Part of him wants to go bang on Quirrell's door until he opens up, wants to... something. Except he doesn't, because the man he really wants to see isn't actually there. Instead he just goes, lets Death direct him along as surely as if he were a dog on a leash until Harry blinks and suddenly finds himself lying in the pile of blankets on the floor of his flat, Inigo looped around his arm and tucked beneath his chin.

Death is beside him, the cool of his thigh beneath Harry's cheek as his fingers run through Harry's hair over and over and over again.

"So stubborn, darling," the being murmurs as Harry fades in and out. "I told you not to look too closely. I should have warned you again. You're still so very young."

Harry thinks he hums.

"Rest," Death tells him. "I have you."

Harry curls his fingers weakly in the soft, almost slick feeling wool of Death's trousers.

"I'm not going anywhere, darling, I promise." Death's fingers drag softly at his scalp and Harry's entire body shudders in a hoarse, tangled sob.

Harry closes his eyes and lets the world slip away. In his heart, in his mind he carefully holds the memory of the mirror, holds the pain and the pleasure of the little flickering flames like a talisman because in another, distant part of him he is still walking into the Forbidden Forest.

*“Stay until the end?”* he had asked the specters that had surrounded him because there in dark, in his heart of hearts, he still had not been able to give voice to the plea that has existed, pulsing and beating beneath the veneer of consciousness since before he can truly remember.

*I do not want to be alone.*

## Chapter End Notes

For the curious, the stones I used in my depiction of the diadem are lapis lazuli, sapphire, labradorite, aquamarine, and both clear and smoky quartz.

And this is as good a place as any to drop in a few thoughts on fancasts/visuals for this fic. I absolutely cannot picture Daniel Radcliffe as Harry - mainly because he is my baby brother's doppelganger. They could seriously be twins and as such that makes my life a little awkward if I'm writing or envisioning potential romantic/sexual situations for Harry. Because of this my personal envisioning of Harry looks quite a bit like [Ben Barnes](#).

I've mentioned before (on a different fic) that Benedict Cumberbatch is my always-and-forever Tom Riddle. For this fic specifically I am 1000% picturing him like [this](#).

I absolutely adore Alan Rickman so even though I think they cast too old for Snape and the Marauders for the films I usually default to picturing a younger Alan Rickman (circa "Die Hard" or "Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves"). That said, for this fic I very strongly picture [Adam Driver](#). And another. Because I can.

Death looks a lot like [Tom Ellis](#) but moves and gestures more like David Tennant.

# Twenty One

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Professor? Do you have a moment?”

Quirrell looks up from where he is seated at the desk in his office and freezes for just a beat, his eyes slightly wide before he shakes himself like a dog and motions Harry forward. “Of course, P-potter. Tea?”

Harry blinks, the offer catching him off guard. He thought... actually, he’s not sure what he thought would happen when he approached Quirrell again – and he should probably stop doing that, bloody hell, the whole point of this is to have a *plan* – but sitting down and drinking tea with the man hadn’t been on the list. Remembering the impressive stack of cannisters sitting on the shelves behind him, Harry thinks this is probably an oversight on his part.

“Er, sure.”

“Any p-preference?”

“Um, no. Whatever you’re having is fine. Sir.”

Quirrell lets out a low hum of acknowledgement and turns away. Harry shuts his eyes. Brilliant. He’s being... well. He inhales and lets it out slowly until he can feel the lift of the air against him, the kiss of the wind against his skin as he hovers.

Quirrell makes a pot of tea deftly, measuring out dark curled leaves and pouring in hot water all with his back to Harry. He’s not sure if it’s intentional, to give him a moment to gather his scattered wits, but he thinks it might be. He’s always thought Quirrell to be a stuttering, reckless fool – a villain of the moment, made evil by a weak mind and being present in the wrong place at the wrong time. Looking at the man now, deftly laying out a tea service with the sort of grace that mirrors Snape brewing or Hermione running arithmancy calculations, Harry is left wondering how much of this is Lord Voldemort and how much is Quirrell himself.

Mentally, he resigns himself to the growing inevitability of being wrong again and accepts the cup that Quirrell hands him and takes a long, fortifying sip before he opens his mouth and makes an ass out of himself again.

“This is good,” he blurts out before he can stop himself, blinking down at the cup. It’s tea, obviously, a smooth black with the bright, almost bitter notes of bergamot – an earl grey. Harry remembers how he had selected it the last time he had been in this room because it had seemed to be one of the blends used the most but this blend is different. There’s a nutty note to it and hints of orange rounding out the taste in his mouth. Harry likes it.

“It is,” Quirrell agrees quietly from the other side of the desk. “My m-mother g-gifted it t-to me. She c-collects t-tea like S-snape c-collects p-potions ingredients.”

Harry stares and then drops his gaze to the fine, bone white cup clutched between his hands, mind racing. Tea isn’t a very noteworthy gift in terms of meaning. Like most sweets, it’s a fairly common gift, it’s importance largely determined by the ingredients and the people involved in the giving and receiving. It might be nothing, a little extra something given from mother to son. A gift given more for the recipient to have something to open than for any other person. And yet, he gets the feeling from Quirrell’s words and tone that this is something more, something special, that he is sharing with Harry.

If Snape had given him a selection of potions ingredients – even the most common ones – he certainly wouldn’t be using and sharing them in class. He’d hoard them for brewing of his own.

“Thank you for sharing it with me, sir.”

“It is I who owes you th-thanks, P-potter.”

Harry looks up from his cup. “Oh, no, you...” he swallows, struggles to rein in his tongue and form his thoughts and feelings into something rational. “I was happy to help,” he finally answers carefully. “Your health is important.”

There. That’s not giving anything away but even Quirrell should understand.

The smile that twists across Quirrell’s face is equal parts resigned and hopeful. “I f-forfeited m-my h-health and p-possibly m-my life m-months ago. I w-was h-happy to d-do so.”

“I know,” Harry says and doesn’t think of the monster rising up from the body of the unicorn with blood dripping down its face, doesn’t think of the way the man across from him felt as he burned and bubbled and turned into ash beneath Harry’s frantic touch. Distantly, part of him wonders if Quirrell is offended at Harry’s actions. If he’s jealous of the help that Harry has provided to Tom Riddle – help that Quirrell has failed to provide. He doesn’t look like he’s jealous, though. He looks a little tired, his fingers clutched a little too tightly around the handle of the teacup. He looks grateful. Calm. Certain of things in a way that Harry suddenly envies with every fiber of his being. “Loyalty is hard to come by, though,” he adds softly. “I would hate to waste it.”

Quirrell’s eyes widen over the curve of his cup. “You are an in-interesting c-creature, H-harry P-potter.”

Harry can’t help but snort a little at that. “So I’ve been told, sir.”

He wants to open his mouth again, wants to add that Quirrell’s thanks is appreciated but unnecessary but he doesn’t. He doesn’t know how he can say that without implying that Harry hadn’t really been thinking of Quirrell at all but only of the extra spirit housed within his flesh. He doesn’t know how to dismiss the other man’s gratitude politely without revealing that until Quirrell’s interference with Dumbledore’s questioning Harry hadn’t really

thought of the DADA professor as anything more than a stuttering, incompetent meat suit that the Dark Lord is stuck wearing until something better can be found or made.

Instead, he reaches into his pocket and pulls out the handkerchief he had stashed there earlier in the day and carefully unfolds it to reveal the small glass vial lying in the center of it. Silently, he picks it up and holds it out toward Quirrell.

The sharp sound of the man's gasp echoes through the room as he recognizes the pearlescent liquid. "W-what? W-why?"

Harry blinks, confused. "I'm sure the initial dose helped but you seemed in pretty bad shape." The Quirrell in his first life had killed several unicorns in the months proceeding his attempts to acquire the stone. Clearly a few mouthfuls of blood hadn't been enough and even though this blood isn't cursed the point probably still holds. "I don't know if it will be enough to undo everything but I have enough to for weekly doses. That should at least hold you together until..." *until we resurrect the Dark Lord.*

"W-weekly d-doses?" Quirrell's hands are shaking so badly he has to put his cup down, the fine porcelain rattling as it drops the last little bit to the tray top.

"Um. Yes? Will that be enough?" He can't get more, Harry knows. The unicorn's gift was strictly a one-time thing. But maybe...

"Enough," Quirrell repeats breathlessly and finally takes the vial from Harry's hand. "Enough," he says again and it comes out a little strangled, a bit more of a laugh than actual words. "You are an interesting creature, Harry P-potter," he repeats carefully, slowly, enunciating with a deliberateness that leaves something aching in Harry's chest.

His fingers pull the stopper from the vial and he raises it to his lips, hands still shaking but not so much that he needs assistance. Not like the first time. Quirrell's eyes flutter shut as he swallows, a flush of warmth suddenly suffusing his skin, giving him back color that Harry hadn't even been consciously aware that the other man had been lacking. His fingers curl around the vial, hold it tight as he lowers it back to the desk.

The man across from him inhales sharply and when his eyes open it is Tom and not Quirrell staring out of them.

"*You are full of surprises,*" the Dark Lord tells him, elegant and smooth but no less deliberate than Quirrell had been seconds before: each word a weighted pebble dropped into a pond.

Caught off guard Harry wants to disagree. In fact, it feels like the last few years of his life at least, were entirely caused by the fact that he was predictable to a fault: foolhardy and impatient, formulaic in the worst way. It rubs him oddly now, to be called a surprise. He thinks the Dark Lord and Quirrell both mean it as a compliment and he is not entirely sure what to do with that. He wants to laugh, maybe, and confess that even though he has the broad strokes of a plan that he honestly, truly has no idea what he's doing – and that is definitely not something they, or anyone else, should be complimenting.

But even as he opens his mouth to say just that he realizes how imprudent that would be, how potentially damaging and so he offers Tom a different truth instead, the one Harry would tell himself in the quiet, lonely hours of the night after everything had gone straight to hell: “*I have to be.*”

“Yes,” Tom agrees after a careful moment of contemplation over the edge of a tea cup. “*I suppose you do.*”

Harry takes another sip of his tea to keep himself from opening his mouth and sounding like an idiot.

Tom does the same, though probably for a better reason, and Quirrell’s lip promptly curls, the nose of their shared body wrinkling with distaste. Then the most feared Dark Lord of the century – of quite possibly *ever* – reaches over and adds two heaping spoons of sugar to his cup.

He had taken it sweetened before, Harry remembers after a moment of blank, blinking static – two sugars and a splash of milk – but he hadn’t really thought of it then and if he had, he might have put it down to the fact that the man was obviously in a bit of shock on top of practically starving to death. Harry is not sure what it is, exactly, but the whole thing is unsettling. It makes his skin prick and the little short hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

It humanizes Tom in a way that little else has managed.

Harry has feared him, loathed him, identified with him, and pitied him in turns but Tom Marvolo Riddle had always been larger than life. The wizard had always been something *other*, something less – or even something more – than human but somehow watching him dump almost an entire bowl of sugar into his cup makes him just a man. Just one of them, down in the trenches and stumbling through the muck like every other being.

But he’s not. Harry isn’t either. Not anymore. Maybe not ever. He’s just been pretending. Wishing.

And yet, he’s still *just Harry*. Maybe buried beneath everything else there’s a *just Tom* as well.

“*I have enough for you to have a vial every week between now and the end of the school year,*” Harry tells him because he refuses to have some sort of mental break over how the Dark Lord takes his tea. At least not today. “*I apologize if I wasn’t clear in conveying that before.*”

“*It did not occur to me at all. The one vial was more than enough.*”

Harry raises a skeptical eyebrow. He’s nowhere near as good at it as Snape but he thinks he gets his point across anyway. “*To gain your consideration, maybe,*” he acknowledges after a moment, “*but that wasn’t what I was after. Not really.*” He’s always been generous. Doesn’t know quite where the inclination comes from when the cramp of his stomach and shaking of his limbs have urged him to hoard every resource he could acquire but he possesses it all the

same. Dumbledore would tell him it is a mark of his inherent goodness. Harry thinks it's just the way he is, as intrinsic as the color of his eyes or the shape of his nose.

*"I am beginning to understand that. Still, all of the vials will not be necessary."*

Harry blinks, caught off guard. *"Why not?"*

*"Because I have no intention of waiting that long to regain my own body. Did I truly wait so long... before?"* He can't tell if the Dark Lord sounds more puzzled or insulted at past future him's incompetence.

*"Not willingly,"* Harry allows after a moment of thought. *"You tried to get the Stone at least once before then, that I know of. I just thought the timing might have some sort of significance."*

*"Oh?"* Tom sounds entirely too much like Snape in that moment. It's unnerving.

*"When you did finally resurrect yourself – well, in the moment I just assumed that it was the only convenient moment for you to do so, seeing as how the entire year seemed to lead up to you kidnapping me,"* he explains, well aware that his memories of his fourth year, of that night in the graveyard had been some of the most vivid that the other man had gotten his metaphorical hands on a week ago. *"In hindsight though it was obvious that you could have had me taken at any time. In fact, it would have been easier and less obvious if you had taken me before then. So I thought it must have had something to do with the date itself."* While he'd barely managed to scrape together enough effort to pass Astronomy and hadn't paid a bit of actual attention to anything past the first five minutes of his Divination education even fifteen-year-old him had remembered the importance of the Summer Solstice. Had remembered, as he lay stewing in the heat and cut off from the wizarding world, that it was a day of power.

*"And what date would that be?"*

*"June 24, 1995."*

The Dark Lord stares down into his tea and hums thoughtfully. *"Not the solstice then, though close enough to catch the fringes of it. Of course, I would not pick the Summer Solstice for rebirth to begin with so I am quite certain that that is more circumstance than anything else."* Harry must look as confused as he feels because Tom lets out a long, heaving sigh. *"What are they teaching you in this school?"* he mutters and drains his cup as if he wishes that it contained something stronger. *"The Summer Solstice, while a day of great power, channels the entirely wrong energy for rebirth. It is a day of vitality, of life at its strongest – but,"* Tom holds up a finger when Harry opens his mouth to ask why that would mean it is a *bad* time to regain a body. *Strongest* seems like something Voldemort would go for when picking power to fuel his resurrection, *"if something is at its strongest then, by definition, it can only grow weaker. The days only grow shorter from there. The light wanes and darkness rises ascendant. To tap into those powers to define a resurrection would mean to limit myself from the start. No, no. I would not have done it then unless I had no choice. My guess, based upon the flashes of your memory, is that I made use of a trifold sacrifice to power the ritual."*

*“Er, yes. I think so. There definitely seemed to be three ingredients. Four if you count...you.”*

Tom hums again. *“And we were in that graveyard, so one of them must have been the bones of my dearly departed father.”*

Harry swallows roughly, feels the terror of that night swirl around him. Remembers the way his heart had pounded in his chest with the wave of Wormtail’s wand, with the sight of the human bones that had come out of the earth. Remembers the way Wormtail had screamed, the way that *he* had screamed when the rat had torn his arm open and left him with a wound that not even Pomfrey and Snape together could keep from scarring: a great, ropey thing that had adorned the inside of his arm for the next three years of his life.

*“Yes,”* he whispers. *“Bone of the Father. Flesh of the Servant. Blood of the Enemy.”*

*“It would have been the blood,”* the Dark Lord muses. *“I would have wanted to make sure.”*

*“...make sure?”*

*“That you were my enemy, of course,”* Tom says, like it’s obvious and, well, maybe it is. *“Not in a nebulous, prophesized way but in a concrete manner. I would have wanted you to know that I was out there actively orchestrating your existence when you should have been safe beneath Dumbledore’s protection. I would have wanted you to know that I was coming for you and for you to fear it. A set of three by three would have been ideal, a year and day even better but I suppose eight months was as close as I could...”*

*“It was a year,”* Harry breaks in, mind scrambling. *“You wouldn’t have known, but it was a year. Trelawney gave another prophecy in the beginning of June of 1994. It was this whole thing about how a chained servant would break free and return to you that night to help you rise more terrible than before. That’s when we discovered Pettigrew and he made a break for it.”*

*“Peter? That pathetic rat is still alive?”*

*“Oh. Um. Yes?”* Maybe Tom hadn’t gotten as good a look at Harry’s memories as he’d thought. He would have thought that Wormtail had featured rather notably in things. Of course, maybe Tom just hadn’t recognized the fucking coward. Twelve years as a rat had done him no favors, twisting him into a pale, paunchy, simpering man that bore little resemblance to the fair haired, pale eyed young man he had been the last time Voldemort had seen him face to face. *“He blew off his own finger and transformed. Everyone thinks he’s dead. He’s been spending the last ten years as the Weasley’s pet rat.”* Harry hesitates for a moment and then adds, *“He’s, um, technically over in the Gryffindor dorms right now. Or wherever Ron is.”*

Tom stares at him, the piercing force of his gaze all wrong for Quirrell’s boyish features. He stares long enough that Harry begins to wonder if he should have kept his mouth shut. Wormtail is a whimpering, pathetic little beast but he’s easily cowed and not nearly as incompetent as Harry likes to think he is. He had, after all, managed to become an animagus at fifteen. What if Tom suddenly decides that, gifts notwithstanding, his life would be so much easier without having to deal with an equal. He’s had two doses of unicorn blood now



and knows that Harry has more – and Harry is under exactly no illusions of being able to keep the rest of the blood from the man if he decided that he wanted it. He's stronger and more knowledgeable than the average first year but he knows that without the fuckery of their entangled souls and a good dose of both desperation and insanity to level the playing field a bit that he has absolutely no chance in a one on one confrontation with the Dark Lord. He's known it for years, no matter what anyone else said.

Harry has nearly convinced himself that Tom's going to lock him up somewhere and scoop up the more malleable Pettigrew when the Dark Lord in question laughs.

*Laughs.*

A short, sharp bite of laughter cuts through the air, loud enough to make Harry jump in his seat.

*"Ten years as the Weasley's pet,"* the Dark Lord *wheezes*, there is absolutely no other word for it, his shoulders still shaking with laughter. Harry stares, wide eyed and feeling a bit like he did creeping through the Chamber of Secrets, the knowledge of an enormous basilisk potentially lurking around every corner hanging over his head. *"Peter is a slimy little mongrel but he has always had more bravery than sense: a Gryffindor through and through."*

Harry bristles instantly, puffing up like an angry cat at the words. Pettigrew is *not* a Gryffindor. He is a cowardly traitor and... and...

And a wizard that had possessed the balls to confront a murderously angry Sirius Black in the middle of a street and accuse *him* of betrayal. A wizard who despite being a small prey animal had still spent *years* running with a werewolf every month. He is a wizard who dared to harbor in his enemy's house for more than a *decade* – which had seemed like a foolproof hiding spot to Harry four years ago but now he knows enough about magics and wards to know that all it wouldn't have taken all that much for his cover to be blown. Bloody hell, if Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had even been more observant and realized that not even magical rats lived for ten years...

Abruptly, Harry feels ashamed of himself. Even now, after everything, he had still objected to Wormtail being called a Gryffindor because he had been *evil*, a betrayer, when Gryffindors are supposed to be the *good* ones.

But what is good? What is evil? Harry isn't sure anymore. Harry isn't sure of many things. The world had been so simple once, divided neatly by a line in the sand but that line is gone now. Everything has blurred together until he can't quite tell what is a lie and what is truth.

Perhaps the only lie had been the existence of the line in the first place.

The thought tastes like ashes in his mouth and not even a desperate swallow of tea will wash it away.

*"There is a certain type of bravery in betrayal – in leaving behind everything that shaped you,"* Tom offers quietly, the sharp, body shaking laughter gone as quickly as it had appeared, so quickly that Harry might think he imagined it were it not still ringing in his ears.

“Yes,” Harry forces himself to acknowledge. “*I suppose there is.*”

After all, isn’t he doing the same thing?

The thought that he might be anything like Wormtail is enough to make his stomach heave, bile burning in his throat as he clenches his teeth and swallows furiously. He’s not like Peter. He’s *not*. They’re *nothing* alike.

And yet...

(And yet)

Bloody, buggering *fuck*.

The touch of Tom's finger against the back of his hand, the hand clenched so tightly around his cup that he can practically hear it creaking, burns. Not literally, not like it would have in his first life, but it is scalding against skin that suddenly feels too cold. “*We are all monsters.*”

Harry shakes, quick and sharp like a dog attempting to dislodge water and blurts out, “*So when would be the ideal date to regain your body?*” because he has to change the subject, he has to or he’s going to be sick all over Quirrell’s desk. He doesn’t even try to be subtle about it.

Tom studies him for a moment, contemplating him with the same vibrating stillness that Inigo only achieves in the seconds before he lunges for the mouse Harry is dangling in front of him. If the Dark Lord strikes now, he won’t just swallow Harry whole. He’ll gut him, break him open along this newfound fault line and leave him strewn bloody and raw across the floor.

This isn’t going anything like Harry meant it to.

No encounter with Lord Voldemort ever has. It’s probably hoping too much to expect things to change now. Even if he is trying to be more thoughtful and precise.

Maybe especially because he’s trying to be more thoughtful and precise. That seems like something that would happen to him.

Bugger.

“*The Spring Equinox,*” Tom finally replies and Harry grasps at this line that he has been thrown and clutches it for all he’s worth. He doesn’t know why the older man isn’t going for the obvious weak spot Harry had just shown him – just *discovered* – but he’s not going to look a gift horse in the mouth. Not now, anyway. He’ll put it on his docket for later. Right after he freaks out about the Dark Lord liking his tea sweet enough to make his teeth drop out of his mouth and make a run for it. “*It is naturally a day of renewal and rebirth - not the heralding of spring but the first, fertile flush of it. It possesses magics of vibrancy and promise, of potential. It is also a day of balance between the Darkness and the Light.*”

“*Probably the closest to a blank slate as you’ll ever get,*” Harry says without thinking and then nearly slaps himself.

Tom smiles: a sharp, lazy thing that only curls one side of his mouth and yet shows far too many teeth. It might be more terrifying than the full-on snake face. Especially because it is Quirrell's features doing it. *"Precisely."*

*"So that... that is when...?"*

*"Preferably. Will it be possible?"*

Harry nods and folds his hands in his lap, fingers clutching at the folds of his robes to hide the tremors that begin to move through his flesh. He has been assuming, obviously, that Voldemort would not be resurrected until the end of the year – one last hurrah before Harry escaped into the muggle world for the summer. A bomb that he could drop and then flee from. The Spring Equinox, though, is in March. Less than three months away. Faced with staying at the Dursleys, three months would feel like forever. Faced with the resurrection of the Dark Lord that he had watched plunge the world into chaos as he rips society apart, three months feels like a blink.

He swallows. *"Should be,"* he admits. Dumbledore should have the mirror in place by now and that's the only true obstacle between them and the Stone. He supposes that Fluffy or the Devil's Snare could actually pose a problem to someone caught off guard enough to forget some rather basic schooling and frankly, Harry wouldn't want to face the chess game on his own but the Mirror is the only *real* protection the Sorcerer's Stone has.

Not to mention that in hindsight the obstacles, even the Mirror, seem far more like a test than like a guard.

*"Then I will make sure things are prepared on my end. Would you be amenable giving blood again?"*

Harry blinks, the question hitting him like a stunner to the face. He barely bites back the first answer that comes to mind (*"I wasn't amenable the first bloody time!"*) and focuses instead on the question. The *question*. Merlin, Tom Marvolo Riddle is *asking*. Never has the fact that Harry is living in a world – a reality – that is rapidly changing from his original been clearer to him. If he had been standing, he probably would have fallen, stumbled and collapsed without having to take a single step.

Is this what being the Dark Lord's equal really means? *Politeness?*

He's well and truly fallen down the rabbit hole now.

There's more than a little hysteria coloring his thoughts.

*"Would it work?"* he finally asks once he's stopped gaping like a bloody idiot. *"I'm not your enemy anymore."* Or he hopes not, anyway. He's rather been assuming as much. The diadem had seemed like a pretty strong indicator in that direction.

Harry is going to feel really fucking stupid if he read that wrong.

Across the desk, Tom looks... something. Pained, maybe. Or amused. Possibly both.

*"It is a trifold sacrifice. The sacrifices themselves are not set in stone,"* he says as if that explains everything. It doesn't. Tom sighs. *"Really, not even this? The base of three is one of the main tenets of arithmancy."*

*"I didn't take arithmancy,"* Harry points out quickly because sure, he's not the quickest wand in the duel but he's not actually stupid even if the Dark Lord keeps looking at him like... well, like first life Harry had looked at Crabbe and Goyle. *"...yet,"* he amends with a sigh of his own because he's willing to acknowledge his own lack of knowledge. *"It's on my list."*

Tom hums briefly, an acknowledging noise that's vaguely accepting: a point he's willing to concede. *"The number three,"* he begins as he rifles through the stack of papers sitting on the edge of his desk, *"is a number of great power. More than that, it is a number of great strength. Most magics are built upon a base of three. Triads are the most common natural forming bonds, between magical items or between magical beings – nearly all spontaneous formed covens consist of three. Larger groupings will almost certainly be made up of sets of three arraigned around a central focus."*

*"... like seven,"* Harry murmurs, brow wrinkling as he connects a few dots.

Tom's gaze lingers on the lightning bolt scar. *"Exactly."*

Harry shivers and wonders how it all works with how entangled they are. Is he but a piece orbiting the bright and burning sun of Tom Marvolo Riddle or is Tom but one sun among many sliding into the abyss of Harry's black hole? Or is it even more complicated than that? Perhaps they are both. Or neither.

*"Even muggles acknowledge the power and strength of three. Their sciences acknowledge one of the basic components of the universe: that the base of three is the most structurally sound rigid formation. It is as true in architecture as it is in magic."* Tom lays a piece of parchment in the center of the desk and draws three straight lines that form a roughly equilateral triangle without actually connecting the sides. Feeling slightly blindsided by this newest turn of conversation, Harry leans forward and watches as the Dark Lord writes *'Bone of the Father'*, *'Flesh of the Servant'*, and *'Blood of the Enemy'* on the parchment, one at each vertex. *"My previous resurrection was built upon this base, correct? And channeled into a homunculus holding a remnant of my soul."* With a touch of a flourish he adds *'Lord Voldemort'* to the empty space in the center of the triangle.

*"Yes."* Harry stares at the parchment. *"Are you saying that you could have resurrected yourself without using those things? That you could have used anything?"*

*"Well, not quite anything,"* Tom acknowledges. *"But there were definitely more options than just this. The only specifications on the sacrifices themselves are in their composition,"* quickly he circles the words *bone*, *flesh*, and *blood*, *"and in their meaning to me. They needed to be components that represented my past, present, and future as well as the three basic blocks of being: body, mind, and soul. I suspect that my father's bones would have fulfilled the categories of past and body, while Wormtail my present and you my future. Unaware of the truth of our connection, I suspect I would have utilized Wormtail as the representation of my soul because of the Mark. Obviously, you being a horcrux gives you much larger claim to that position. Magic would have sensed it and followed that path of lesser resistance. It is*

*quite possible that the entire nature of my other self's resurrection was changed without him even knowing.*" Tom stares at the parchment sitting between them for several minutes, lips pressed together and clearly lost in thought. *"A theoretical for another time,"* he finally dismisses with a slash of his hand.

Bugger that, Harry thinks and wonders if that change, whatever it was, had been one of those other things that that Death had alluded to – one of the other causes for Lord Voldemort shattering so completely.

*"So my being your enemy isn't required?"* Harry checks. He's not stupid but he likes to be sure, achingly aware that he's gambling with the sanity of the most dangerous man – arguably – in the world.

*"Not at all,"* the Dark Lord confirms but a ridiculous part of Harry doesn't believe it until the man leans forward and draws a bold, dark line through the word *Enemy* and replaces it with the word *Equal*. It feels both exhilarating and disappointing.

Can it really be as easy as that?

He doesn't realize that he has said that last bit out loud until Tom replies, *"Believe it or not, most magic is not difficult. Not in the sense you are thinking. More is not necessarily better. A ritual of resurrection is not the time and place to start cluttering things up. I do not need to make it complicated to show off,"* Tom adds, all but purring, *"The fact that I can perform such a feat speaks for itself."*

And, well, he's not wrong.

They drink their tea in silence for several minutes, an unspoken agreement to reach for that familiar veneer to allow themselves a moment to gather their thoughts. Harry thinks the moment is probably just for him, really, that he's the only one floundering like he's been thrown naked into the lake with his hands bound but what does he know? Tom is the one that's been without a physical body for a decade and that only has one now because a wizard has consented to share it with him. Harry might be trying to orchestrate the fate of the world into something that suits him more than its previous path but he is not the only one who has the entire shape and form of reality ripped out from underneath him. He's not even the only one in this room.

Across Quirrell's desk, Tom dumps another spoonful of sugar into a fresh cup of tea.

*"I assume that you'll want to go with me to get the Stone?"* Harry asks once he's finished his own tea and feels marginally more in control of himself.

*"Of course. Unless it would hinder things."*

Harry nearly snorts at the idea. *"It shouldn't. Honestly, the only bit you wouldn't be able to do yourself is the Mirror."*

*"The Mirror?"*

*"The Mirror of Erised,"* Harry tells him and there's a flash of surprise on Quirrell's face, there and gone again like fish scales catching sunlight. *"Dumbledore hid the stone in it,"* he continues after a brief pause in which Tom says nothing. *"Only someone who wants to retrieve the Stone but not use it can get it out."*

*"That sly bastard,"* Tom hisses and he almost sounds admiring. Almost. And a bit like he wants to just wrap his hands around Dumbledore's neck and squeeze. *"So how do we get around that? I could undo the old man's spellwork but that will take time and would not have been something I would have been able to do...before."*

Before you found me. Before you pressed gifted unicorn blood into my hands. Before, when the only strength he had possessed had been Quirrell's.

It goes unsaid but Harry hears it anyway, as sure as if that other man had whispered it in his ear.

*"I can get it."*

*"You can?"*

The blatant skepticism in Tom's voice is enough to make Harry laugh. *"I have no wish to use it."* He might be one of the few people in the world who doesn't – or wouldn't – desire to use it for one purpose or another. But he has money, more than enough that he could never work a day in his life and still live fairly comfortably, and he is already going to live longer than he can begin to comprehend. The Sorcerer's Stone has no hold on his heart. It is just a tool that he is taking off of a shelf and setting it down elsewhere.

*"You are planning to resurrect me with it,"* the Dark Lord points out.

*"I have no wish to use it,"* he repeats, with emphasis. *"I just want to get it out of the mirror. What happens after that..."* Harry shrugs, *"...is out of my hands. Literally."*

Tom stares out of Quirrell's eyes and into Harry's soul, as if he might read his every thought or action of Harry's written there like words on a page. Given that he's a damn good legilimens, that's actually entirely possible, but Harry doesn't feel any prodding at the edges of the sky hanging in his head and the horcrux in his head gives no indication of being connected to a larger part of itself. This is just Tom himself, the entirety of his focus pinned on Harry until he has to clench his fingers in his lap so that he doesn't squirm beneath the force of it.

*"You are full of surprises, Harry Potter,"* Tom echoes his earlier words and it feels like judgment, like benediction: a weight that settles over him, warm and comforting like a heavy down blanket. Harry didn't realize just how shaky he still felt, how close he felt to simply rattling apart until suddenly something is there, holding him together.

Unable to do anything else, Harry lets the sensation wash through him. *"You should get used to it,"* he warns Tom, reaching for a bravado he doesn't really feel. *"I'm just getting started."*

Across the desk, Tom grins bright and sharp and for a moment, just a moment, the gold-green of Quirrell's eyes seem to gleam red in the shifting light. *"I look forward to the show."*

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The better part of an hour later, halfway back to the dungeon, Harry realizes that he never managed to ask Tom what he had meant to ask him in the first place.

They'd managed to talk a bit more about Tom's resurrection, had detoured into some more magical theory that left Harry feeling like he had finally opened his eyes and caught a glimpse at the world around him. It had been a relief to think of something that had nothing to do with himself, with his life. By the end, he'd regretted not taking notes.

*He's a bloody good teacher when he's not monologuing,* he had thought and then had promptly pinched himself to keep from thinking it again.

But they hadn't touched on the topic of muggles. Or muggleborns. Or, more specifically, what Tom is planning to do about them. Or if he even has a plan.

"Bollocks," Harry announces from the middle of the stairs.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for your lovely comments and continued patience with the erratic updates of this story. In addition to all the RL craziness going on in the world right now, I had to bid a final farewell to my grandmother in January. It wasn't a surprise and I was able to spend her last days with her but even when it is expected and a relief (fuck Alzheimer's) there is still a...weight to death that must be acknowledged. So thank you, very much for your patience, and even more for your comments. They brought a definite brightness to my day.

I'm not particularly happy with this chapter. It's been finished for almost two weeks and I've just kept poking at it but I think if I don't post it now I'm just going to keep poking at it and I'd really rather move on. I've been looking forward to sharing the resurrection with you for ages and we're nearly there! (FINALLY)

## Twenty Two

Four days later he's back at Quirrell's office.

"Sorry professor," he offers as soon as the turbaned man opens the door.

Quirrell blinks, obviously caught off guard, and stares down at him. Harry can't help but feel quietly pleased that there's a bit of color in the man's cheeks – color that he's pretty sure is actually there and not just a glamour of some form. "W-what f-for, P-p-potter?"

Harry presses his mouth together, unsure of how much Quirrell knows. Not much, he'd wager, except for the fact that Harry Potter is talking with the Dark Lord and providing him – *them* – with freely given unicorn blood.

And that he's planning on helping Voldemort resurrect himself.

So, actually, Quirrell knows quite a bit. Probably nothing but the broad strokes but one doesn't need to see the detail of every leaf in order to know that they're staring at a forest.

"...For taking up your time, sir," he finally settles on saying and the corner of Quirrell's mouth twitches ever so slightly.

"It's either th-this or g-grading p-papers," Quirrell steps to the side and waves him in. "Th-this is m-much m-more int-interesting. T-tea?"

Harry perks up a little at the offer. Tea is always welcome and, well, even before this life he had fond memories of taking tea in this office. Plus, he feels safer with a cup of tea clutched between his hands and a table between them. It's ridiculous, he knows. A teacup in both of their hands isn't really going to stop he and Voldemort from trying to hex each other into a thousand pieces if it comes to blows but that's the illusion that it casts: a veneer of civility to hide behind. Perhaps, that's all they need. That second of hesitation to make them use their brains and their words instead of their wands.

Well, no, they definitely need a great deal more than that but it's a start. No one's dead yet, so it must be working.

"Sure," Harry agrees and moves to what he is rapidly coming to think of as his chair. Bloody hell. "Thank you."

"P-p-preference?"

"Whatever you're having is fine." Quirrell eyes him for a moment like he doesn't quite believe Harry's answer and Harry has to bite back the words that rise to his tongue: that he'd never really gotten to pick out tea before, that he's always just had whatever was in the pot on the table or in the tin in Hermione's purse or even the cold, bitter dregs left in the cups he had been forced to take to the sink and wash. That he can identify a few things by smell but he doesn't actually know enough about tea to make an intelligent sounding request. That the fact



that Quirrell *asks* is thrill enough, honestly. “Really,” he offers and hopes that it’s reassuring and not condescending. Harry wonders how many times they’ll have this conversation. If the offer of tea will go away once Tom possesses a body of his own or if Quirrell and Harry are locking themselves into a pattern: a life time of encounters doomed to start the exact same way.

There are worse things, he supposes.

He also vaguely hopes that Quirrell at least suspects that he’s not *quite* the child he looks like – and surely, he must given the few pieces of the puzzle he possesses - otherwise this whole conversation is just really weird.

The transition happens as the professor is lowering himself into the chair on his side of the desk. It is definitely Quirrell that makes the tea and moves the pot and cups to the only clear section of the desk, a piece towards the center not much bigger than the average textbook and surrounded by mountain ranges of parchment on all sides, but somewhere between that and sitting down he changes. His shoulders square up and his spine straightens, sharpening his outline until it’s something predatory.

*There you are*, Harry can’t help but think as Tom stares out of Quirrell’s eyes.

It’s a moment of heart stopping terror and a rush of relief every single time.

“*Is something wrong?*” the man asks instantly.

Harry blinks. “...*no? Nothing is wrong.*”

The Dark Lord clearly does not believe him. “*It is too early for another dose.*”

Harry stares, wondering vaguely, for just a moment, what the other man is talking about and then he blinks again and the words slot together in his mind like tumblers turning in a lock. “*Oh,*” he stares for a second and then gives his head a little shake. “*Right. No. Nothing’s wrong,*” he says again, much more earnestly. “*I just meant to ask you something last time I was here and got distracted.*” Both accidentally and on purpose but that’s neither here nor there.

Tom raises one of Quirrell’s barely-there eyebrows. Not much but enough to ask the question for him as he takes a sip of tea that surely must be grainy for all the sugar he just shoveled into it.

Fascinating.

He gives his head another little shake. *Focus, Harry.*

He opens his mouth. Closes it. Opens it again.

Tom’s eyebrow gets a little higher.

“*Muggles,*” he finally forces out in a rush. “*And muggleborns. And well, everyone not a pureblood. Which is a lot of people.*”

Tom sets his tea cup down. Harry's not sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing.

Probably a bad thing.

It leaves him entirely too open to getting a wand into his hand.

Oh, for Merlin's sake, it's not like he can actually die.

*Get a hold of yourself, Potter*, he growls inside his head.

Tom still hasn't said anything but he's motionless on the other side of the desk, oh so still. So still that the absence of movement has almost become movement itself.

Harry forces himself to a sip of his tea. It's something rich and bold and it leaves the definite taste of dark chocolate on the back of his tongue. The perfect sort of thing for lots of milk and sugar.

Quirrell, he thinks, might be the only one of them to have his shit together and bloody hell, that's a depressing thought. If they all make it out of this, he probably owes the man a gift. Something big and thoughtful that says: *Thank you for not murdering your time traveling student and the scary Dark Lord that was possessing you while they hammered out the rough shape of the future of the magical world.*

Harry bites back the hysterical laughter that wells up in his throat, drowns it with another sip of tea, takes a deep breath, and tries again.

*"I wanted to know what your plans were considering muggleborns."*

There. That wasn't so hard.

The teacup slips against his skin, sweat rendering the porcelain slick. He sets it down with a clatter, the tea sloshing up the bone white sides but not falling over. Harry nearly sighs in relief, the sin of spilling tea across Quirrell's desk suddenly too great a horror to contemplate.

Tom watches him, pins him beneath his gaze until he feels like some poor spider that's caught Dudley's attention: trapped beneath a glass and its legs pulled off one by one so that he and Piers could see what happened. Ignoring the instinctive flare of panic and fear and the urge to do something brash and stupid, to push and press and snarl just to show the other man that he doesn't intimidate Harry, that he can't cower him into silence (*he's not a coward, he's not, he's brave and good and...*) he meets the Dark Lord's eyes and waits.

There's an irony here, part of him notes as they stare at each other over abandoned tea and half graded papers. He had spent years learning – attempting to learn – to block Tom from his mind but here, now, he is the only legilimens that he greets freely. The only one that he looks properly in the face. Now that he has the beginnings of protection, Lord Voldemort is the only one he doesn't use it with.

Entwined as their souls are, could they ever really keep the other out?

Together or apart, they will never be free of the other. Not really. Not easily.

*“And if I said they were vermin, little better than the muggle pigs that spawned them and that they should be put down before they dilute us beyond our ability to recover?”*

Harry tips his head, mirroring Tom. *“Are you saying that?”* he asks quietly. *“It seems a bit hypocritical. You’re a half blood. So am I.”* He doesn’t mention Dumbledore or Snape. There’s pressing things and then there’s stomping all over them like a great rampaging dragon.

Tom flicks his fingers dismissively. *“One could argue that we are as powerful as we are in spite of our mediocre heritage. Think of how powerful we would be without it. If we were not diluted.”*

*“One could argue that we are only as powerful as we are because of our mediocre heritage and the influx of new blood that it brought to our bloodline,”* Harry snaps back instantly. First life Hermione had certainly lectured enough about genetics and the pitfalls of inbreeding that he had been bound to pick up something even if he didn’t ever listen as closely as she would have liked. He’s pretty sure it would be a bad plan to get into that right now, though. There is enough tension between them already, thinly veiled hostility that could erupt into violence at the slightest misstep.

Unfortunately, Harry is really good at missteps. Especially with Tom. He once made an entire life out of them.

He takes another slow deep breath and clutches his hands together in his lap until his knuckles ache.

*“Are we arguing that?”*

Harry gives his head single shake. *“Not today.”*

Today he would just settle for gaining an accurate idea of where the other man stands without the whole thing blowing up in his face. It’s not looking terribly likely at this point – it had never been terribly likely, if he’s being honest – but Merlin, he’d hoped.

Just for once he’d like whatever he is trying to accomplish to be easy: a monster fixed with a piece of his soul or a vial of uncursed unicorn blood. A madman made reasonable with a single action.

But he’s Harry bloody Potter. Nothing is ever going to be that easy.

*We are all monsters.*

*“I despise muggles,”* the Dark Lord says pointedly, enunciating each word with a sharpness and care that would do Snape proud. *“I pity them. They are little more than worms: sightless, petty creatures burrowing in the dark and utterly unaware of the vastness of the world above them. Muggleborns are opportunistic rats who enter upon our world and fear it because of its greatness. Like many of their ancestors they have stumbled upon something magnificent and they destroy it, so certain that their own ways are better. Like rats they consume without hesitation and carry death to every place that they touch.”*

*“Don’t we all do the same?”* Harry retorts, clenching his fists so tightly that he can feel his flesh part and blood well up to bead along his palms like gems in an effort to keep from recoiling from the sheer distaste on Voldemort’s tongue. He hates what Tom is saying. Hates even more that there is a part of him that agrees, that thinks it makes sense. *“Purebloods afraid of muggles because they are utterly foreign to them? Afraid of muggleborns? Muggleborns afraid of the world they find themselves in for the same reason? I was terrified of you for many years because I did not understand you.”*

The slash of Quirrell’s eyebrows nearly rise off his face. *“But now you do?”*

There is danger there, a sibilant sharpness that Harry hasn’t heard since that first night, since they stood across the room poised between accord or destruction. The Dark Lord might accept the idea – the possibility – of Harry as his equal but who is he to claim to understand Lord Voldemort? The very idea is probably insulting.

Harry had certainly been offended when Voldemort had made the same claim of him.

*“No,”* Harry says swiftly, sharply, underscoring the word with the slash of his hand. *“I would not do you that disservice. I would not make the mistake that Dumbledore has and pluck scenes from your life to support the narrative that he believes.”* Except that’s what he’s done, isn’t it? Shifted the perspective until it supports what he wants. Until it agrees with his goals and his narrative. There’s something in him, something hot and burning bubbling up in his gut and shaking through him with enough force to leave him shaking. *“I would never be that stupid.”* Not again. Not ever. *“But I understand you better than most. I think...”* Harry swallows roughly and bites back the urge to turn away from the unspoken fury in the other man’s eyes. There is no room for hesitance here. Not ever, when Tom is concerned. *“I think I am one of the few people that can.”*

It sounds even more pretentious out loud than it did in his head but he had to say it. He had to.

*Equals.*

It might just be their magic. It might not even be that. It might be nothing more than a reality shaped by the beliefs and actions of those who heard words spoken in a dirty pub room. As simple as an old man sifting through all the potential until he finds someone that he deems worthy.

Or it might be something more. Something that they have forged themselves, unknowing, by sheer luck and happenstance, woven so tight that they cannot escape it.

*“You do, do you?”* The silky slither of Tom’s voice rumbling out of the smaller confines of Quirrell’s chest shouldn’t be as terrifying as it is.

Harry swallows but doesn’t back down.

*“Yes. Because we both grew up cold and hungry and alone. Because we both grew up unwanted and afraid. Because we were both different and those around us never let us forget it. Because magic is... it’s magic and it’s everything and it saved us even when it abandoned*

*us. Because we're both the last of our name, because both of our mothers loved us desperately and died for it. Because we're both parselmouths. Because we were both branded before we ever entered the magical world and we've never been able to escape it. Because I hold your soul inside of mine. Because I think... I think...*" he scrubs desperately at his face. His hands come away wet and he laughs. It's tears, just tears, but he almost wishes it were blood. It feels like it should be blood, like the words he's saying are ripping away at something behind his eyes that can't be put back together again.

He had thought he was ready for this. He had thought he knew what he wanted from this conversation.

He was wrong.

*"I think we might stand at opposite sides – that we might disagree – but even then, we are always connected. We're always part of a whole. We're the two sides of a bloody coin, Tom."* He laughs and it feels like broken glass in his throat. *"But this, this is my line. I know what it is like to be tormented and hunted for something that I cannot control, for simply being born and I can't do that."*

Never again, he thinks, and remembers a boy, a young man, crying in a bathroom, afraid for his mother and blood splashing across the floor. It's all blurred together now. Black and white and so much gray, so much gray that he's suddenly drowning in it. He's drowning and he doesn't know which way is up anymore and it's snarled all together, all of it, until he's nothing but terrified and furious, furious that he's scared *again*. That after everything, after all he has done and all that he has become, that he is still caught *here*. That he can't simply move forward and be done with it.

Tom is staring at him, eyes wide and lips slightly parted. He's never seen the Dark Lord look so surprised, so caught off guard. Tom inhales and he's going to say something, Harry knows it. He knows it and he can't take it. Suddenly it's all too much. He can't sit here. He can't hear this. He can't bear to hear the words that will bring it all crashing down. He can't bear to hear that it's all for naught, that they're trapped, that they're just going to go round and round and round and destroy the world between them.

"I have to go," he announces and forces himself to his feet. "I have to go. We can continue this..." he swallows roughly against the sudden burning sensation in the back of his throat. "I..." He shakes his head and grips the edge of Quirrell's desk so tightly that it creaks. *"Happy Birthday, Tom,"* he says and can't even bring himself to look up as he sets a small, carefully wrapped parcel on the desk.

He catches a glimpse of the other man, just out of the corner of his eye, as he turns to shut the door behind him. Tom has his fingers outstretched, hovering over the gift as he stares. Harry feels like he is looking in the mirror at himself that very first Christmas morning here at Hogwarts, bewildered and disbelieving that these presents could possibly be meant for *him*.

Harry doesn't remember the walk back to the dungeons.

He liked things much better when he was sidetracked by the wonders of magic and not the mess inside of his head.

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After a sleepless night and a hastily choked down breakfast, Harry finds himself in the Forbidden Forest. He doesn't realize where he's going until he does and when he does, he keeps moving, suddenly needing to be there so badly that he aches.

It's cold, almost bitterly cold, even for Scottish Highlands, and yet the snow of Christmas day has mostly melted and what remains is frozen in great white and gray clumps amongst the tree roots and sheltering brambles. A fine drizzle falls from an oppressively gray sky, clouds so full that they're swirling like smoke around the castle turrets and practically kissing the tops of the trees. He's wearing his cloak but he doesn't bother to cast an *impervius* on the black wool. He wants to feel it. He wants to feel the creep of the damp and chill as it soaks down through his layers and winds around the heart of him. He wants to feel like he's slipping free of his skin, that he's turning into the vapor exiting from his lungs as he moves through the trees.

He has walked this path twice now. Once, slow and despairing, a sacrifice accepting his fate. Once, steady but unknowing, following a tug from inside him. Now he moves with surety, like a predator. He is not hunting but this is his territory. It belongs to him and somehow everything around him knows it.

The clearing looks different in the dim light of day.

Or, well, different is probably not the right phrasing. He's never really gotten a good look at it before. Not like this. Not when it's just him.

It's not nearly as big as it had felt that first time, crowded with Death Eaters. It's irregularly shaped and carpeted in moss and layers upon layers of decaying leaves. The ground dips towards the eastern end, a thin sheet of ice covering the moisture that gathers there. Between the thaw and the rains, it must turn into a proper little pool in the spring. He can almost picture it, flush with fresh green growth and a tangle of heather. Like most of the Forbidden Forest the trees surrounding him are predominately oak and birch, stripped naked by winter and wind. There's a couple scotch pine though, just enough to lend some green to shadows and towards the middle, just before the icy hollow, is one of the largest hawthorn trees that Harry has ever seen. Its gray bark is ridged with age and covered in fissures deep enough to stick his entire hand in if he were brave enough to dare the thorns that are at least half as large as his fingers.

He's not.

He circles it slowly, lets his feet rest heavily on the earth and turns his face up to the rain. Something snaps beneath his boot and when he looks down, he sees the off white of old bone: the skull of something small reduced to shards and dust.

Harry inhales sharply, draws the cold and the wet in until he can feel his lungs strain. Exhales.

He doesn't know how long he stands in the cold, half frozen rain. Eventually he isn't alone. Death materializes between one breath and the next and comes to stand silently at his side. He's in nothing but slacks and a crisp dress shirt the color of fresh blood with sunglasses

tucked in the unbuttoned v of his collar. He doesn't say anything, just stands next to Harry with his hands shoved in his pockets and waits. Harry doesn't know how long they stand there waiting. He thinks, perhaps, that it's nothing but the space of a heartbeat or two but it feels like longer. It feels like years. Like millennia.

"He'll change me, won't he?" Harry finally asks. He knows how ridiculous the question is before he voices it. Voldemort, the Dark Lord, *Tom* has already changed Harry. In so many ways, maybe even all the ones that matter, Tom Marvolo Riddle is his beginning, his middle, and his end.

Beside him, Death rocks back on his heels and turns to fix a steady, knowing gaze on him that Harry feels like a physical touch. "He will change you and you will change him."

Harry wants to laugh, wants to cry. An odd little huff that's somewhere in between comes out instead. "...for better or worse?" He wants to sound bitter or angry or maybe even scared. He doesn't.

"What is better? What is worse?" Death shrugs. "You will change. He will change. It is inevitable. Everything changes. Everything ends. Every second of every day. You will never be the same as you were. You will never be the same as you will be. You will never be the same as you are right now."

"It sounds so simple when you put it like that," Harry mutters and leans into Death's side. Even after spending Merlin knows how long out in the cold, the being's presence is an icy brand that he can feel beneath his layers as if it were a frozen poker set to his skin.

Death shifts slightly, wraps one arm around Harry's shoulder and draws him closer. Harry shudders, shivers at the sensation of being surrounded and goes still. It feels quiet here. Calm. Serene. Untouched. Safe. It probably says something about him that the only place he feels safe – that he's ever felt safe – truly, absolutely safe, has been when he's side-by-side with a physical embodiment of the Endless Void, of the ending and absence of all things.

Probably not something good.

[*What is good? What is bad?*] Death's voice rustles through his head like a light breeze teasing at the edge of fallen leaves.

"All complex things are at the heart of them," he adds out loud. "It's getting to the heart that's the difficult part."

Harry suspects it will be a very, very long time before he gets to that point. If he ever gets to that point. Does anyone ever get to that point or is a point strictly reserved for endless beings that exist beyond comprehension?

Death smiles at him, toothy and sharp, eyes gleaming. Harry feels it like cool water running down his throat after a thankless, merciless day spent working in Aunt Petunia's garden beneath the heat of a summer sun. He smiles back, helpless to stop himself even if he wanted to.

All of the horrible, tangled tension that had filled him - and left him alternately so furious the he shook and so grieving, terrified and disappointed that his eyes constantly burned and he could hardly swallow past the lump lodged in his throat - drains out of him so suddenly that it leaves him weak. Were it not for Death's arm around his shoulders he would no doubt be on his knees in the ice and the mud. He hadn't been aware that some small, distant part of him had built up some sort of reformed expectation of Tom, that even if he hadn't meant to some part of him had built and planned as if the Dark Lord walking around in Quirrell's body had the same benefit of a former, alternate life that Harry did. But he had. He must have, to make him feel that sting of betrayal behind his ribs, nestled somewhere between his lungs and his heart.

*Stupid*, he murmurs inside his head. That's the sort of mistake he can't afford to make. This, whatever this is, is only going to work if he keeps his eye on Tom and if Tom keeps his eyes Harry. He meant what he said in Quirrell's office. He would never be so naïve to claim that he understands Tom, to presume that he knows the breadth and depth of the man who is Lord Voldemort, but he knows him better than most. Understands him better, he thinks, than anyone living or dead. The two of them are the same. Different, but the same: two shadows cast by the same creature.

Harry inhales slowly, breathes in the cold and the calm, and feels himself steady for the first time since he had left Tom and Quirrell behind.

"Hello, darling," Death murmurs.

Harry laughs quietly. "Hello," he returns, still smiling into the being's shirt. "I got a little lost there," he admits. More than a little, truthfully. "Thank you for finding me."

Death tightens his arm. "Oh darling, always."

Together they stand in the rain beneath the hawthorn and stare at the place where Harry Potter died.

"I worry that I'll get it wrong," Harry admits quietly. "That'll I mess up – make it worse."

"What is wrong? What is right?" Death's voice rumbles beneath his cheek. "Right, wrong. Good, evil. Better, worse. These are all matters of circumstance and perspective. What is right for you now might have been wrong for you then. What will be better for you will almost certainly be worse for Albus Dumbledore."

Harry is probably projecting but Death doesn't sound terribly put out by that truth. Harry's certainly not.

There may be some lingering anger issues.

Still, it keeps him up at night, the memory of walking across Hogwarts grounds, wading through bodies and blood. So many dead. So much lost. Everything ends, but not like that. He can't handle an ending like that. He doesn't just *want* to change things but he *needs* to. Perhaps, in the end, it will matter about as much as cleaning Dudley's second bedroom before he left Privet Drive for the very last time but that doesn't change the fact that he craves it



more than he ever has food or water or affection. It feels like something he owes the wizarding world, one last thing before he finishes his metamorphosis into whatever he is becoming.

No.

No, if he is being honest with himself – and he does try these days, Merlin, he really does – it is one last thing he owes himself. Because once he was just little Harry Potter who lived under the stairs, who wore his cousin's too large clothes and didn't know what it felt like to not be hungry, who dreamed that somehow, someday he might get away. That he might be happy. That he might be safe.

He got away and it was wonderful. It was exciting and exhilarating and joyful and terrifying and depressing and exhausting. But it was never safe, not quite, and never his, not entirely.

He owes it, he thinks, to the little boy who lay in the dark and talked to spiders to try and trick himself into not feeling lonely, to live Harry Potter's life. More, he owes it to the heart of him who will always be *just Harry* to live it *well*. Whatever that may be.

"You will," Death promises quietly and the fierceness in his voice is enough to cut.

Harry smiles and glances upwards. It hurts his neck to twist this way but if that's the price he has to pay to look Death in the eye without leaving this haven at his side, Harry is willing to pay it. He might be settled now but he still feels scraped out and raw, the rampage of his thoughts and emotions leaving him unwilling to abandon the calm and the cold. "What is well?" he parrots back and Death's smile widens until his eyes are practically shut, crinkles of joy radiating out from their corners.

"It's whatever you want it to be, darling, whatever you make of it. You change and the world changes with you." *Tom changes with you*, goes unsaid both out loud and in his head but Harry hears it anyway. "The world changes and you change with it." *Tom changes and you change with him*. "Such is the way of things."

Harry has never thought of things quite like that before. Everything has always had a shocking permanence, a definite place. Right or wrong. Real or not real. Solid or incorporeal. He has spent months floundering, feeling the ground yanked from beneath him again and again. Spent months feeling unsteady. Like falling. Or drowning. Spent months waiting for the world to right itself, for the sky to clear and the ground to reform beneath his feet. Maybe that is the mistake. Maybe the ground is nothing more than a cup of tea held between his hands: an illusion, a veneer.

A moment.

"Everything changes," he murmurs the words, trying out the feel of them in his mouth.

"And everything ends." Death's eyes are dark and gleaming, nearly red here in the shadow of the hawthorn tree.

Harry shivers. "So what do I do?"

Death grins. “You do what everyone does: you change, darling, or you stop.”

Harry has never been very good at stopping.

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When he arrives at Quirrell’s office two days after that it is obvious that the professor has been waiting for him. For a moment the two of them – the three of them really – stand on either side of the door’s threshold. On one side is the shadow of a dimly lit corridor, the cold of the wind whipping around the castle seeping through the stones and creeping in through the windows until Harry’s toes are half numb in his boots. On the other side is warmth, fire and candlelight dancing across the walls, and a tea service already sitting on the desk. Already, Harry mourns that he won’t get to try whatever blend Quirrell has selected as their veneer for tonight.

“Professor,” he greets quietly and holds out a vial of unicorn blood. Quirrell takes it. His hand is shaking. He swallows nervously. Once. Twice. Now that he’s seen it, Harry can’t believe that he ever forgot – or never realized in the first place – that Quirrell is his own person too. And right now that person is wary. Scared.

Harry wants to apologize.

He doesn’t.

“W-w-will y-you c-c-come in, P-p-potter?”

Harry shakes his head. “Not tonight. Tonight, I think we need something else.” It’s not until he’s stepped back into the shadows, Quirrell nothing but a half-blurred shape standing in his doorway and watching him go that Harry turns back and asks, “Are you coming?”

Quirrell doesn’t even hesitate.

He shuts the door behind him and follows Harry into the dark.

# Twenty Three

## Chapter Notes

First off, thank you (as always) for patiently waiting for this chapter. In many ways 2021 is hitting me harder than 2020 and frankly, I've spent a lot of time with my nose buried in a book while snuggling with my babies (human and fur alike) because everything else is just too damn exhausting. BUT this chapter is finally done and if the universe is kind the next one won't take as long.

Second, I'd like to reiterate that I only post my fanfiction on AO3. If you see it somewhere else it is there without my knowledge or my permission. I will never give my permission for it to be posted to another site.

Finally, I'd like to take a moment to address the topic of Rowling and her recent and ongoing transphobic comments because people have asked my opinion on the matter and because of her own assertions regarding the support of her stance by her online fan base.

As always, I do not own these characters or the world they exist in. I am not JK Rowling and I do not share her opinions. **Trans lives matter. Your. Life. Matters.** (And fuck anyone who says otherwise).

Over the last month or so many HP stories that I have subscribed to have been abandoned or deleted because their authors do not wish to offer any support, in anyway, to Rowling. I respect that. I have considered that myself back and forth on numerous occasions but have ultimately decided that, for me, it would feel too much like surrender. It would feel like I was letting her steal not just the characters and stories that, imo, revolutionized reading but my own joy, comfort, and delight that I have found in reading canon, reading fanfiction, and ultimately in creating this 'verse.

This story began on a whim, with no plan and no direction beyond possibly writing a crack fic. It has evolved beyond that and into something so massive that I require multiple notebooks and word documents to keep the scope of it straight, never mind all the notes and research. It is sprawling and consuming, ever growing and constantly changing and it has come to mean so much to me. And I know it means quite a bit to many of you. Your comments and support are life.

Let me offer the reassurance (not for the first time and probably not for the last) that I will ride this crazy train to the very end.

Thank you for riding it with me.  
I love you.

One foot in front of the other, Harry ascends.

Up, up, up he spirals, dragging his fingertips against stone worn smooth by thousands of hands over a thousand years. He knows these stones, not in the way he knows the rest of the castle: with the familiarity brought only by seeing them day after day. Or not anymore. He knew them that way once but such simple memory has been overwritten: devoured and replaced by something darker. Something more vicious.

Now he doesn't think of rushing to class, trying not to stumble on the steep steps or simply fall over in exhaustion.

Now, no matter how many times he goes up and down these steps for class, he can only see them through a tangle of rage and betrayal.

Now, no matter how many times he goes up and down these steps, he can still feel the last of Dumbledore's petrifying curse tugging at muscles that he is forcing to move. He can still hear Bellatrix laughing, still see the shocked white paleness of Draco's face, still catch the whisper of Snape's robes as he flees.

*Avada Kedavra.*

Sometimes Harry thinks that if he did not also carry part of Voldemort in his head dementors would force him to relive that night and not the night of his parents' death. Dumbledore had been the one that died but Harry had been hollowed out. The growing hope that they could actually do this, that they could *win* had been snuffed out the moment that Dumbledore's body had hit the stones. The loss of his mentor - of man he trusted to guide him and tell him what to do, of the leader of the light - had killed any belief that his story would end well and left behind nothing but an empty feral determination in its wake.

If the world was going to burn, he would do his best to burn Voldemort with it.

But look at him now.

Bloody hell.

Stepping out onto the roof of the astronomy tower is like stepping into another world while remaining put. Like stepping into another time that is future and past and present. The barest of tastes of what it must be like to be the Endless Void: present everywhere and everywhen at once.

Harry gives his head a little shake and walks right up to the edge of the tower.

It's an uncommonly clear night for January, not a whisp of cloud cover in sight and nothing but starlight to light the way. Here at the castle's highest point, they are surrounded by the velvety darkness: cascades of indigo and black brushed with the shimmer of thousands of stars. Harry can feel the echo of it in that space behind his heart, can feel it like a beat in his veins, can feel it like outflung limbs: reaching, reaching, reaching.

*[Hello darling.]*

Harry tips his head skyward and smiles.

*Hello*, he thinks, impossibly fond and inhales until he is full to bursting, the cold night air burning in his lungs.

Slowly, cautiously, Quirrell joins him - and it is Quirrell, surprisingly. There is nothing of Voldemort in the way he moves. It's the same body but Quirrell is smaller, rounded and tucked in. Still, Harry has no doubts that the Dark Lord is hiding just there beyond the gleam of the Defense professor's eyes, watching. Waiting. A snake poised to strike.

Harry exhales and reaches for a bit of that Gryffindor bravery still burning inside of him. "I stood here and watched Dumbledore's murder. The last bit of magic he ever cast was immobilizing me so that I couldn't interfere."

Quirrell blinks.

Clearly, this is not what he expected Harry to say.

To be fair, Harry doubts that *anyone* would expect him to say that.

Well. Maybe Death. But he doesn't count.

Quirrell looks surprised but not shocked - and certainly not like he thinks Harry is delusional.

So, he does know something.

Some of the information exchanged in Harry's conversations with Tom obviously leaks over. Or maybe Tom actually tells him. Harry's knee jerk reaction is to laugh at that possibility. Open communication doesn't really seem like Lord Voldemort's sort of thing, especially when the topic is something that is, however indirectly, about him.

Except he managed to communicate with both Wormtail and Barty, hadn't he? Trusted them - or trusted them as much as he could, as much as he had to - with the twisted remains of his soul. Had trusted them to return him to his own physical form. Had trusted them to orchestrate Harry's unwilling participation.

"H-how old w-w-were you?" his professor manages to stammer out after several minutes of charged silence.

"Sixteen," Harry lets out a noise that might be considered a laugh. It grates like broken glass in his throat as he looks back at the ink filled sky. "And then I suddenly found myself the focus of thousands of hopes in a way that wasn't just Prophet gossip but actual truth. I hated it," he admits. "I hated all of it. Even before. The Dark Lord was an impossible figure: a monster that just wouldn't die and Dumbledore - he was a beacon. '*The only man that You-Know-Who ever feared.*' That's what they..." he exhales loudly. "That's what I thought of him," he corrects.

"F-feared?" Quirrell repeats, and it's so oddly strangled that Harry looks back to his professor and finds his face a mix of fury and amusement, blatant skepticism painted across his features.

Harry huffs. “Yeah.” It had made sense at the time, aligned with the vision Harry had built of Voldemort in his head but it hadn’t been able to hold up to reality. The man who had dueled with Dumbledore in the Ministry atrium certainly hadn’t been afraid of him. Hate and contempt and respect – just a little, one predator acknowledging another – and a fury so deep that Harry had thought he would drown in it. But no fear.

His lack of attack on Dumbledore hadn’t been an admission of fear, it had been the knowledge of facing an enemy in a superior position of power and being unwilling to risk everything in a head on collision.

Harry shakes his head.

“He hated Dumbledore and I – I got it in my head somewhere that hate is just another name for fear. Still think that, to a large extent,” he adds because he does. Because hate and fear are so tangled up for him that it’s almost impossible to tease them loose, to have one without the other, “but it’s not. Not always. I hated Voldemort because I feared him. I hated Snape because I feared him. I hated Malfoy because I feared him. Sure, I thought they were awful people but that wasn’t why I hated them. I hated Voldemort not because he was a dark wizard but because from the moment, I heard of him all I knew was that he wanted to kill me. That he had already tried once and made my life a misery because he failed. I feared what would happen if he tried again. It wasn’t until later that I understood that hate could be motivated by something besides fear.”

Wasn’t until he had found himself standing in the Headmaster’s office, dozens of pairs of eyes staring down at him from their portraits on the wall, with the scent of Snape’s blood still clinging in his nose.

Wasn’t until he had found himself in a recreation of Kings Cross with Dumbledore beaming at him and a baby rattling its last desperate breaths underneath a bench.

“Oh?” the question leaves Quirrell’s mouth in a rush of air, an angry hiss that makes Harry check over his shoulder. It’s still Quirrell, but barely. It’s still Quirrell’s rounded shoulders and softer body but the slant of his lips is too sharp to be his own, a flicker of burgundy around the pupils of his eyes.

It’s profoundly unsettling to see both men present at once. Harry shivers, unable to stop the urge to shake his flesh like a horse trying to rid itself of flies.

“I was presented with a choice,” Harry finally offers and curls his fingers around the aging stone until it bites into his flesh, the brief flash of pain grounding him in the here and now. “It filled me with nothing but contempt. It obliterated everything else.”

The rest of the change ripples over Quirrell in an instant: a monster rising from the deep. It’s still the same body and yet... Harry can’t get over how bloody different the two men are. Shoulders squared, spine straightened - Voldemort is just *bigger*. It doesn’t matter that it’s the same flesh, Harry swears the man gains at least six inches in height and takes up twice as much space. Even Quirrell’s face sharpens, the roundness of his jaw seeming to fade, shadows in his cheeks highlighting the bone structure hiding beneath youthful skin.

*There you are.*

*“What did the old man ask of you?”*

The hiss of the words rolls over Harry like waves: one after another crashing against the shore. Relentless.

*“I got to see the horcrux. The one I carry in me.”* Beside him the Dark Lord freezes. Cautious, coiled, his eyes flicker to the red raised scar adorning Harry’s forehead. Harry doesn’t dare look away, doesn’t dare meet his eyes. *“I got to see part of you left lying cold and alone, crying out for comfort and understanding and was told to walk away. To abandon you or to kill you but to leave you one way or another. Because you didn’t matter. Because you couldn’t matter.”* He spits the words – tastes them, bright and coppery like fresh blood on his tongue.

He hadn’t known that he could hate without fear until then. He hadn’t known that he could look someone that he had respected – someone he had *admired* and *trusted* - in the face and feel nothing but a bottomless emptiness: a pause before the inferno.

The flames are licking at him now.

There’s a part of Harry that wonders what will happen when they finally blaze free.

There’s a part of Harry that wonders if he’ll care.

There’s a part of Harry that just wants to watch the world burn.

He swallows roughly and corrals his thoughts back to the present. *“And I thought, who was he to decide that? Who was he to decide that I mattered and that you didn’t?”* He swallows again, the words rough and sticking in his throat. The brief sensation of a cool hand curling around his shoulder is enough to let him take a deep breath, to clear away the tangle of emotions choking him and soothe them out to something less desperate, less deadly. *“I feared you and I hated you,”* he admits and keeps his eyes fixed on the line of Quirrell’s nose. *“I despised what you made my life but I couldn’t leave you.”*

*“Why?”* The question vibrates all the way down to his bones. It might have been intimidating – a command more than a question – if it hadn’t sounded so... lost.

He hadn’t known that Voldemort knew how to sound like that.

Harry dares a quick glance at the other man’s eyes and there’s something there that he can’t quite identify. Something that makes him think uncomfortably of curling up in his cramped cupboard and making friends with the spiders that gather in the corners.

*“Because you and I are as alike as we are different,”* he says. *“Maybe even more,”* he adds with a rueful sort of huff. *“And if that is true of The Boy Who Lived and the Dark Lord...”* He trails off, shrugging.

Tom’s a smart man. Smarter than Harry will ever be. He doesn’t need Harry to voice the quiet *‘then what about everyone else?’* that hangs in the air between them.

The other man exhales in an angry sounding hiss. *"You are oversimplifying..."*

*"... am I? Really?"* Harry cuts him off before he can stop himself and when Tom doesn't instantly toss him off the tower in retaliation, he hurries onward before he can overthink it. *"That's the line you're going with?"* he scoffs. *"You? Mr. Purebloods Good, Muggles Bad?"*

Apparently, he's still holding his inner lion by the tail.

That's just... great.

*"It is not that simple,"* Tom hisses back, lips thinned down to practically nothing and teeth flashing in the starlight. *"It is more than that. It was always more than that."* His fingers flex, curling like they would around a wand and Harry shoves down the urge to dodge, to step back.

He's not an idiot. Tom might not have a wand in his hand but Harry doesn't doubt the other man could have him on the ground and twitching without one.

He holds his ground and hisses back, *"Not that I ever saw."*

Now it's the Dark Lord scoffing, rolling his eyes like a petulant schoolboy. *"As if Dumbledore would let you see."*

And, well, Harry doesn't entirely think that Tom is wrong on that front. Dumbledore had certainly looked at Tom's life and found exactly what he wanted to find, had told and shown Harry exactly what he thought needed to be passed along.

It's not that Dumbledore specifically kept him from seeing any good in Tom, it's more that Dumbledore didn't believe that there *was* any good in Tom to begin with – that there wasn't any validity to his thoughts or reason to his choices. That there wasn't even the possibility.

Which might actually be worse, in its own way.

Not that it really matters. Not right now. And Harry tells him that.

*"I only saw hate and destruction,"* he explains and stares up into the sky, into the stretch of ink and starlight, and sees the lines of the Dark Mark glowing against the expanse. *"You encouraged cruelty and madness amongst your followers. You had muggleborns stripped of their wands and taken off to prison camps. Sympathetic half-bloods and purebloods were hunted and imprisoned – if they weren't kissed or killed in the process. You had children tortured and then you launched an assault on Hogwarts. You devastated entire generations."* Above his head the snake devours the skull, consuming itself until nothing but tatters remain. *"Dumbledore did not have to do anything to paint you a crazed, evil villain. You did that to yourself."*

Beside him, Tom is silent.

Harry sighs.



*“I’m not asking you to suddenly embrace muggleborns or befriend muggles,”* he mutters and drags his gaze away from what-had-been. *“I just ask that you keep an open mind. That you be willing to look beyond the fear and contempt and whatever else you feel for them to consider the idea that you’re not so different after all. That beneath everything, we’re all just the same.”*

All he’s asking for is a chance.

A pause.

A second to choose words instead of wands.

It doesn’t seem like a big thing to ask but it is. It’s the biggest thing Harry can ask of him.

He asks it anyway.

Harry never had to look the basilisk in the eye – Fawkes saved him from that – but he imagines that this is how its prey had felt in that instant. Pinned. Paralyzed.

A minute passes. Two. Three. Four. Five.

Harry nearly speaks a dozen times but he can’t, he can’t even bring himself to open his mouth. He just waits.

Ten minutes. At least.

Neither of them has moved. Neither of them has blinked.

It’s just the two of them and the wind beneath the starlight.

When Tom finally does speak his voice is like waves crashing against a rocky shore, like thunder over the mountains. *“I will do as you ask if, in return, you promise to keep an open mind about points of my own.”*

It’s a fair enough request, all things considered. If Harry is going to ask that Tom consider and compromise on his entire world view it is only fair that he be willing to do the same.

It still feels like a trap.

Not that that’s ever stopped him.

Still.

*“What points?”* he asks cautiously.

Voldemort’s eyes gleam, slivers of old blood in a too young face. He holds up one finger between them. *“First, that there is no such thing as equality. There are those who are strong and those who are weak.”*

It’s nothing that Harry has not heard from him before. He gives his head a jerk of assent.

The Dark Lord gives him the slightest of nods in return. Harry can all but feel the threads of acknowledgment weaving between them. He holds up another finger.

*“Second, that muggles are dangerous and only grow more dangerous with each passing year.”*

Harry twitches, caught off guard by Tom’s word choice. Had the other man not referred to muggles as pathetic, sightless worms just days ago? His confusion must show on his face because Voldemort repeats himself.

*“Dangerous,”* he emphasizes sharply. *“They have knowingly and unknowingly suppressed our society and our growth for centuries while they progress in leaps and bounds.”*

Harry doesn’t know enough to know if that is true but there is a small part of him - probably the part of him that had half listened to Hermione as she rambled and lectured about everything under the sun – that has the itching, uncomfortable feeling that the other man isn’t entirely lying.

Feeling a little unsteady, Harry jerks his head again and it’s like the plucking of a string when Voldemort once again acknowledges.

*“Three,”* the Dark Lord holds up a third finger between them, *“that muggleborns are a natural weak point between our societies and that they arrive in our world and take it from us.”* Harry opens his mouth to protest, because even if it is technically possible to remove someone’s magical core it’s surely not being done by muggles in order to implant their newly magical children into a world they know nothing about, but Tom cuts him off. *“Not our magic,”* he hisses, *“not literally but our culture, our customs, our history,”* he inhales so sharply that it must hurt. *“It is offensive and uncivilized to them – it is different so they change it or destroy it.”*

*“Fine,”* Harry agrees with another jerk of his head because he can’t argue that point. Already, has he not begun to think the same thing? That left unprepared and shunned for their lack of knowledge that so many of those raised in the muggle world – Harry included – stomp all over customs that they do not understand? *“I will try to keep an open mind but I think you’ll find that I will not be convinced towards genocide.”*

The Dark Lord laughs and it’s too much like the laughs that have come out of Harry’s mouth lately: bitter and broken, a desperate attempt to release emotion without screaming or tears. *“You severely overestimate how much effort it takes to convince someone to do such a thing,”* he tells Harry. *“Everyone wants to believe that they are better, that they are special. It takes depressingly little effort to convince someone of the logic of mass murder.”*

And Harry wants to argue, he really, truly does. He can’t. He’s seen it himself. From both sides.

Us versus Them.

Good versus Death Eaters.

Still, he needs to be clear. One more time.

*"I'm not other people,"* he promises lowly as the other man comes up next to him so that they stand shoulder to shoulder at the edge of the tower. *"You won't convince me."*

In this reality at least, that is his line.

*"Who says that I want to convince you?"*

Harry blinks. *"Don't you?"*

*"Towards systematic destruction?"* Voldemort sighs. *"I do not know. The world has changed. You have quite neatly ripped it out from under me. I am not sure what things will look like when I finally regain my footing. I imagine quite a number of things will have to be accomplished differently."*

Harry opens his mouth and then promptly closes it, unable to think of way to ask after this seemingly change of heart without being insulting. Tom laughs again.

*"Slytherins survive. You do not survive the game by refusing to acknowledge the pieces changing the board."* They exchange a look of mutual understanding, sharp and knowing. *"All I know is that things cannot continue on as they have been,"* the Dark Lord finally offers and the truth of his words, of his belief in them, rings like bells inside Harry's head. *"Better we go out in a blaze of fire and blood than limp onwards towards extinction."*

They are the same. Different, but the same, even to the bitter end.

It gives Harry the courage to press the issue one more time.

*"So, what you're saying is that you don't know what you're going to do about muggles and muggleborns."*

*"I do not know what I am doing about anything,"* Tom admits quietly and Harry doesn't dare breathe at the admission. *"I have spent a decade without a body of my own and perhaps even longer than that without the clarity of mind that I am currently afforded. It seems prudent to focus on rectifying the former. Once that is done, I have time. So long as you uphold your end of the alliance, I have time. We both do. We have a chance here. I know that. You know that. I would not lose it for the sake of hasty decisions."*

Harry blinks. Blinks again as the words filter through his skull and sink into his brain.

*"And you couldn't have led with that?"* he exclaims, swaying so badly that he half fears accidentally flinging himself off the tower.

The Dark Lord raises one of Quirrell's eyebrows. *"No."*

Bloody bastard.

Harry throws his hands in the air. *"Well why the bloody hell not? You could have saved me from worrying my damn head off. I want this to work but..."*

*"I am what I am," Tom cuts in, snarling. "I will not suddenly become whatever you deem acceptable just because of the blood you gift me."*

We are all monsters.

*"You are," Harry agrees more calmly. "But I'm not the same person that I was the first time I was this age. I'm definitely not the same person that I was a year ago when I was hunting your horcruxes. I imagine that you will change too."*

After a moment of charged silence, Tom once again tips his head in weary acknowledgment. *"Everything changes."*

*"Funny," Harry mutters and hears laughter drifting through his head like the babbling of a distant stream. "Someone else recently told me the very same thing."*

*"Then they are wise."*

*"Yeah," Harry smiles up at the night sky. "He is." And then, because he is a sucker for punishment and so very tired of turning this issue over and over in his head, "So that's it. We're just going to keep an open mind and decide later."*

It feels anticlimactic after everything, after how he has worried himself sick over it and built it up in his head. It is an important decision. A defining decision. The sort of decision that decides whether Tom lives or dies. But Tom is right. They have time. Despite the desperation that claws in his chest and keeps him up at night, they have time.

Technically speaking, they have all the time in the world – and then some.

*"It seems like the most prudent option," the Dark Lord points out.*

Harry narrows his eyes. *"You're being reasonable."*

*"I can be reasonable," Tom protests and then, after a beat of skeptical silence, qualifies, "When I want to be."*

There it is. Bloody bastard.

*"...and you want to?"*

*"Yes." The suddenness with which Tom replies seems to surprise even him. Harry wants to laugh. The sharpness of Tom's displeasure looks awfully petulant on Quirrell's face. "I find that I am deeply curious as to where this will take us," he adds. "It makes me... hopeful." He grimaces.*

*"Merlin," Harry breathes, choking on laughter. "That's kind of terrifying."*

*"Yes. It is. It is a feeling I have not entertained in a very long time," Tom turns just enough to narrow his eyes at Harry. "I should kill you for that alone."*

“Well,” Harry murmurs, automatically relaxing beneath the familiar force of an entirely serious death threat. “*At least some things don’t change.*”

“*Did you really witness Dumbledore’s murder?*” Voldemort asks some time later.

Harry is not sure how much time they’ve lost to simply standing there, close enough that their arms almost brush but he suspects it’s been the better part of half an hour. Several times he’s thought to say good night and head back to the dorms before it gets much closer to curfew but each time the words have died before they can cross his tongue. There’s something soothing about just being near the Dark Lord, a whisper of something humming just beneath his skin. On his forehead his scar pricks warmly, pins and needles, like restoring blood flow after sitting in a certain position too long.

It should hurt. In his other life it might have.

It doesn’t.

It feels like sinking into a too warm tub after being run ragged by a desperate-to-win Oliver Wood.

“*Yeah. You didn’t do it,*” he adds, not sure if he should feel amused or apologetic at the look that flashes across Quirrell’s face. Neither. Both. Probably both. Probably anger but he just... can’t. He has no energy left for anger. Not tonight. “*Not directly, at least.*”

“*Pity.*” At some point the Dark Lord had turned around and now he leans back against the parapets, elbows resting on the worn stone. It is such an ordinary thing to do that Harry can’t look away. Like the sugar in his tea, the simple, relaxed line of his body humanizes him in a way that is simply shocking. It is hard enough to make sense of it now, when he animated a body not his own – a smaller, gentler body. Trying to imagine the lean, snake-like Voldemort or the shade of teenage Tom doing the same makes him feel a bit like he does whenever he started thinking about the Master of Death situation too closely. And yet he must have, to do it so smoothly, so easily. Just like everyone else. “*Who had the honor?*”

“*Snape.*”

Tom hums softly, a smile tugging at his lips. “*Acceptable,*” he allows.

“*I don’t think he wanted to do it,*” Harry offers, gently prodding. He’s been operating under the assumption that Lord Voldemort had possessed doubts about Snape’s loyalty, thus the need for him to publicly murder Dumbledore and prove his devotion but now he’s wondering if he – if Dumbledore – had gotten it all wrong.

Harry doesn’t doubt Snape’s loyalty to him but he’s beginning to think that, at the heart of things, Tom feels much the same way.

Voldemort laughs. *Actually* laughs. “*Of course, he wanted to do it,*” he scoffs but he hadn’t been there. He hadn’t seen the look on Snape’s face as Dumbledore pled for his death. But he must see the blatant disagreement on Harry’s. “*Did he use the killing curse?*” he asks.

For the second time that night, Harry has the distinct feeling of walking into a trap.

“...yes.”

*“Then he wanted to do it,” Tom repeats firmly. “All magic is based in intent, to one extent or the other, but the killing curse is old magic, primal magic. There are no specified wand movements and the incantation is more for show than anything else. It requires nothing but pure intent. If Severus used it, he wanted to kill Dumbledore. He wanted it with everything in him.”*

The voice of Barty-as-Moody echoes through his head: *You have to mean it.*

*“And if I said he only did it because Dumbledore asked him to?” Harry pushes harder. “That they arranged it beforehand to protect the person that you had ordered to kill Dumbledore?”*

His own words hit him like a bludger seconds after they come out of his mouth.

Fuck.

Harry closes his eyes.

That stupid Gryffindor tongue of his, giving away secrets that are not his to give. Snape is going to kill him and Harry is going to deserve it.

Tom lets out another laugh. *“Like I would actually delegate the old fool’s death,”* he dismisses, still chuckling at the very idea.

“No,” Harry repeats because in for a knut, in for a galleon. *“You definitely ordered...”*

*“Then I expected them to fail,”* Voldemort corrects bluntly. *“I have waited my whole life to see that man dead. If I gave the honor to someone else then I wanted them to fail. They would have been important somehow, yes?”* he prods in turn. *“Someone that I wanted to make an example of. Someone of some importance in the hierarchy of my followers. Someone that I needed justification in order to punish.”*

*“I wasn’t aware that you needed to justify your actions.”*

It sounds wrong even as he says it, the words awkward and heavy in his mouth.

“Oh,” Voldemort hisses softly, watching him with serious eyes. *“Always.”*

---

“You are late.”

The soft crack of Snape’s voice makes Harry freeze in the middle of the common room. A quick glance at the clock sitting on the mantle reveals that it’s ten after the hour.

Bugger.

“Sorry sir,” Harry apologizes instantly, turning just in time to see his head of house materialize out of the slip of shadows hugging the area near the door. “I lost track of time.”

“You lost track of time,” Snape repeats slowly, skepticism so thick it practically hits Harry in the face.

“Yes sir.” It is true enough. Time had passed all too quickly in Tom’s presence, hours slipping by without notice. His scar is heated but not angry – a warm, happy hum on his forehead. He idly wonders if the Diadem...

Harry clamps down on that thought before it can fully form, petrifying it as it lurks around the corners of his mind. He doesn’t need to give the horcrux that kind of in and he certainly doesn’t need to be thinking such thoughts around Snape, who is watching him with a single-minded intensity.

“Curfew exists for a reason, Mr. Potter,” Snape finally says after a long, silent moment that left Harry feeling a bit like his skin has been peeled back and his insides left vulnerable and exposed. “See that it doesn’t happen again.”

The unspoken *or I will make you regret it* hangs in the air between them, loud and clear.

“It won’t,” Harry promises and hopes that he’ll be able to keep it.

Snape’s eyebrow rises in silent, judging doubt. “I know you like to wander but your safety is my priority.”

“Thank you,” Harry says, so sincerely that he can feel it thick and clogging in his throat. He blinks back the sudden burning at the corners of his eyes. “I’ll be careful.”

“Past actions give proof to the contrary,” his professor points out dryly. For a single, wild moment all Harry can think is *he knows*.

*He knows, he knows, he knows* on constant loop like a banshee’s scream.

But then his brain catches up to him.

The troll.

Harry fists his hands in the folds of his robes to keep from falling.

*He is talking about the troll.*

“I don’t actually try to get into life threatening situations. Sir.”

Snape’s eyebrow climbs just a little bit higher. “I suppose time will tell. Good night, Mr. Potter.”

Harry gives the man a smile that is probably as shaky as it feels. “Good night, professor.”

He feels the weight of Snape’s gaze all the way back to his room.

## Chapter End Notes

Also, when I first wrote him I had no idea that Quirrell would step up and become such a large part of the proceedings. I simply gave him my standard basic level of character building and let him loose. Clearly, he's taken that freedom and run with it! In the beginning, when he was still little more than Voldemort's meat suit, I kind of just pictured him as he was portrayed in the movie but as we've gotten further and further into the story he's taken his own, more definite shape. After many (many) insomnia fueled hours of looking through pictures and wishing that I could draw portraits worth a damn, I have decided that a healthy Quirrell looks like a red haired, hazel eyed [Harry Styles](#) except slightly more rounded around the edges of his jaw.



# Twenty Four

## Chapter Notes

This fic has passed 25,000 kudos. I can't even.

Thank you. Just. Thank you.

(Pay no attention to some slightly hysterical laughter and/or hyperventilating. That's just me.)

It is with nothing less than unabashed relief that Harry welcomes the end of Christmas break.

It's only been three weeks since everyone went home for the holidays but it feels like three years have passed. Three incredibly long years.

At least.

Honestly, Harry is exhausted and tired of being exhausted and really, since he can't change everything *right this bloody second*, crawling into bed and not moving for a month sounds perfect.

And since he can't do that either, well. Sitting here at the Slytherin table and hearing the swell of voices approaching as nearly the entire student body trickles in through the open front doors is probably the next best thing.

He needs to get out of his own head. He needs to remember that there is more to this world than he and Tom and whatever the fuck they are doing as they try to not burn everything to ash around them. It's not all about changing or succeeding. It's about living.

Harry is finding that it's all too easy to forget that.

"Harry!"

The sound of Hannah calling his name is enough to make him smile – a slow and steady thing that just grows and grows so that by the time he turns on the bench and looks towards the doors he is grinning so widely that his eyes hurt. Desire for normality aside, it settles something in him to see all six of his friends come spilling through the doors: an odd sense of...almost nausea done away with as they gather about him.

Several minutes are lost to wordless noises of greeting and one-armed hugs

"How was break?"

“It was good. Quiet. It was nice to wander around the castle without...everyone.” He motions vaguely at the students steadily streaming past to get to their own tables just to make sure they know that he’s talking about everyone else. “It was good,” he repeats.

“We need to work on your expectations,” Blaise drawls. “Not being stalked around the castle is a pretty low bar for a decent holiday.”

Harry shrugs. Blaise isn’t exactly wrong. His first Christmas at Hogwarts will probably always be his happiest Christmas – or, more accurately, his most treasured Christmas. He doesn’t think anything will hit him quite like being here in this grand castle with friends, magic, grand adventures, and *presents just for him* but he is tired of being alone. Tired of living for the purpose of others.

“It was good,” he repeats, “but I promise: no more holidays spent alone at Hogwarts.” It’s a promise to himself more than a promise to them. Hogwarts will always be home in a way that nothing else can be but there’s a bigger world out there. A world he’s died for, technically. He’d like to see it.

Mandy raises a fist in the air.

“*Mamma* will be very pleased to hear that.”

“Hey,” Draco protests instantly, gray eyes narrowing until Harry thinks he might actually succeed in stabbing Blaise with them. “You already have Neville staying with you.”

Harry blinks at that, tipping a little to peer around Hannah to where Neville is suddenly looking a little nervous, pale and eyes rounded and looking more than a little like he had the night they were caught transporting Norbert: like he’s somewhere he shouldn’t be.

*Because that is exactly what he feels like.*

The realization takes longer to hit him than it probably should.

Harry bites the inside of his cheek so hard that he tastes blood, bright and coppery fresh, to keep from making a wounded noise as he closes his eyes, just for a moment, and breathes in slowly.

“G-gran w-wasn’t f-f-feeling-ing w-well,” he manages to stammer out as he shrinks in on himself, shoulders up around his ears and his stutter worse than Harry has ever heard it. The entire group presses closer, huddling up around him. Harry doubts that they even know they’re doing it. *He* didn’t know he was doing it until he suddenly realized that he could feel the whole line of Blaise’s body move as the other boy reaches out to touch Neville’s arm.

*Of course, she wasn’t,* Harry thinks and forces himself to offer a friendly smile instead of the sympathetic grimace he can feel coiling behind his teeth. “I hope she feels better,” he offers instead and when Neville simply looks lost, he adds, “How was the rest of your break?” and then promptly wants to slap himself because the only time he’s seen Neville looking more disinclined to talk had been right after Barty-as-Moody had crucio’d a spider right in front of his eyes.

Despite the paleness of his face, the corner of Neville's mouth ticks up in the ghost of a smile. "It w-was good."

"I think he spent the first couple of days introducing himself to all of *mamma's* plants," Blaise drawls. His voice is teasing but the expression on his face is nothing but fond. "Once she showed him the orchids it was like a whole day before they remembered I was there." His smile broadens and he gives Neville a nudge before the Gryffindor can do much more than start to look apologetic. "It was amazing. *Mamma* is always worried about me being alone but I think she is the one that gets lonely. She liked having you there. We both did."

The din of the Great Hall seems a distant, muted thing. The world is just them, huddled here next to the Slytherin table, quietly turned to Neville as he slowly smiles. "I enjoyed b-being there," he enunciates slowly. Blaise beams. Next to Harry, Hannah practically quivers in place, clearly fighting back the urge to bound over and give the other boy a hug. "And the M-manor," he adds after a slight pause, earnestly looking to Draco. "Th-that w-was good too."

Draco looks mollified and more than a little pleased at the inclusion, the point of his nose rising into the air. A year ago, that little tilt of his head would have made Harry want to punch it right off his smug face and now, well. Now he can feel a smile tugging on his lips, amused and fond and a little bit exasperated all at once as he asks, "You went to Malfoy Manor?"

He's trying to picture Neville of all people wandering around Malfoy Manor.

He can't.

Actually, he can't picture it at all without the overlay of Voldemort and Death Eaters and his friends rotting in cells in the dungeon. Can't imagine what the building would look like without the miasma of despair and the drifting dementor produced fog. It's almost easier to imagine having a summer picnic at the foot of Tom Riddle Sr's grave than it is to think of Neville spending the day at Malfoy Manor and sincerely describing it as *good*.

"We all went."

"Aunt Millie had a meeting with Draco's dad and brought Hannah and I with."

"Blaise and Neville were already there so we sent an owl to Mandy..."

"...not that we saw you much."

Mandy shrugs, unrepentant and leans against Neville. "You're the one that insisted on showing me the library."

"Because I thought you would appreciate it!"

"Clearly, I did! I'm going to live there," she adds, turning her attention to Harry. "I'm going to *live* there." She is absolutely serious.

"It's just a library," Draco mutters, but his cheeks are faintly pink and he looks pleased.

“Just a...!”

“And you didn’t go flying with us!”

“Um, yeah, it was freezing. Why would I want to get my arse frozen to a broomstick when I could be digging through your library instead?” Mandy points up at her face with the index fingers of both hands. “*Ravenclaw*.”

Draco deflates like a balloon that’s been stuck with a needle. “You are,” he allows, managing to sound put out even if the corner of his mouth is curved upward. “And you did come play exploding snap with us.”

“Of course, I did,” Mandy huffs. “There was cake *and* you had the good cards. We practically burnt off Blaise’s eyebrows!”

“Yes,” the other boy drawls blandly. “Thanks for that.”

“They look like they’re growing back nicely,” Susan tells him kindly, eyes gleaming.

Blaise sighs. “*Grazie. Mamma* is a decent potion mistress when she needs to be.”

“Sounds like everyone had a good time,” Harry says and part of him can’t help but think that he could have been there with them. He could have laughed over things catching fire during exploding snap and poked around the Malfoy library, and flown – actually *flown* – without inhibitions instead of trying to hash things out with the Dark Lord and avoid Dumbledore. It certainly sounds less exhausting and yet... he can still feel that night on the Astronomy tower, still feel the whip of the wind whistling buy, still feel the faint warmth of the other man’s body as they stood there in quiet understanding. He can all but feel Quirrell sitting at the head table, feel the fleeting touch of his gaze, of *both* of their gazes, as the students take their seats. He’s vaguely aware of the other man in a way that’s like listening to the echo of his own heartbeat.

So maybe part of him wishes that he had gone with his friends but he can’t bring himself to be discontent with the way things turned out, with the effort spent making a new one.

The Dark Lord, a friend. Harry has to bite his tongue to keep from laughing at the thought, however true it might be. At least he thinks it might be. Maybe. Possibly. Probably?

He gives his head a quick little shake, pulling out of his thoughts just in time to hear Neville repeat, “It was g-good,” and though the Gryffindor is still looking a little pale and pinched faced, the smile pulling at his lips and the way his eyes are lit up is nothing but genuine. “It’s n-nice to b-be back,” he adds.

“Yeah, it’s nice to all be together again. Even if...” Susan’s eyes flicker towards the high table. It’s nothing but a there-and-gone glance but there’s something about it, about the way his friends are huddled together, close enough that they form of a wall of black robes pressed shoulder to shoulder that makes the hair at the nape of Harry’s neck prickle uncomfortably.

“What?” he asks and it comes out more of a hiss than anything else, skirting a little too close to parseltongue than is probably wise given the concerned look that Draco gives him.

Susan shakes her head except it’s more a shiver that makes her entire body twitch. “Not here,” Blaise murmurs lowly and around the circle heads nod in agreement.

Harry doesn’t like it.

He doesn’t like it *at all*.

He must look as on edge as he suddenly feels, entire body coiling in preparation for an attack, for *something*, for whatever it is that has Susan looking at the professors like she expects to be attacked. Like they’re *dangerous*.

They are. Of course, they bloody are.

Merlin, three of the most dangerous magical beings in Britain are sitting at the professor’s table – and it’s not like McGonagall or Flitwick are slouches either. Even ignoring Harry and whatever mischief the Weasley twins have stuffed in their pockets and up their sleeves there’s enough magical firepower in this hall to do some serious damage. But - and Harry feels like this is the important part - his friends and the rest of the students – they’re not supposed to *know that*.

Well, except for Snape but most of magical Britain is at least slightly terrified of Snape.

And yet...

Something is wrong and inside his chest, in that hollow behind his heart, he can feel the cold spilling out like mist from a cauldron. Can feel it creeping through his veins and crawling along his bones.

[*Steady, darling.*]

Harry inhales sharply, good mood suddenly falling away like chunks of brittle glass.

Draco’s hand on his forearm is scalding, hotter than dragon fire.

Harry flinches.

“Easy,” Blaise murmurs from beside him. Hannah’s touch is slightly cooler, fingers winding with his own and clenching until they’re pressed palm to palm. He can feel her heartbeat against his skin. It’s elevated, her flesh damp with sweat, but it’s not frantic. It’s not churning yet, not gearing up to run, to fight.

Harry exhales slowly and it’s colder than it should be, cold enough to make his teeth ache but his next inhale is almost normal – as normal as he can make himself be when his friends are huddled like a herd of hippogriffs faced with predators that they’re not sure they can escape.

This is why he had waited until everyone was gone before going to Tom. This is why, even if he hadn’t realized it. Because Harry has always had shit self-preservation but he’s always

been willing to do anything to protect those he cares about.

“I’m fine,” he gets out, biting back the laughter that twists and scratches at his throat when he is met with nothing but skepticism. “I’m fine. I just don’t like... I just...” he presses his lips together, unsure of how to salvage this. Unsure of how to get out of this without explaining that he still wakes on a regular basis from dreams of the dead – of the dead he had seen, of the death that could happen. He takes another deep breath and lets it out slowly. “What is happening?”

“Nothing yet,” Susan promises. “We’re all okay.”

Harry opens his mouth.

“Later,” Draco promises. “Once we’re in the dorms.”

*Once we’re safe*, Harry hears silently and mentally crosses Snape off his list. That just leaves the Dark Lord and Dumbledore and he’s inclined to think that there would be a bit more of an uproar if people knew that Lord Voldemort is currently walking around in Quirrell’s body.

Or maybe not, he allows, thinking of last time.

Or it could be something else entirely. He could just be making paranoid assumptions and jumping in before he knows the lay of the land.

Like usual.

Bugger.

Harry inhales so sharply that it actually hurts.

“Okay,” he gives his head a little jerk of assent. “Okay.”

He doesn’t taste a single bite of his dinner.

---

“What’s going on?” he demands as soon as enter the first-year common area.

Blaise rolls his eyes. “Not here,” he scolds and drags both Harry and Draco down to his room. Once they have achieved a questionable level of privacy, Harry repeats himself as calmly as he can manage.

Draco immediately raises both his hands in a placating gesture so he must not have managed much calmness at all. “It’s nothing to worry about.”

“Really?” Harry scoffs, giving the blond a pointed look. “Because that’s definitely not what it looked like.”

Draco’s face makes several complicated motions before settling into something between a grimace and a sneer. “Okay. Fine. It’s a little worrying but my father is going to take care of it!” And clearly, that means the matter is done in Draco’s eyes but Harry is going to need a

little more than that. The last time he'd seen Susan look that worried Umbridge had been about to break into the Room of Requirement.

"Take care of what?"

"The wards!" Draco snaps back, like it should be obvious and maybe, to Draco, it is. Harry honestly hasn't given the subject more than a stray thought since the first week of November.

Harry blinks. "Didn't he already do that?"

"No, apparently it's a much bigger problem than they originally thought. The wards are..."

"They're starving," Blaise butts in.

Harry blinks again. "That sounds bad."

"It is." Blaise's lips are pressed together in a fair imitation of McGonagall. "Wards are... living, in a way. If they're not fed..."

"...then they fail." Harry doesn't quite know all of what the wards at Hogwarts entails. He knows that they disguise it and repel any muggles that wander too close. He knows that they prevent apparition. And that's the extent of his knowledge, really, though now that he's thinking about it, he assumes that there are various things they're supposed to protect against seeing how a troll wandering through the school had been enough to warrant an investigation of them. "But why are they starving?"

Draco's jaw tightens. "Father says Dumbledore hasn't been feeding them."

Harry blinks. "What?" he asks because that makes *no sense*. Literally none. Harry had spent six agonizingly long summers with the Dursleys because *those* wards had to be maintained so why wouldn't Dumbledore take care of the school wards? He might dismiss the whole thing as Malfoy Sr trying to stir up trouble for Dumbledore by blowing things out of proportion – because it certainly wouldn't be the first time *that* had happened – but it had been Susan who had been the most concerned. Or at least the least able to keep the concern from her face and Susan is a pretty sensible, no nonsense, hard to rattle person. Or she had been when he knew her previously and she's not all that different now. Just younger. And while eleven-year-old Susan might be more trusting than the scornful fifteen-year-old that he had taught in DA he doesn't think the difference is so great that she would look at Dumbledore with fear if it were only Draco's word, even if he is her friend.

But it hadn't just been Lucius who had come to Hogwarts after Halloween, had it? Amelia Bones had been there too.

And if *Amelia Bones* is warning her niece about the state of Hogwarts' wards... Then it's serious. It's serious. It's verifiable. It's... it's...

It just doesn't make any *sense*.

Unless.

Harry turns to stare pensively out at the lake.

He's thought before about how convenient and circumstantial his fight for the Sorcerer's Stone had been. How everything had slotted together in the end like pieces of a puzzle. How the protections had seemed almost insurmountable as a panic driven eleven-year-old but in retrospect were laughably pathetic. Out of all the things that magic can do and Dumbledore left the safety of one of the most powerful magic objects in the world to some Devil's Snare and charmed, flying keys. The only protections that had possessed any true effectiveness had been Fluffy and the Mirror. And maybe, possibly, the troll. Even Snape's contribution had been so much less than what the man is capable of – and what had been there had been hampered by a *riddle* – somewhere, distantly at the back of his mind, Harry lets out a rather hysterical giggle – that provided all the answers to anyone capable of an ounce of rational thought.

It certainly hadn't stopped Tom. Broken and cursed, falling apart and mad, he and Quirrell had made it through the flames without issue.

*Harry* had made it through without issue. Harry, who had the ability to *burn a man to death* with nothing more than his bare hands as the result of magical protection, had passed through the gauntlet set by a dozen powerful witches and wizards without any true issue.

He has since wondered, several times, if that had been intentional. If his encounter with Voldemort had been engineered – maybe in the hopes that he would actually destroy the Dark Lord for good, maybe for no other reason than to see what happened.

But if wards could keep Voldemort away from Privet Drive, why couldn't they do the same for Hogwarts? Why hadn't they been protected from trolls, basilisks, acromantulas, and werewolves? He assumes Death Eaters were never warded from the school because Dumbledore relied so heavily on Snape. If the Ministry is able to pinpoint, down to the minute, what the type of spell cast in the Dursley's home, why could there not be monitoring for dangerous spells – for the Unforgiveables at least?

Unless.

Unless it had been deliberate. Unless it had been on purpose. Unless it was a weakness created in the name of the Greater Good.

Unless.

He doesn't want to believe such a thing of Dumbledore, even now. It's one thing to be so reckless and callous with the life of a weapon kept until the proper time. It's another to endanger the lives of everyone else in this school.

But why else would he not care for the wards supposed to keep them safe? Why?

"Why?" he whispers, eyes flicking back to first Blaise and then Draco. "Why wouldn't he feed them?" He does not have to fake the utter confusion that twists at his face. "Did he not know he was supposed to?" He knows it's a measly, miserable excuse the moment it falls from his mouth: so unlikely, so completely impossible that it's absurd. Half buried in the



folds of his robes his hands are clenched so tightly together that he can feel his bones creaking painfully.

He doesn't even need to look at the other two boys to know that they're shaking their heads.

"Father didn't say much," Draco says, clearly displeased with the situation. "He just said that Dumbledore expected the magic of the school itself to feed them."

"...and it didn't?"

"Not enough," Blaise shrugs.

No, Harry agrees silently. *Not enough.*

"Mother wanted to keep me home and hire a tutor," Draco confesses, so quiet that Harry has to lean toward him in order to hear. "Or even send me off to Durmstrang like Father originally wanted. Father said no."

Blaise's eyebrows nearly shoot clear off the top of his head. "Your dad said *no*?" he repeats, his voice sounding as stunned as Draco looks.

Draco nods slowly. "He said that this might be our only chance."

"Only chance for what?" Harry asks.

Draco lifts one shoulder and lets it fall heavily: a limp and sullen protest of his lack of answers. "I don't know," he admits after a moment. "They didn't know I was there so I couldn't ask."

Draco might not know but Harry does. He doesn't even need to utilize his additional seven years of experience to know, not if the speculative look on Blaise's face is anything to go by. Whatever Lucius Malfoy is doing, he's going to leverage the troll and the issue with the wards against Dumbledore.

For a moment all he feels is a flash of fury, the heat of it licking up his spine and surging through his veins. The familiar litany of *how dare you* pounds in his head, churning up years of frustrated, bitter helplessness, of self-indignation, and quiet, lonely jealousy. For a moment it is all he can feel, as hot and uncontrollable as fiendfyre.

And then in the space it takes his heart to beat once, it's gone. The flame turned to ash and blown away on the wind.

Everything is different now, even the things that remain the same. Harry has long since accepted that his knowledge of specific events will become useless, the world turning and twisting into something unrecognizable, changing the more he changes. The longer he persists, the further he goes the more of what he knows, what he has experienced, will become obsolete.

He doesn't have a plan for Dumbledore – he barely has a plan for himself – but he would be a liar if he didn't admit to being curious about what is going to happen, about how it will all

play out.

Maybe nothing will happen. Maybe something will.

Everything changes.

“Father says that we should be safe enough as long as we’re careful.” Draco’s voice draws Harry out of his thoughts and back into Blaise’s room. “The wards aren’t at a critical point yet and Uncle Severus always uses his own wards for the potions classroom.” Harry finds himself nodding at that, completely unsurprised. “But if anything does happen,” Draco adds quietly, more serious than Harry has *ever* heard him, “we’re supposed to get to Uncle Sev as fast as possible.” He lets out a shaky breath. “And if for some reason we can’t get to Uncle Sev, we stick together and try for Professor Quirrell.”

“Quirrell?”

Harry thanks his lucky stars that Blaise asks because Harry is too shocked to do so. There had never been any indication that Lucius Malfoy – or any of the Death Eaters – had known that Quirrell and Voldemort had been sharing a body. But perhaps he does know. He can’t think of any other reason Lucius might trust the man with his son – and even that one is a flimsy one at best. This Voldemort hasn’t tortured the Malfoys and held them hostage but Harry doesn’t know what sort of relationship Lucius had had with the Dark Lord before his death.

Or maybe it’s something else.

Harry can’t imagine what, though.

“Yeah.” Draco sounds just as confused. Harry’s glad he’s not the only one. “He helped me before – at Halloween. But it was just a letter. All he did was mail my letter so I could stay by the hospital wing.”

“Maybe it’s that simple,” Blaise offers after a moment of pensive silence. “It’s not like any of the other professors go out of their way to help us Slytherins.”

“Maybe.”

After a prolonged, skeptical silence that speaks louder than any halfhearted agreement Blaise swears quietly in Italian and drags a hand down his face. “And what about you?” he demands.

Harry blinks. “Me?”

“Yes. You. You were practically speaking parseltongue in the middle of the Great Hall!”

“Ah.” Harry rubs at the back of his neck, feeling his cheeks warm with genuine embarrassment. Not necessarily for the near parseltongue slip, though that works as a convenient excuse, but for the way his magic slipped so badly at the slightest hint of a threat. He hadn’t made ice crawl along the floor and up the walls, hadn’t plunged the room into a dementor worthy chill but he could feel that it had been close. Could feel just how much the growing coil of his own magic had pushed at the covering of his skin. He’s continued to

practice magic is short, regular bursts like Madam Pomfrey recommended and he's been able to tell, especially in the past couple of weeks, that he's growing stronger. He can't afford to slip up. Not when he's going to eventually have the power required to chase off hundreds of dementers just swimming around inside him all the time. "It's pretty much all I've been speaking during break."

Both Draco and Blaise blink.

"Seriously?" Draco asks.

Harry shrugs. "Well, yeah. Outside of a few conversations with the professors, who else was I going to talk to?"

"That's really sad, Harry."

Harry figures he probably shouldn't tell them that Inigo is an infinitely better conversationalist than the spiders in his cupboard. Or the Dursleys. Or pretty much anyone he knew from the time of his parents' deaths to when Hagrid showed up with his letter.

"I already said that I wouldn't stay here alone for anymore holidays," he says instead.

"You're staying with me first," Draco informs him. Blaise throws his hands up in the air and mutters something in Italian.

"Sure," Harry agrees and doesn't fight the smile forming on his face. "I'll stay with you first."

Draco is almost unbearably smug for the rest of the evening.

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Despite the tension surrounding everyone's return and the words of caution regarding the school's wards and their safety – Harry finds out from Susan that her aunt *had* given her and Hannah practically the same warning that Draco had gotten from his father, right on down to the instruction to head straight for Snape like a flock of homing pigeons at the first sign of trouble. "*She didn't come out and say it but it sounds like she's talked to him about it,*" she had told in a low voice during their first charms lesson after the break. "*Which makes sense, of course. If they're conducting a formal investigation then they'll want to talk to at least some of the professors.*" – the weeks slip by in a sort of casual, comfortable monotony. Once the lack of action would have left Harry nervous, almost frantic with the need to *do something*, as the beginning of the calendar year always seemed to bring that lull in whatever sinister and/or unfortunate plot Harry had tripped or been shoved into that year, but now he's content to watch the days slip past one after another. Might even prefer it, actually.

Meals, medications, physical therapy, classes, homework, sleep, repeat.

Still, there are some things that stand out from the passing days, much like the golden egg sitting in the middle of a dragon's clutch.

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Hermione approaches him on the third day of the term.

It's honestly at least one day longer than he thought it would take, especially because on Monday she spent the better part of an hour not so subtly watching him from a nearby table in the library.

Instead, she approaches him after lunch, marching over to the Slytherin table after most of the upper years have eaten and left for their classes, leaving the first and second years to fill the Great Hall with their higher voices as they linger over their food and contemplate their afternoons. Her head is up and her back is straight but Harry can tell that she is nervous. Despite her determined carriage, her shoulders are rounded, arms clasped around her chest as if she were holding a book though there is nothing there. The riot of her curls is more unruly than ever, a bristling halo that is more like a cat all puffed up in an attempt to make itself bigger and more intimidating than anything else.

Because Harry has had seven years to learn the body language of one Hermione Granger, he manages to time their intersection for the more neutral territory of the doorway to the Great Hall. Better this happen out in the open than to draw her deeper into snake territory to be met with looks ranging from a cool and distant disapproval to a violent, burning disgust. Blaise, at least, catches his intent in suggesting they all move to the library and raises an eyebrow, dark eyes flickering to where Hermione is barreling down on them like the Hogwarts Express.

"You guys go ahead," Harry says, waving his friends toward the main staircase. "I'll catch up in a minute."

Susan's displeasure with that plan is immediately evident in the press of her lips. It surprises him a little how seriously she is taking the warnings, the possibility of a threat. Draco isn't nearly as paranoid and honestly, Harry kind of expected him to be. If nothing else he expected the other boy to throw his weight around more, but there isn't even an uptick in the frequency with which *my father will hear about this* is uttered. Susan, on the hand, watches everything with a sharp, careful caution. There's something a little feral lurking around the edges of her eyes that reminds Harry of the sheer panic and desperation that had consumed him at the idea of Hogwarts being closed. "We'll wait for you on the landing," she decides after barely a beat and the firmness of her tone leaves absolutely zero room for argument.

Harry twitches his hands upward in surrender. "Sure," he agrees. "I won't be long."

Seeing him alone makes Hermione square up her shoulders even tighter and march over to him after the briefest of pauses – probably spent trying to figure out *why* he was waiting for her alone in the entry hall while his friends perched like overly interested birds of prey on the staircase. He'd sent them on ahead in an attempt to make himself less intimidating and instead probably made it worse.

Bugger.

Story of his life really.

"Granger." Her name feels odd in his mouth, weird on a tongue used to shaping out the syllables of her name.

“Potter.” It feels even odder to hear his name in her voice, the *wrong* name. It’s jarring, almost like falling off a broom. His heart clenches painfully, a sudden wave of longing for Hermione – for *his* Hermione – pulling at him like the currents of the sea. He takes a deep breath, lets it out slowly, lets it take the sudden surge of longing and mourning with it.

Everything changes.

He waits for her to speak.

“Thank you,” she opens abruptly, before she’s even had a chance to properly stop her forward momentum. “For the books. For the book suggestions,” she corrects hastily, nearly tripping over her own words.

Harry mercilessly stomps down on the urge to grin at her: full and lopsided and just a little bit sheepish. It’s a familiarity this Harry Potter and this Hermione Granger do not have, that they might never have. “You’re welcome,” he says instead.

“I was only able to get two of them delivered before the end of break but they are *fascinating*. Did you know that...” her voice, gaining speed, pitch, and volume in her enthusiasm, trips over itself, goes completely arse over tea kettle as she shoots him a sudden look. “Well, of course *you* know.”

*But I don’t – I didn’t*, Harry wants to tell her. *Even after spending years at Hogwarts I still knew nothing.*

He doesn’t. They are not familiar enough for that, for words and confessions he has not even spoken to his friends.

Besides, she has clearly formed her own opinion of him and what he knows and Harry is well aware of how well twelve-year-old Hermione takes having her own knowledge challenged.

He offers her a smile, small but genuine and bright.

“They’re very informative. I thought you might be interested in something like that.”

For a moment there’s nothing but hurt splashed across Hermione’s face, bright and sparking like fireworks bursting against the night sky. It’s followed closely by offense and Harry briefly wonders if she’s going to punch him like another Hermione had once laid into Draco but then she stands impossibly straighter, tightens her shoulders, and presses her mouth together in a firm line of determination.

“I am,” she announces firmly, like she expects him to disagree. Harry’s smile widens, unbearably fond.

“I thought so,” he repeats gently, “You were so excited to tell everyone about the Great Hall when we first arrived.”

Hermione blinks rapidly at his tone of voice, at his words, at the hand held out between them. She only had time to order two of the books before she had to come back to school. Two out of the ten he had recommended, trusting that her own obsessive thirst for knowledge would

take care of the rest. Knowing her she's read them already or at least read a good chunk of them. Probably sat in the corner of one of the compartments on the train – maybe alone, maybe not – and devoured the ink right off of the page before storing it in that magnificent brain of hers.

There is power in words, in naming something, in letting people use your name. What first life Harry had taken for a sense of superiority – Potter this and Potter that - is a natural caution, a reservation of power for those that you deem worthy to have it. He hadn't understood that. He hadn't understood that sure, Lord Voldemort had eventually persuaded every wix in the world save one to refer to him as You-Know-Who, or even He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named if you wanted to sound pretentious, by virtue of a taboo spell but that he'd already been well on his way to end even before the spell. Harry hadn't understood the power that had come with crafting a name and then attaching it to whispers and fears and promises for years until even the *thought* of the name had been nearly as effective as a well placed *stupefy*.

Likewise, there is power in a gesture such as this. It's not an oath or even a promise but something akin to it. Maybe their youngest sister or perhaps even a cousin. An extended hand is an offering, an accepted hand is an agreement. It is a ceasefire, a peace agreement between two beings with the power to make the other hurt, to make the other *die*, with nothing more than a wave of a stick and some whispered words, with nothing more than *intent*.

He hadn't understood that when he had refused first life Draco's hand that day on the train – and truthfully, even if he had, he still probably would have refused. First life Draco had been a stuck up, petty, bigoted little shit. This life Draco still *is*. He sees it at times, little bits and pieces but not nearly as much as he expected to. It's different. Harry is different, sure, and he puts a lot of their new friendship down to the fact that he is really eighteen years old and has a slightly better understanding of human behavior, but it's also not just that.

He thinks again of cakes and cookies – of the same ingredients combined in different amounts and in different ways to create two things that are completely different.

“Oh,” Hermione breathes out, eyes wide.

She takes his hand.

He gives it brief shake. “See you around, Granger.”

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“Really?” Draco asks as he climbs the last few steps separating them. “*Granger?*”

Harry shrugs. “I have a good feeling about her.” Draco isn't the only one whose eyebrows shoot skyward with incredulity. “I don't know if anything will happen,” he admits with another shrug, “but we'll see.”

His Hermione had never given up on him. No matter the cost she had stayed with him through everything, through every miserable, terrifying second. This isn't his Hermione. She isn't. She never will be but she's still the seeds of her and Harry is curious to see how she'll grow.

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After Hermione, Harry manages to make it all the way to the end of January without incident.

Well, there's a bit of unadulterated panic as the weekend approaches and he realizes that there is no bloody way that he can sneak off to meet with Quirrell and Tom to give them their unicorn blood. Not even with the invisibility cloak. Between Susan's insistence on sticking together as much as possible, Snape's all watchful eye, and whatever magical alerts the man has cast on the Slytherin dormitory he is as stuck as if they'd simply hit him with a *petrificus totalus*. Maybe more so because given enough time he can wiggle himself out of one of those.

And look, Harry has been trying to be more thoughtful. To make plans, to think things through, to analyze situations through to their various outcomes – or at least as many as he can think of – but he's always been an act first, think later sort of guy. And he's always been really, really shit at lying. Which is why, in a surge of desperation, he finds himself bailing on his friends as they're headed into lunch on Friday using the lamest excuse of all.

"You guys go ahead. I need to run to the loo."

The only good thing he can say about this plan is that his timing is spot on: everyone is either in the act of sitting down at their usual spots at the Slytherin table or already reaching for their food.

"But didn't you..." Susan begins because ever since people started trying to follow Harry into toilet stalls to ask about his scar everyone has been far too interested in keeping track of his bathroom habits. Most of the time he thinks it's weird but oddly sweet. Right now, it's just bloody annoying.

"I've been extra thirsty today," he interrupts and Susan, thank Merlin, accepts it because he has actually been known to drink rather excessively when his head is bothering him. "I'm fine," he adds hastily, not wanting to accidentally earn himself a trip to the infirmary.

Susan raises an eyebrow.

Blaise sighs and swings his legs back around to the other side of the bench.

"Don't get up," Harry tells him, probably a little more forcefully than is strictly necessary. "Seriously. I'm just going to nip into the loo out there." He thumbs over his shoulder at the doors to the Great Hall. There are, in fact, a set of large bathrooms around the corner and down a half flight of stairs. Generally, he avoids them because they draw some of the biggest crowds but he's pretending to be desperate and beggars can't be choosers. "Right now."

"Oh, just let him pee in peace. It's not like anyone wants to be alone in the loo with him since he killed the troll," Many points out pragmatically. Out of the corner of his eye Draco looks like he's desperately trying not to laugh and make an undignified scene of himself. Even Neville looks amused, the corner of his mouth turned up enough to make his eyes gleam.

The things he does for his friends, honestly.

Susan sighs. “I guess...”

Blaise swings back around and reaches for the roll that he had dropped at the first sign of Susan’s disapproval.

“Besides,” Mandy assures her, “if he’s not back in ten minutes we can launch an attack on the boys’ bathroom.”

“Oooh!” Hannah perks up like hound catching scent. “That could be fun.”

“We-we’re not g-going to do that!” Neville gasps out, torn between horror and laughing.

“Well,” Mandy allows after a pointed pause. “*You’re* not.”

“I’m leaving now,” Harry announces.

Draco waves him away and Harry doesn’t bother to question his good fortune. He just flees.

Outside of the Great Hall he pauses and waits to the count of ten just in case someone *does* decide to come after him but when no one immediately appears he slips behind one of the tapestries and takes off at dead run. Mandy had been joking. Mostly joking. Probably. Maybe. But regardless of whether she may or may not have been joking, Harry knows a time limit when he sees one.

Ten minutes. He can make it.

Probably.

Four minutes later he all but skids to a halt in front of Quirrell’s office just as the man in question is leaving. No doubt headed down to lunch himself.

To Quirrell’s merit he doesn’t do much more than blink before asking, “N-need s-s-something P-Potter?”

“Have...” he pauses to take several gulps of air, fill his lungs to the bursting and send oxygen racing through his veins, “...something for you.” His fingers fumble as he tries to grip the vial and it’s only after another deep breath – Merlin, he thought he was in better shape than this – that he manages to wrap his fingers around the smooth cylinder of glass and pull it from his pocket. He holds it out carefully, shielded by his fingers so that even if there were anyone else in the corridor, they wouldn’t see what exactly he is passing to the professor.

Quirrell doesn’t even blink but takes it with a smooth flick of his fingers and then it’s gone, vanished into his robes as if it was never there. It’s still Quirrell’s softer form standing in front of him but those are Voldemort’s fingers: smooth, sly precision and absolute control.

“I’ll figure out a better way for next week,” Harry promises, nearly biting his tongue to keep it from coming out in parseltongue. It’s only been a week but he... he almost misses speaking it, as crazy as that sounds. He still talks with Inigo. Still has complete conversations both in private and out in front of his dormmates because that will never stop being amusing, no matter how used they are becoming to it. It just feels different, speaking to Tom. He had



started it because he knew it was, it *is*, something that only the two of them understand. Harry doesn't know how many other parselmouths there might be in the world – *if* there are any other parselmouths out in the world – but he's damn sure that there aren't any others in Britain. It had been a safety precaution but it had felt...private. Binding, in a way. The two of them against the rest of the world.

Not so far from the truth, he supposes. Not if he accomplishes anything close to what he hopes to.

He shoves down the urge to laugh hysterically, buries it behind the storm clouds of that game against Hufflepuff, before Draco had shown up in his ridiculous dementor costume, and focuses on the way the wind had whipped past his face, how the rain had felt like needles driving through his uniform and into his skin.

It still hits him from time to time just how bizarre his life is. How utterly *ridiculous*.

Bloody hell.

He gives his head a little shake. He doesn't have time for this.

"W-walk with m-me?" Quirrell inquires with a tip of his head in the direction of the Great Hall.

Harry gives him a rueful little smile. "Some other time, sir," he begs off politely, "but I have to get back before Hannah leads an attack on the boys' loo."

Quirrell's eyebrows climb his face but the smile that flashes across his face, a sharp slash of his lips, is all Tom. As is the low, rumbling, "That girl is going to be trouble." The Dark Lord sounds positively delighted.

Harry wastes almost thirty seconds worrying about the possible implications of Voldemort *approving* of his friends and their actions before he promptly shelves that thought for later and, with a polite farewell, tears himself away and heads back to the Great Hall.

It's harder to leave than he thought it would be.

The blood in his veins instantly feels cooler.

He makes it back to the Great Hall right at the ten-minute mark and plops down on the bench just as Blaise is, with a look of great long suffering, swinging his legs around as if to get up.

"There was a line," he offers when they all look at him and inwardly pats himself on the back that he doesn't sound like he's been sprinting up and down several flights of stairs.

Next week, Quirrell and Tom save him from having to think up an excuse with his useless brain by asking him to stay after class for a moment. "I've thought about what y-you asked m-me," he stutters out from behind his desk but the stutter isn't quite right. It's still real but it's faded, loosening. "I h-have some b-books that m-might prove useful. If you stop b-by Friday afternoon I should h-have them r-ready for you."

Harry allows himself to stare for one brief, bewildering second before he nods. “Of course, sir.”

Voldemort’s eyes gleam out of Quirrell’s face.

When Harry leaves Quirrell’s office *that* Friday, he has a book tucked into his bag. It’s a small, slim bound book with a stretched velvet cover and the title embossed in gold: *The Power of Three: Recovering the Triumvirate*.

Just a single glance at it makes Harry’s fingers itch. Not literally, not with the tingle of magic, but with eagerness. He wonders if this is how Hermione feels about every book she sees.

The next week Quirrell and Tom have a different book for him, this one scuffed and leatherbound, creaking with age as he slips it into his bag.

He can’t ever linger. There are no opportunities to speak beyond the basic cordialities and there are certainly no opportunities for Harry to speak to *Tom* but the crisis has been averted. They get their unicorn blood. They grow healthier, stronger. They remain allies. All three of them wait, one day ticking over into the next and the next and next until suddenly January has passed without incident.

And that is when Hagrid ambushes him.

# Twenty Five

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

In retrospect, Harry should have expected something like this.

Given his ever-growing certainty that Dumbledore had orchestrated his confrontation with Voldemort over the Stone, he absolutely should have expected this to start *now*.

Now that he has proven to Dumbledore that he is no *true* Slytherin. Now that he has proven to the headmaster that he is brave and good. Now that he has passed whatever arbitrary test Dumbledore had set him in regard to the Mirror – had it been a test or had he been checking that Harry is still what he is supposed to be: a lonely child who longs for family? For acceptance and belonging? – it should not be a surprise for Dumbledore to start nudging him in the direction of the Stone.

It really, really shouldn't.

It does.

Bugger.

What doesn't surprise him is that it starts with Hagrid, just as it had before.

That doesn't stop him from starting violently when Hagrid's familiar voice booms out from behind him, both different and achingly familiar all at the same time – something closer to the few commands he barked during class and less the gentle exuberance of his first friend.

“Harry!”

Harry isn't the only one who jumps. Draco practically takes flight and Mandy twists next to him, the bag of books slung over her shoulder nearly knocking Harry off his feet as she turns around to face the groundskeeper. Even Blaise flinches at the sudden noise.

“Harry!”

He blinks for a minute, frozen in place for just a second, the memory of Hagrid screaming at him as he walked out of the woods and into the clearing where Voldemort waited overlaid against the reality until he can feel his heartrate drop until it's almost nothing, until it's just a *plodplodplod* echoing in his veins.

The cool press of a hand between his shoulder blades is a shock and he sucks in air, Hagrid's cries fading away until it is only the Hagrid of now striding towards them across the icy ground.

[*Breathe, darling.*]

Harry manages to catch himself on Draco's shoulder and breathes.

They are not in the woods.

No one is dying.

And no matter how much he loves him, this Hagrid is not Harry's friend. This Hagrid has not rescued Harry from the Dursleys. He has not brought him a birthday cake or taken him shopping or bought him an owl. This Hagrid has not said a word to Harry at all – the general call to first years to follow him down to the boats doesn't count – which means that there is only one reason he is doing so now after months of inattention.

Dumbledore.

"Harry! There you are. I was worried I might not catch you before yer classes."

Harry blinks. "Um. Hello?"

"Oh right. Rebeus Hagrid, Groundskeeper and Keeper of the Keys of Hogwarts at yer service."

"Oh. Er." Harry flounders a bit, mouth gaping like he's trying to catch the snitch all over again. "Nice to meet you."

"Suppose you don't remember me then? No matter, last I saw you, you were just a little tyke." Hagrid's mouth wobbles like he's both smiling and frowning at the same time and Harry knows that he's remembering that night. "I was friends with yer parents. Great people, James and Lily Potter."

"I'm sure they were," Harry says diplomatically after biting back his first dozen responses.

"I was hopin' ... that is, I was wonderin' if you might want to join me for a spot of tea some afternoon? I could tell you about them if you'd like."

"... what?" Draco butts in sharply and it's those biting, imperious tones that bring Harry up short, that give him a moment to *think*.

He never thought he'd be grateful for Draco being a rude little shit but apparently today is the day.

*Oh*, Harry can't help but think, that was well played because Harry's knee jerk reaction had been to fall back on his default rule of *when in doubt, do the exact opposite*. He had even opened his mouth to offer a polite refusal. And if he had refused, he would have failed the little test that Dumbledore had set for him because the Harry that Dumbledore had been expecting, the Harry that the Headmaster needs would have jumped at even the smallest of chances to learn about the parents that he could not remember. The Harry that Dumbledore needs would do anything for that sense of belonging.

And while Harry still has days where he would love nothing more than the opportunity to punch Dumbledore right in his smug, condescending face he also knows that it is far too

early to set himself against the Headmaster. He might be the Master of Death but in this game that Albus Dumbledore is playing he is still operating from a position of weakness. Eventually that will change but until he has a better idea of *how* and *when* it is best to play along. At least to a point.

Of course, it could also just be an invitation to tea utterly free of ulterior motives but Harry is feeling pretty skeptical these days.

Still.

“I would like that,” he says, interrupting whatever scathing comment had been about to come out of Draco’s mouth.

“...*what?*” the boy repeats, his voice at least half an octave higher.

Hagrid blinks, caught off guard by Harry’s positive response – or maybe just by Draco’s rudeness. It’s kind of hard to tell. “Well, a’right then. Three o’clock on Friday work alright for you?”

“Three is fine,” Harry agrees. “Can I bring my friends?”

This time Draco’s one word outcry is so highly pitched that Harry’s not entirely convinced that he actually heard it. Maybe he just saw the movement of the other boy’s mouth.

Draco isn’t the only one surprised. Hagrid blinks again and rubs at his bearded chin with a hand larger than a dinner plate. “Of course,” he says after a stunned moment or two. “The more the merrier.” He gives the group of them a long look, like he’s not entirely sure he believes this conversation is actually happening, and then gives a firm nod of his head. “Friday at three, then.”

“I won’t forget,” Harry promises and Hagrid gives him a big, bushy grin before turning around and heading back towards the school.

“What,” Draco asks once they’ve resumed their journey to the greenhouse, “was *that?*”

“Uh... an invitation to tea?”

“From the *groundskeeper*. That you *accepted*.” Draco sounds more scandalized than Harry has ever heard him.

“...yes.”

“At his *house*,” Draco continues as if Harry isn’t getting it. “Have you seen his house?” he cries and grabs Harry by the arm, pulling him around until Harry doesn’t have any choice but to stare the other boy in the face. “It’s not a house! It’s a – a shack! A *hovel!*”

“I think you broke him,” Mandy mutters after several seconds of charged silence. She pokes at the carefully slicked strands of Draco’s hair. Draco doesn’t even flinch. “Yeah. Definitely broken.”

Draco is still staring.

“He knew my parents,” Harry finally offers with a small shrug. “The stuff that Mrs. Greengrass sent me was amazing but it wasn’t... it wasn’t...”

“...personal,” Blaise offers and Harry nods.

“Yeah.”

Draco sighs heavily. “Fine. I can understand why you might want to hear about your parents. Even if you’re going to...to *that*.” He releases Harry and motions vaguely in the directions of Hagrid’s hut, where only the roof, chimney, and a curl of smoke are visible among the rise and fall of the grounds and the beginning brambles of the Forbidden Forest.

“You don’t have to go,” Harry points out calmly. He wants to be offended on Hagrid’s behalf but mostly he’s just... amused.

Draco, on the other hand, is definitely offended.

He sputters wordlessly for a moment before he manages, “Not go? Of course, I have to go! I’m not letting you go alone. You’re going to the *groundkeeper’s hut*!”

Harry casts a look at Blaise, who holds his hands up as they slide into the greenhouse. “Don’t look at me. I wouldn’t miss this for the world.”

Harry gets the distinct impression that Blaise is talking more about the inevitable spectacle of Draco Malfoy taking tea at Hagrid’s than about anything else but that’s fair. Harry is trying to picture Draco perched on the edge of a ratty, oversized chair with an oversized teacup and cutting his teeth on a rock cake the size of his fist and is utterly failing.

“And you don’t have to go either,” he adds to Mandy as he follows her into the greenhouse and the four of them take up their usual spot, parchment and quills and ink drawn from bags and strewn across the rough wooden surface. “I was just...”

“...You know,” she interrupts, “sometimes I wonder how you ever managed to not get sorted straight into Ravenclaw but then you do something like this and suddenly it all makes perfect sense.”

Harry blinks. “...wait. What?”

Mandy just pats him on the shoulder and all chances for immediate clarification lost as Professor Sprout starts her lecture.

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In the end their entire group of seven stomps through the fresh layer of snow to have tea with Hagrid.

Not exactly what Harry had intended but when he’d protested that he hadn’t meant for all of them to come Hannah had told him to not be so ridiculous and Neville had gotten that tenseness around his mouth that said he was about to dig in his heels. He’d had that look on

his face when, in a different life, he'd tried to stop Harry, Ron, and Hermione from going to protect the Sorcerer's Stone. He'd had that look on his face when Harry had decided to go to the Ministry to save his godfather. Harry is familiar with that look.

"He did say the more the merrier," Blaise points out as the familiar sight of Hagrid's hut comes into view: weathered wooden siding, grayed with age and edged with mossy greens set atop a seemingly haphazard stone foundation with cheery spirals of smoke drifting up into the monotonous gray of the sky. The last time he had seen it this close it had been on fire. It's a relief to see it like this: unblemished and whole. "Unless you don't want us all to come," the other boy adds quietly. "That's okay too."

"No," Harry retorts quickly. "No. I... I want you to come." It isn't until he says it that he realizes just how true it is. He *wants* them to come with him, wants to be surrounded by them and reminded that he is not alone. It feels selfish though to drag them all along to sit and have potentially awkward conversation and inedible rock cakes just because the idea of suddenly facing Hagrid, alone, after all this time makes him wonder just how he ever managed to get sorted into Gryffindor. "I just... if you have something else..." He shrugs awkwardly.

"Yes, because writing another essay for Binns is such a thrilling experience," Blaise observes dryly. "It's not like he actually reads them."

Harry scrunches his nose at the thought. "He doesn't?"

Blaise shakes his head. "Not unless the Ministry really used hummingbirds to defeat the goblin forces in the thirteenth century. Got an EE for that," he adds, the corner of his mouth curling up in a satisfied smirk. "Also got an EE for simply turning in a length of parchment with my name written at the top and a transcription of Crabbe and Goyle's supper discussion."

"But Crabbe and Goyle hardly speak outside of the dormitory."

Blaise raises his eyebrows and spreads his hands in a silent *exactly*. "Exceeds Expectations," he repeats. "Every time."

"Bollocks," Harry mutters under his breath. He usually gets an EE in Binns' class with the occasional O thrown in for variety but in his first life... well. The endless string of Acceptables and Poors, while technically deserved, feel a bit more insulting now.

They walk in silence for a moment, bits and pieces of the others' conversation falling back from where the five of them have pulled ahead a bit as the wind down the hillside. "You can't really think that we'd let you face this alone," Blaise murmurs softly, nudging Harry with his shoulder. "You didn't even know what your parents looked like until..." he trails off, shaking his head. "You've got us now."

Harry blinks rapidly, trying to push back the sudden tears that burn at the corners of his eyes. "Yeah," he manages to get out without sounding too pathetic. "I suppose I do."

And it's not exactly a novel feeling – he's had people before. Ron and Hermione. Sirius and Remus. The rest of the Weasleys. Hagrid.

This feels different.

He's not sure if it's him. Or them. Or both.

(It's almost definitely both.)

He doesn't get a chance to do much more than raise his hand to rap on the door before Fang's welcoming barks thunder through the meager barrier of wood. Harry knocks anyway: a quick one-two rap of his knuckles.

"Comin'!" Hagrid's voice booms. "Back, Fang. Come on back now. I said back, you slobberin' beast!"

Beside him Draco barely has a chance to pale and mouth, "*Fang?*" when the door is wrenched inward and only the quick snap of Hagrid's hand latching onto the boarhound's collar keeps him from barreling straight into the group gathered on the front step and knocking them straight on their arses.

*Right*, Harry thinks rather hysterically, *I can do this*.

And then he steps into Hagrid's hut.

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"Well," Blaise remarks as they make their way back to the castle the better part of an hour later, "That was kind of weird."

"I think it was sweet," Hannah offers. "It was nice of him to give you those photos and the rock cakes weren't completely awful."

Draco scoffs. "I think I broke a tooth!"

"Your tooth is fine," Blaise assures. Draco lets out a little huff of disagreement, his noise pointing straight up in the air. "If you're really that worried just go have Madam Pomfrey take a look at it."

"Maybe I will."

"Do you want someone to go with you?" Mandy asks and Draco nearly causes everyone to trip as he pauses mid-step and then gives her a small, tight nod.

"I would not decline any offers."

Mandy rolls her eyes. "Fine then. I'll go with you."

Harry, very carefully, does not smile.

"I still think it was weird that he said that the troll *got free*," Susan says after a moment. "That implies that it was being contained somewhere, doesn't it?"



“M-maybe that’s what’s on the-the third f-floor,” Neville muses and stumbles a little when everyone turns to look at him.

“Huh,” Mandy says after a long pause. “I’d actually forgotten about that.”

“But why would they keep a troll in a school full of children?” Draco asks. “Even for Dumbledore, that doesn’t make sense!”

Harry manages to bite back the vicious disagreement that wells up in his throat. Barely, but he manages.

“I’m going to write Aunt Millie,” Susan announces. “It sounds like something she should know - and you should probably write your dad,” she adds, nudging Draco.

“I will.” Draco gives a determined nod. He looks rather relieved to have a clear course of action.

His life, Harry reflects, is quite possibly even stranger the second time around.

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“We might have a problem,” Harry announces as he barrels through the barely open door.

“G-good afternoon, P-potter,” Quirrell asks, the door closing with a deliberate *click* following a very pointed pause. “T-tea?”

“Yes, yes, I’m sorry,” he snaps back and Quirrell, unquestionably Quirrell with his rounded face, widens his eyes and fixes them on Harry. After a moment of unblinking silence, Harry shuts his eyes and forces himself to inhale slowly to the count of ten. Now is not the time to go rampaging about like an idiot. “I’m sorry,” he repeats more quietly and this time he actually means it. “Good afternoon, professor,” he greets again. “I would love some tea.”

And he would. He would absolutely love a bloody cup of tea. Maybe then he would stop feeling like he’s going to vibrate out of his skin.

The edges of Quirrell’s lips twitch and he nods, waving Harry in the direction of the chair that he practically thinks of as his own. He obligingly goes to it but doesn’t sit. He’s too wound up for that, restless to the point that he finds himself bouncing his leg as he stands, arms crossed over his chest and waiting, fingers tap tapping against his robes.

“I’m sorry,” Harry says for a third time, after he’s taken a moment to take a few more deep breaths and let Quirrell pick through the dozens of cannisters in the cupboard behind his desk. “I’m not trying to be rude. I’m just...worried,” he finally finishes, tongue reluctantly curling around the word in his mouth and propelling it outward.

He hadn’t been worried, at first. In fact, it hadn’t been until he was preparing for bed last night that it even occurred to him that there was something to be worried about. But then, somewhere between getting Inigo out of his habitat and climbing out of his trunk it had hit him: Draco and Susan are going to tell someone about their suspicions that the troll could

have come from the third floor. The third floor corridor that students have been forbidden from entering on pain of death.

And it's not even that they're going to tell, not really, it's that they're going to tell and *Lucius and Amelia will believe them*.

Harry... Harry doesn't know what to do about that.

Usually, his problem is the exact opposite: adults that *don't* believe him.

But they're going to tell. The others might as well – Blaise and Hannah and Mandy at least.

They're going to tell and the adults in their lives are going to believe them.

They're going to believe them and *they're going to do something about it*.

Harry is suddenly, desperately regretting bringing them all to Hagrid's.

If they lose their chance at the Sorcerer's Stone because of this...

"W-worried?" Quirrell asks as he measures out whatever tea he has chosen. Harry barely resists the urge to put his head down between his knees and instead forces himself to inhale past the vice wrapped around his chest.

"Yeah. There might be a problem with the... thing." He waves a hand vaguely in the direction of the Sorcerer's Stone. "And I really need to talk to..." he waves his hand vaguely at Quirrell. Frankly, he doesn't understand why Tom hasn't taken control already – or at least made his presence known. These days he's almost always lurking right there at the surface, present in the sharp slash of Quirrell's mouth or in the faint sheen of burgundy that occasionally shines out of Quirrell's eyes.

"In a moment, Potter," Quirrell insists but it is Tom's voice that comes out of his mouth, the crip exactness of someone who has taken great pains to fix their speech patterns a certain way.

Harry blinks. "Why?"

Quirrell's mouth curls upwards in a small smile. "I m-make b-b-better t-tea."

Harry blinks again.

Tea.

The Dark Lord is making him wait because he wants his tea fixed perfectly.

"Bloody hell." Harry slumps down into the chair, the frantic edge of the nerves crowding his veins bleeding off with the exclamation. They're simply unable to exist in the face of the sheer ridiculousness of the situation.

Quirrell's smile is perhaps a little bigger when he finally pours Harry his cup and pushes it across the tabletop with a gentle, "It h-has h-hibiscus in it."

Thank Merlin look on Harry's face does all the asking for him because he's not sure he could find the actual words.

"S-so don't add m-milk," the other man cautions. "It will c-curdle."

The thoughtfulness of the comment, however small, is like a blow – something that simultaneously leaves him staggering and warm to the core. He still drinks his tea plain most of the time but he has, occasionally, been experimenting with varying levels of milk and sweetness. Thus far he's learned that he's not one for sweetening his tea but a splash of milk is quite acceptable.

"Thanks," he manages to get out and quickly raises the cup to his mouth to hide just how much the fact that Quirrell or Tom or *both* have noticed means to him. And that the fact that it means so much for him kind of makes him want to slap himself.

The tea is shockingly bold and searingly bright in a way that is somehow both acidic and sour but also sweet. "Is that... berry?" Harry finds himself asking before he can stop himself, staring down into his cup of tea like it's going to answer him itself.

Quirrell hums as he takes his own sip. "S-strawberry, raspberry, and blueberry," he acknowledges. "There is also ap-p-ple and rosehips and a t-touch of..."

"...cinnamon," Harry finishes that warmth is easy enough to pick out, a soothing sort of spicy finish to the sweet-tart-tang of the tea. "It's good." Complex, certainly, in a way that leaves Harry feeling a little overwhelmed, but good.

"Just w-wait until s-summer. It is even b-better c-cold brewed. Like drinking a b-berry crisp."

"Cold brewed?" Harry feels like an idiot for asking because it probably means exactly what it sounds like.

"I'll sh-show you," Quirrell promises. "*Now, you mentioned a problem.*"

The sudden sibilant sounds of parseltongue leaves Harry blinking over the desk. He hadn't even noticed the change. It had just happened. Quirrell had been Quirrell until he had not. He's not sure if he should be terrified or impressed at the level of precision and control that that displays.

Or both.

"*Er. Yeah,*" he manages to get out after a moment. "*Everyone came with me to tea at Hagrid's yesterday.*"

The Dark Lord doesn't actually roll his eyes but Harry can tell that it's a close thing. "*I cannot believe he is still here.*"

Harry glares at him across the desk. *“Really?”* he asks. *“And where else is he supposed to go? You had him expelled when he was thirteen!”*

*“He was keeping an acromantula stashed in a cupboard!”* Tom hisses back, face stretched to the very limits of incredulity. *“Do you have any idea how many people it could have hurt, even killed, if it had gotten loose?”*

Wow.

Harry can't believe that just came out of the other man's mouth and he hopes that his face is doing an adequate job of portraying that for him because he is literally speechless for at least two whole minutes.

*“This,”* he observes quite calmy, *“from the man who was hunting students with a sixty foot basilisk.”*

*“Yes, hunting,”* Tom emphasizes with a dismissive wave. *“Sacha was completely under my control. Her eyes were veiled and she attacked only at my direction.”*

*“But that's not entirely true, is it?”* Harry presses, because he always presses and because he refuses to get sidetracked by the fact that the basilisk is apparently named *Sacha*. Merlin. *“Myrtle's death was an accident. You didn't even know she was in the loo.”*

The silence is deafening.

They stare at each other the desk, neither one moving, neither one folding.

And then Tom, very slightly, inclines his head.

Harry wants to push, wants to press on this point until it bleeds. His anger over Hagrid's treatment by Voldemort, by the Wizarding World at large is a comfortable, familiar thing. Hagrid is gentle and loyal soul ill-suited for the games Dumbledore and Voldemort alike had used him in and Harry will never forget the kindness, the welcome that the half giant had extended to him in another life.

But Tom inclines his head.

It is not an apology. Lord Voldemort does not offer apologies. It is an acknowledgement, a concession of Harry's point.

It is probably the only one he will ever get on this subject.

Harry lets out a slow breath and then another and then one more for good measure and finally takes another fortifying sip of his tea. His hands are shaking. Just a little.

*“I suspect the whole point of the tea was to make me interested in why part of the third floor is off limits,”* he finally says, deliberately returning to the original reason for his visit. Tom lets him.

*“A test cannot be a test if the appropriate parties fail to participate.”*

Harry grimaces. *“Exactly. He kept stressing how safe Hogwarts was, how trusted Dumbledore is. He had a copy of the Prophet that talked about your break in at Gringotts.”*

*“The man always was heavy handed,”* Tom mutters and Harry isn’t entirely sure if he’s speaking of Hagrid or Dumbledore. Or both. It could definitely be both.

Harry sighs. *“He all but said that the troll had escaped from the third floor – a fact that Susan jumped on almost immediately.”*

*“Smart,”* Tom hums and once again Harry is hit with the dizzying and slightly terrifying sensation of having the Dark Lord approve of his friends. This is going to bite him on the arse someday, he can just feel it.

*“Yes,”* he agrees. *“But therein lies the problem because, unlike Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger, Susan and Draco’s first inclination is not to go on an adventure to investigate the potentially dangerous and illegal thing – or even to tell a teacher. They want to tell their parents. Given what happened on Halloween they probably already have.”*

*And,* a little voice in the back of Harry’s head points out, *they are right to do so.*

Tom steeples his fingers over his half empty teacup and waits.

*“Last time no one complained about the third floor. I don’t think anyone took it seriously. They all just thought that it was some eccentric Dumbledore...thing.”* They share a knowing glance over the desk. Dumbledore’s seeming eccentricities are one of the most dangerous things about him. *“Lucius and Amelia will take it seriously and they will do something. What if Dumbledore has to move the stone? What if he already has?”*

*“He hasn’t.”*

*“He... hasn’t.”* Harry repeats dubiously. *“How do you...?”*

*“I can still sense it. You probably can as well.”* Harry thinks that the Dark Lord might be taking this equals thing probably a bit too literally if he honestly thinks Harry can do *that*. Hogwarts feels as it always does, so full of magic that it is like a pot boiling over. *“The stone is still there. The old fool has done much to set up this test and is secure in the idea that I can’t get to the stone itself – not before he gets to me, anyway. He won’t move it.”*

*“Not even if Lucius and the Ministry start investigating?”*

*“Dumbledore believes he is untouchable and Hogwarts is full of magics beyond reckoning. The number of people that would be able to tell that there are two different magical objects tangled up in that mirror are few and far between. It would be easy enough to simply turn the mirror to the wall and tuck it into a corner.”*

*“And the rest of the obstacle course?”*

*“With the wards being repaired and reinforced, he has already removed the troll and the cerberus from the school in order to avoid uncomfortable questions.”*

Harry blinks. Fluffy is gone? *“He has? When?”*

*“Three weeks ago.”*

Harry bristles a little, feels a bit like a cat pet in the wrong direction at the dark lord’s words – or, more accurately, at the fact that this is just coming up *now*. As if sensing the direction of his thoughts, Tom raises an eyebrow in silent question: when, exactly, was he supposed to have informed Harry? They have exchanged more words in the last twenty minutes than in all the time since their conversation at the top of the Astronomy tower.

*“It coincided with the beginning of the work on the wards. Devil’s Snare or human sized chess board are easy enough to explain away and unlikely to be caught in the wards to begin with – same with Snape’s contribution.”*

*“Even the poison?”*

Tom makes a dismissive gesture with his hand. *“Severus could poison us all a thousand times over with what he has in the students’ supply closet, never mind his own stores. Besides, should he need an excuse, it would be entirely within his character to make his older students test their own potions via a logic puzzle.”*

Harry can’t really argue with that. It definitely sounds like something that Snape would do.

*“Okay.”* He slumps down in his chair and nearly presses his face into his teacup, the last magenta edged dregs staring up at him. *“I just... I worry about messing it up. I seem to do that a lot. It’s usually an accident but whether I meant it or not doesn’t change the outcome.”* And he’s messed up a lot.

*“Harry.”*

The sound of his name, just his name, just the one that is his and nothing else, rings through the air like a struck tuning fork and Harry jerks his head up so quickly that his neck twinges in protest. There’s a look on Quirrell’s features that he can’t place, unreadable but open. Vulnerable, perhaps – or as vulnerable as Lord Voldemort gets.

*“I appreciate your concern,”* the words come out of Tom’s mouth oddly, stilted not with falsehood or discomfort but with a simple lack of practice. These are not words that other people have heard from the dark lord’s mouth. Not often, anyway. Perhaps not at all. It’s a little unsettling, if Harry is being honest.

Okay. More than a little.

*“You have already done far more than I expected – even after we struck our agreement. The stone would prove immeasurably useful for no small number of reasons but I managed to regain my body without it before, did I not?”*

*“Yes,”* Harry agrees slowly. *“You did.”*

For a certain definition, anyway. Walking around inside Quirrell’s skin might be the better option if the whole no nose, snake faced thing is the only body waiting for him.

Not that he's going to say that.

Ever.

*"Then, if necessary, I shall do so again. Your gift has merely expanded my options,"* Tom reminds him, motioning at the body he and Quirrell currently share, and Harry can't disagree. After more than a month of weekly doses of freely given unicorn blood, Quirrell is healthier and more vibrant than Harry has ever seen him. The youthful roundness of his face is beginning to fill out again, cheeks rosy even as the shadow of red stubble reappears along the line of his jaw.

Harry tries to imagine what Quirrell looks like with hair.

He can't.

"Oh, Merlin's saggy balls," he mutters and all but throws his teacup on the desk. "You're right. *You're right. I'm freaking out over nothing.*" Again. Dragging his hands up across his temples and then down across his cheeks Harry can't help but add, *"I'm sorry."*

Tom cocks his head. *"What for? You were concerned for our success. You perceived a problem and tried to get out in front of it. Such devotion is commendable."*

*"Yes, but just bursting in here like that... you must think I'm crazy."* In truth, he's beginning to feel like he had all during his sixth year: stuck with the knowledge that his godfather was dead because of him with Voldemort's return revealed to the public in a way that they could not ignore while the Death Eaters circled the wizarding world like wolves testing a nervous flock of sheep. Each day had lasted forever and yet passed with such swiftness, winding him up and up and up until he could feel himself cracking, until he could feel himself shaking apart and breaking – just waiting for the axe to fall.

Voldemort spreads his hands in magnanimous acknowledgement. *"We're all mad here."*

Harry's rather inclined to agree but there's something about the way that the other man says it, a certain weight. *"Are you quoting something?"*

The Dark Lord stares. *"Alice's Adventures in Wonderland?"*

Harry blinks, caught completely off guard.

*"Published in 1865,"* Tom prods. *"Written by Lewis Carroll, who is most well known for being a muggle who spent weeks wandering around the magical world before anyone realized he was there and then subsequently botched his memory modification? He is almost single handedly responsible for the laws governing magical and muggle interaction in Britain as they stand today?"*

Harry blinks again. "Umm..."

*"Unbelievable,"* Tom mutters. *"What in Salazar's name are they actually teaching at this school?"*

Harry thinks that it's probably a rhetorical question and also a little unfair because Quirrell – and by extent, Tom, who has definitely been slithering into Quirrell's lessons more and more since that first dose of unicorn blood – is an actual professor at this school. It's not like Harry's the one coming up with the lesson plans.

Of course, Harry's ability to keep his mouth shut has never been well exercised.

*“Goblin Wars, mostly.”*

*“Binns,” the Dark Lord hisses, eyes narrowing to gleaming red points. “I should have exorcised that repetitive little worm when I had the chance.”*

At that, Harry perks right up. *“He can be gotten rid of?”*

*“You would think dying would have taken care of him but he is as stubborn as he is pathetic,”* the other man all but growls in disgust. *“But yes, he can be removed. I will see to it before the start of the next school year,”* he adds and Harry feels the weight of it as surely as any vow.

*Lord Voldemort rewards those who are faithful,* he can't help but think and barely manages to stifle the slightly hysterical laugh that bubbles up in his chest like a cheering charm.

And maybe he says it out loud, or maybe he just thinks it too strongly but across the table Tom's sharp smile softens into a quiet, blinding thing as Quirrell assures in a voice scarcely more than a whisper, “Always, Mr. P-potter. Always.”

## Chapter End Notes

Look, I have no excuse other than the fact that 2022 has been a study in highs and lows and it's been really exhausting. It's required a careful orchestration to make sure I don't burn out. But I'm finally (dear sweet god, FINALLY) feeling a creative spark again so hopefully we can get back on track with updates that come more frequently than once every 8 months. Because that's just really depressing and I'm not a fan.

Wherever you are, dear readers, I hope you're well. I hope you're taking time to take care of yourselves. You're amazing. Thank you for your patience and support <3



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