

you belong to me (i belong to you)

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by [Child_OTKW](#)

Summary

“What I find absolutely fascinating,” Riddle said, stalking closer, “is you.” He marched forward, backing Harry up until he was pinned to the cool wall of the common room. “Do you know why?”

“No. And I’ll be honest here, Riddle, I don’t particularly care.”

The taller boy grinned at him, small yet infinitely pleased. “That. Right there.” One hand rose and brushed some of Harry’s fringe from his face. “Nathan Ciro was a spineless little boy too afraid of his own shadow to dare even glance in my direction. But you...”

He leaned closer, “You look at me like you want to stab me.”

After an accident, Auror Harry Potter wakes up in the body of fourteen year old Nathan Ciro, a tormented Slytherin who recently tried to end his own life. Seeking answers to his strange predicament, Harry returns to Hogwarts, and causes quite the stir through staff and students - especially when they come to realise he is not the same boy as before.

He tries to avoid suspicion, but as his quest for the truth draws more and more attention to him, Harry begins to think that he might not like what he will discover.

Notes

Hey guys, welcome to the party~

Now, before we start, fret not, Consuming Shadows is still at the forefront of my mind, and there is absolutely no way I'll be putting that on hold for now. This is just a little something that's been creeping into my mind for the past month or so, and I just had to get the blasted thing out.

So, as the summary states, this is a time travel story (I'm a sucker for these things, and figured I might as well try my hand at it haha), as well as a body swap. I'll be honest, I've never particularly liked body swap stories purely because I haven't really found any seriously written ones/ones with intriguing plots. But oh my lord, recently I stumbled across an AMAZING webcomic by Haribo called "At the End of the Road" - and guys, I can't praise it enough. It has completely destroyed my soul. The characters, the plot, just everything makes me melt. If you haven't read it, I highly recommend :)

This story does take some inspiration from that webcomic, because it is awesome and all throughout reading it was I was like "It is Harry, and it is Tom, my god, I need to do a thing" and ideas just exploded in my head. So bless Haribo for giving us that gem.

Thanks to everyone who's giving this a read (defs check out that webcomic), and let's give this a go.

Warning: A section of this chapter deals with the aftermath of the rape of a minor, and the attempted suicide of the same minor. If that bothers anyone, please, please, please, either don't read, or skip the italicised section towards the end.

Edit (29/11/2020): Hey everyone, I've had to make some edits to this first chapter so that the direction I take this story in will make more sense. I've finally figured out what I want to do with this fic, so yay! It's nothing major. I have just reworked how and when Harry has his dream of what happened to Nathan, and then smoothed the rest of the chapter to reflect this change. Enjoy!

Chapter One

Harry woke with a sharp breath and cruel laughter ringing in his ears.

He stared at the ceiling of his dimly lit bedroom for an endless second, memories still dancing along the edges of his sight, and his skin prickled as the early morning air hit his sweat-covered body.

Bile rose in his throat, and Harry shot upright, wrestling with his sheets as he rushed to get to the bathroom. He barely made it in time to empty his stomach in the toilet.

He coughed, spitting the last of the foul, burning liquid from his mouth, and wiped the back of his hand over his lips.

He stayed there for a full minute, hunched over the bowl and waiting for his stomach to settled, before standing and flushing. He slowly stepped up to the sink and raked his fingers through his hair, breathing deeply.

“Harry?”

His shirt was sticking to him uncomfortably, and his hair was plastered to his neck and forehead. Harry quickly yanked the night shirt off and tossed it to the side, leaning over the sink and staring at the mirror intently.

He looked like a mess.

“...Harry?”

“In here,” he called, knowing she would find him eventually and that there was no point trying to pretend nothing had happened. She had likely heard him throwing up.

“Harry, are you alright?”

His gaze switched from his reflection to Ginny’s. She was standing in the doorway, wrapped in the same gorgeous black lace sleeping gown that he had delighted in taking her out of last night. Her hair was up in a loose bun and her face freshly washed, meaning she had been up for some time already.

“Yeah,” he croaked, then immediately cleared his throat to get rid of the grit in his voice.

“Yeah, just...just a nightmare.”

“Nightmare, or memory?” She asked as she glided towards him, coming to a stop just behind him. Her hands, calloused and warm, landed gently on his back, rubbing the tense muscles there absently.

Her familiar scent surrounded him, and when he exhaled next, he let some of his tension go.

“Is there a difference?” Harry huffed.

Ginny pressed a kiss to his shoulder, watching him carefully. "The war?"

He shook his head.

"Voldemort?"

"No," he swallowed, grimacing at the lingering taste. "Bellatrix. The ministry. Sirius."

She perched her chin on his shoulder, hands snaking around his waist. Harry stared at her arms to give his mind something to focus on. The difference between her fair skin and his own darker shade was stark.

She tilted her head, probing but not demanding. Ginny always knew how to handle him.

"I just kept seeing him fall through the veil," he whispered, closing his eyes as he felt despair well in his gut. "Over and over, and all I could hear was her laughing."

She hummed, thumb stroking along his hip in comfort. The soft puffs of her breaths against his bare skin grounded him in a way he could not describe.

Harry sighed deeply, bowing his head for a moment before turning in her hold and wrapping his arms around her. "I'm sorry," he murmured against her head.

"Don't be," she replied, pressing another kiss to his collarbone. "It happens to all of us. Are you feeling better?"

He slumped more in her hold, "Yes."

"Then that's all the matters at the moment."

Harry smiled within the confines of her hair, closing his eyes. This was why he loved her so, so much. Whenever he got caught up in his memories, whenever he felt like he was drowning and pulled in too many directions, Ginny made things simpler.

"Thank you, Ms. Weasley," he said gratefully.

She patted him on the chest, pulling back enough to smile up at him. "You are very welcome, Mr. Potter."

Harry leaned down, laying a gentle kiss on her forehead that had her lightly pushing into him. "I probably should get ready," he whispered. "Kingsley asked Ron and me to head in early today to talk the Summers' case over. Hopefully we'll finally get the bastard."

"Good," Ginny said, vicious. "That bastard deserves to be thrown in Azkaban to rot."

Harry stepped back and brushed some of her loose hair behind her ear. "He'll get a trial first, Gin. No more slips like with Sirius."

"You already know he's guilty, Harry. You have so much evidence."

“Which, hopefully, means that things will go quickly, and he’ll be put away.”

Ginny settled, her frown easing. “Alright, you have a shower, and I’ll finish up breakfast. We don’t want you to be late.”

“Sounds good,” he kissed her one last time on the cheek, watching her smile bloom as she slipped back into the bedroom.

The moment the door closed Harry’s smile fell. He looked back to the mirror and frowned.

He never liked dreaming of Sirius’ death. He much preferred remembering the man when he’d been alive – alive and vibrant and *there*.

It was probably just the stress from the case, Harry knew.

He and Ron had been working on it for weeks at this point, from the very first moment Summers’ niece had been sent into Saint Mungo’s; and every day the stress of knowing the man had not been caught yet ate at him.

He supposed it was only natural that his dreams would be plagued by memories of his other failures.

Harry scrubbed a hand over his face, then stripped the rest of his clothes off and jumped into the shower, pushing the memory out of his mind for now.

When he finally entered the kitchen, fully dressed in his uniform, Ginny was in the living room. She wore half her Quidditch gear, leaving her upper body bare except for her bra.

“Nice,” Harry commented as he moved to the table where a plate sat for him. Ginny smirked at him from over her shoulder.

“When you get home,” she promised, “now hurry up and eat so you can get going.”

“Yes ma’am.” He saluted, taking a seat and popping some bacon into his mouth. He groaned in delight, tilting his head back to watch her. “Have I told you you’re amazing?” He asked.

“Not today you haven’t,” she laughed, reaching over him to snatch a piece of toast from his plate.

“You’re amazing.”

“I know,” she said through a mouthful. “You’re going to be late.”

Harry grinned, finishing his last few bites before placing his dishes in the sink. He kissed Ginny once more, because he could and he would never get sick of the taste of her lips, then ducked into the fireplace with a handful of floo powder.

“See you tonight. Kick their arses.”

“Always do,” she replied, leaning on the back of the couch. “Stay safe. I love you.”

“Love you too.”

And then he was gone.

OoO

“Get out of the way!” Harry shouted, feet pounding against the cobblestone floor as he followed his target.

People scrambled to the side, either simply reacting to the authority in his voice, or because they recognised him. Harry did not particularly care, so long as they *moved*.

He shoved a poor man that was too slow to move out of his path and ran faster, eyes pinned to the fleeing figure of Robert Summers.

He wanted nothing more than to throw a hex, but with the street so full, Harry could hardly risk injuring some innocent bystander.

He and Ron had been completely caught by surprise when they had stumbled across the man, hiding in his half-sister’s abandoned shop. They had been following up on a lead from Kingsley, rechecking with some of the family – close or distant – that Summers might have used to avoid them.

Harry had assumed that the man would not be stupid enough to remain in such an obvious place, but clearly they had overestimated his intelligence.

“Summers!” He barked, causing more people to part before him. “Stop!”

Summers kept running – not that Harry had expected anything else. No one ever stopped when he ordered it.

Summers tripped over a stray cart, sending items flying and causing another explosion of chaos as he stumbled and almost fell. Despite the man’s girth though, he was remarkably agile, and he was on his feet and running in a split second.

Harry bit back a curse as he leapt over the fallen items and weaved through another cluster of people blocking his path.

Ron, he knew, was somewhere behind him, delayed due to a curse that Summers had stupidly thrown into a crowd of shoppers, but Harry knew he would be following along soon.

Summers suddenly veered to the side, slipping down the entry into Knockturn Alley.

Harry took the upcoming turn mere metres behind Summers, almost crashing into a haggard looking witch. The woman jolted in shock, and Harry barely side-stepped in time.

He pushed past her, somewhere between gentle and rough, and started off again.

Fortunately, he had little trouble gaining ground again. Summers was much like a bull, carving through the crowds like a knife. All Harry had to do was follow the gap.

He swerved around another corner, bending to avoid a broken pipe that hung down into the thin street, and straightened in time to see Summers slip into a building. The door was hanging half off its hinges, and most of the windows were boarded up with wood so old it was discoloured.

With narrowed eyes, Harry went after him.

He scaled the front steps and carefully tugged his wand from its holster.

Harry stuck close to the wall, peeking around the doorway, and taking in the dusty, decrepit insides of what appeared to be an abandoned shop. A number of glass containers lined the shelves, with what must have once been a counter protruding from the back wall.

There was some broken glass on the floor, and Harry stepped around the shards slowly, testing the floorboards before putting his full weight on them.

He paused just a few feet inside, eyes darting around the badly lit space, searching for his target.

A sharp creak to his left had him spinning and sending a simple *stupefy* in that direction.

Summer dodged with a yelp, shooting a sickly yellow curse in retaliation. Harry batted the curse away with a wave of his wand, sending it ricocheting into one of the shelving units.

He threw up a shield when Summers continued his assault, gritting his teeth as the spells and curses rained down on him without pause.

Harry squinted, watching through the bright flashes as Summers began circling towards the staircase in the far corner. He tensed in preparation, waiting until the man turned to bolt up the stairs before dropping his shield and giving chase yet again.

The sound of their footsteps on the wooden stairs was deafening, and with its sharp turns and many levels, navigating the dilapidated staircase was a struggle. Harry was just grateful that Summers was more preoccupied climbing than trying to stop him from following.

Harry vaulted up the last few steps, catching the door that was swinging closed with his shoulder and crashing into the top floor with none of his usual grace.

He skidded to a stop, head twisting frantically, eyes just catching Summers as the man scrambled out of the far window, the scuffed tips of the man's boots disappearing as he clawed his way onto the roof.

Harry swore, throwing himself after the other. He pulled himself out the window, grasping at the lip of the roof and tugging himself upwards.

He rolled to his feet, sweat-damp hair sticking to his forehead.

"Summers!" He snapped, watching as the gasping man rushed to the other side of the roof with no cation. "Enough of this shit. You're done." Harry shot off a quick *expelliarmus*, claiming the other's wand and tucking it into his belt.

Summers spun around to face him, eyes wild. He flinched backwards, arms gesturing desperately. “No! No!” The man cried. “I’m innocent – I never touched her!”

“If you’re innocent, why did you attack my colleague and me? Why did you run?” Harry tread closer, keeping half an eye on where he put his feet, and the other on how close Summers was to the edge of the roof.

“You’re aurors!” Summers shouted, stepping back again in fear as Harry prowled ever nearer. “You’re like mad dogs! You don’t listen!”

“It’s not my job to listen to your whines,” Harry told him, stopping just a few feet away. “I just bring in people like you.”

“I didn’t do it!”

Harry scowled, his patience wearing thin. The chase, first through Diagon Alley, then into Knockturn, had already pushed him to his limit. Summers’ pathetic pleas were doing nothing to endear the man to him.

“Look, if you’re innocent, why not just come down to the Department and we can clear all of this up? Running makes you look guilty.” But Summers was already shaking his head before Harry could finish.

Harry sighed, “Fine.”

He raised his wand, ready to knock the bastard out and bodily drag him into a cell.

The fear in Summers’ eyes burned brighter, and Harry took a moment to wonder if it was due to the prospect of facing justice for his assault on his niece, or because he was staring down the wand of Harry Potter.

Perhaps it was a combination.

There was a reason why Harry was one of the youngest aurors on the force. Why his training only lasted a short eight months, rather than the customary three years. Why his record was quickly rising to the level of Alastor Moody himself.

Harry clenched his jaw, sighing through his nose as Summers trembled in front of him. He studied the other man, judged the distance between him and the edge of the roof, then muttered, “*Stupefy*.”

The spell struck Summers square in his chest, sending him crashing to the roof with a cut-off yelp. Harry stood still for a moment, before lowering his wand. He took the chance to catch his breath now that he was not in the middle of a fight.

With careful steps, Harry made his way over to Summers, avoiding the loose tiles and planks of wood that covered the area. He reached down and grabbed the man by his shoulder, hauling him onto his front to make sure he did not suffocate from laying on his face.

A necklace caught his attention, the protection runes plainly etched into the metal – easily recognisable even for Harry. He only had a second to blink in surprise before Summers suddenly moved, his arm swinging up fast to strike Harry across the head with a brick.

Harry dropped to the ground, glasses falling away, his sight blacking out from the sudden burst of pain. He closed his eyes, hand cradling his head as something wet and warm slid down his cheek. Harry hissed, squinting against the bright sunlight, as he scrambled to his feet.

He slowly shook his head, blinking heavily as his vision swam from the shift in position. His lungs seized, unable to breathe for a few precious seconds.

Shit, he thought sluggishly, a rush of blistering cold rolling through him that had nothing to do with the wind.

Dimly, beyond the pounding in his temples, he could hear the panicked shrieks of a voice. But for the life of him, Harry could not focus on a single thing they were saying.

Without his glasses, he could barely make out the shape blurry towards him in time. Someone grabbed his wrist, jolting him back. Harry slammed his fist into Summers' nose, forcing the man to release him.

Summers stumbled back, but caught himself before he could fall.

Harry winced, a fresh wave of pain crashing into him. He gritted his teeth, pressing his palm to his head once more. The wet patch had spread, matting his hair down and smearing his face red.

He glanced down at his hand for a moment, and Summers used his distraction to tackle him. They hit the ground hard, and Harry drove his knee into the man's side, then jabbed his elbow sharply upwards, cracking into Summers' jaw.

Harry was smaller though, and disorientated, and his hit lacked enough force to dislodge the larger, heavier man.

Planting his feet, Harry bucked, using the momentum to switch their places. Summers lashed out, almost striking Harry in the head once more, and with a curse he swayed backwards out of reach.

Summers shoved at Harry, hooking a hand on his left knee, and hefting him to the right.

Harry rolled, and his gut lurched when the roof disappeared from under him.

His arms shot out and gripped the gutter, stopping his fall with a terrible screech as the aged metal dipped precariously with his weight.

The pain in his head sang out, blinding him.

The metal screamed again, the section Harry was holding onto almost completely tearing free. He winced, the beginnings of fear licking at him.

He could hear someone calling his name, but his attention had narrowed down to the slowly breaking gutter.

He did not have his wand, and with the wound to his head he could barely see properly, let alone cast a spell.

Ron was somewhere else completely, and he doubted that Summers would suddenly grow a conscience and help him.

“Fuck,” Harry bit out.

No. No.

The metal snapped.

I want to live.

OoO

They left, one by one, cruel laughter echoing back to him as they returned to the main alley just a few metres away from where he lay.

No one had come when he had screamed, when he had cried and pleaded. No one had cared. Here, in the bowels of darkness, everyone minded their own business.

He stayed where he had been thrown, body trembling more from the cold night air that was seeping into him than from how violated he felt.

He had stopped reacting to this torture. He just...did not care anymore. It was better that way, to just block it all out.

His clothes were torn open, and he could still feel the ghosts of their hands running along his chest, over his neck, down his thighs – nothing more than mocking caresses until they turned harsh and bruising.

Their horrible words still swirled in his ears, terrible whispers that permeated the quiet of his mind and kept him from falling into the peaceful embrace of unconsciousness.

He reached up and wiped at the tears that painted his cheeks, smearing dirt and grime onto his pale skin.

With aching care, he pushed himself up into a sitting position, staring with blank eyes at the mess they had left him in.

His stomach rolled, but there was nothing for him to throw up.

He forced his clumsy fingers to pull his pants back up his legs, to redo the buttons of his shirt, and to try and fix his jumbled hair. He ignored the sticky wetness clinging to his body as he tucked his shirt in and pulled his belt tight, two notches more than he usually did.

That done, he stood shakily, leaning heavily on the disgusting wall next to him as he waited for his legs to regain their strength.

As he stood there, his head rolled listlessly to the side-alley opening. His dark eyes watched emotionlessly as countless figures moved back and forth, black cloaks hiding even blacker hearts.

No one so much as glanced in his direction, though more than one had to have heard or known what had happened.

He wanted to feel hate. He wanted to burn them all for their selfishness.

But he was exhausted, and could not bring himself to waste what little energy he had left on the likes of them.

Tilting his head back, he stared up at the night sky. His fingers brushed blindly over the wall behind him, feeling the numerous grooves and cracks between the stones.

The wall stretched high above him, towering into the night sky, looming.

The emptiness that had been inside him for weeks, months, years at this point, rose like the tide and choked him.

And suddenly, he knew what he had to do.

He turned, and without even a second to reconsider, he began to climb.

The rough stones cut into his soft hands, leaving bloody marks wherever he scrabbled for a hold. His nails were shredded from where he scraped them, and his body was quickly becoming numb as the autumn night air brushed against him – more insistently the higher he went.

He lost his hold only once or twice, his hands too slippery with sweat to get a good grip; but he was determined to get to the top. He had to do this right. What was a little more pain when he was so close to freedom anyway?

When his hands finally curled around the lip of the roof, he almost sobbed with relief. Hauling himself up and over with his trembling arms, he collapsed against the freezing tiles, rolling onto his back and closing his eyes while he regained his breath.

After a moment, he pushed himself upright, casting his gaze out over the area.

From here, he could see the entirety of Knockturn Alley. The twisted dark buildings created a long maze, witches and wizards scurrying along below like ants.

In the distance, the bright, cheery glow of Diagon Alley illuminated the night, so different from its twin that seemed to swallow the shadows.

His family would be down there somewhere, soaking in the atmosphere, enjoying the acts and festivities of Samhain, as they did every year.

They would not even think to start looking for him for another hour at least, not until they wished to go home and complete their own ritual. They were so used to him wandering off on his own, so used to him sneaking off to read or lose himself in an interesting store, or just get space.

His chest hurt at the thought.

He never should have left their side tonight. He never should have strayed so close to Knockturn Alley's entrance. He had known the dangers, he should have taken the precautions

But he had just wanted to get away from it all, for even a little while. He needed to get away from the echoing, relentless jeers of his classmates; escape from the snide rumours and unforgiving stares that had tormented him every day at school.

He could not stand to be with his happy, happy family when he felt so tainted in comparison, when it felt wrong to be in their presence. Unworthy. Unwanted.

It...it would be better this way.

He stood, moving to the very edge of the roof so the tips of his shoes were overhanging the night sky.

This was it.

Finally.

He wondered if they would miss him, if they would even care.

It did not matter, though.

He took one last pause to gaze out over the beautiful, twisted world, before tipping forward.

He wanted to die.

Harry's eyes snapped open and he shot upwards, the image of the ground rushing to meet him melting into the plain white wall before him.

He groaned then, eyes screwing shut against the harsh light spilling through the room.

He brushed his hand against his hair, leaning forward over his legs. The soft, heavy blanket that had been draped over him dropped to his lap.

The fierce pounding in his head did not abate for a long minute, but as it slowly ebbed away into a dull ache, Harry released a deep sigh.

He cracked his eyes open, mindful of the light, and stared at the room he was in.

"...A hospital?" He murmured, voice horribly thick.

He sat up straighter, taking in the bland curtains, the open window, and the small white vase on the table next to him. A handful of colourful flowers sat there, on the verge of wilting.

"What the hell happened?"

Harry looked down at his covered legs, frowning thoughtfully.

"Summers," he remembered with a heavy blink of his eyes. He had been fighting Summers on the roof, that was the last thing he could recall – but then what had that dream been?

It had been so vivid, so *real*. Like Harry had actually been the one to –

His stomach clenched as more details from the dream solidified in his mind. He shuddered, feeling the lingering memory of hands running over him. Brutal, larger hands that knew nothing of kindness.

He shook his head, casting the dream from his mind, and moved to pull the blanket back. He froze, however, when he caught sight of his hand properly for the first time.

Harry's eyes widened as he stared at the pale limb, turning it over to see the same skin colour on the other side – a shade severely different from his normal warm brown. He held the other one up, chest heaving when he saw that it too was wrong.

He took an unsteady breath, dropping his arms and ripping the blanket off of him. His feet were the same, and the sight of them – not his own, *what the fuck was going on* – had him springing from the bed in panic.

Harry backed away, but he could not escape his own body. He knocked the side table so the vase wobbled, and then slammed into a wall, feeling something dig into his back.

He spun and realised that it was a door.

Harry shoved it open and rushed inside. He came to an abrupt stop when he was confronted with a wide, shining mirror, half-collapsing onto the basin and staring at the face looking back at him.

It was all *wrong*.

Too pale, too smooth, too *young*.

This was not his face.

His hair was more brown than black, and his *eyes* –

Gone were the familiar sharp green eyes he had once abhorred, then treasured because of their connection with his mother. In their place, two soft grey ones pierced him.

This was not his face.

Harry's hands tightened around the edges of the basin, and his magic crackled around him like a toxic cloud as his emotions erupted.

"What the fuck is going on?" He whispered, reaching up to touch a cheek that did not belong to him. He felt the smooth skin of a boy that had never shaved, felt the underdeveloped jawline, the straight, almost feminine nose.

He wrenched his hand away in disgust, because this was not him. There was no stubble, no glasses, no untameable hair and – he glanced up – no scar.

This was not Harry Potter staring back at him. This was...someone else.

He stepped away from the mirror, turning his back on the wrong reflection and closing his eyes. He pressed his hands to his face and tried to control his breathing.

Calm down. Calm down. Clearly something has gone wrong. This has to be another dream. There's no way this is possible. Think, Potter. There has to be an explanation.

Harry slowed his breathing, casting his mind back.

He had been on the case with Ron. He had found Summers, chased him to that roof. They had fought, he had stunned him, but Summers had had that runed necklace and attacked.

Idiot, he chided. I should have looked for that necklace. I should have known he would have something on him.

The sting of his failure was eclipsed by the sense of wrongness he felt when he remembered the bending metal under his hands.

The gutter dipping, the screech of metal, the rush of wind in his ears.

“I fell,” he announced hollowly to the empty bathroom. The gutter had given out, and he had fallen.

But that did not explain why he was as he was. Why was he in a child’s body? A boy that could hardly be more than fourteen?

Harry exited the bathroom hurriedly, took two steps, and promptly tripped over his own feet. He stumbled into the bed, a fierce scowl appearing on his face as he stared down at his – considerably shorter – legs.

He huffed, and jammed his elbow against the bed, glancing around the room once more. His eyes landed on the clipboard at the end of the bed, and he plucked it from its place, eyes devouring the information printed there.

Name: Nathan Ciro

D.O.B: 17 March, 1927

Underneath that was a list of simple observations – temperature, blood pressure, and more. Yet Harry’s eyes had trouble moving from the date of birth.

The 17th of March, 1927.

1927.

He lowered the clipboard, staring blankly at the opposite wall.

1927...how is that even possible? He’d have to be – what? At least seventy-two by now?

Harry’s mouth twisted. He did not like this at all.

He moved to stand upright, and as he did his foot brushed against something. He looked down and saw another file sitting on the floor. He scooped it up and started flicking through it, rapidly scanning the information printed there.

It was about him – or rather, the kid whose body he was somehow inhabiting.

The list of injuries he found had his eyebrows raising and the pit in his stomach growing.

Broken bones, torn tendons, a shattered wrist, swelling in the brain...it just went on.

The most prevalent though was the coma. Almost three-months, completely unresponsive.

Harry flipped to the last page, breezing over the short paragraph of hand-written notes and coming to a stop on one in particular.

Patient suffered from a severe fall, but showed signs of sexual assault...

Harry snapped the folder closed, dropping it beside the clipboard and taking a deep breath.

This could not be happening.

He pressed his hands on the soft mattress when the began shaking minutely, willing the tremors to stop. His mind was flooded with noise and he bit his lip, pushing through the confusion and fear and multitude of other emotions, and focussed on what was important.

One thing at a time.

He looked down at his – Nathan's – hands and clenched them repeatedly. They moved on his command, without a hint of pain or any delay.

He slowly started stretching, noting the lack of injuries. There was not even the slightest twinge. Whatever the healers had done, they had done it well. From even his brief examination he could tell that there was no lingering damage.

Harry looked back at the document spread atop his bed, his eyes inevitably landing on the damning date of birth once more.

He frowned, keeping a tight grip on his simmering panic. None of this made sense, but with the documents screaming these facts at him, what else could Harry think?

A young boy, assaulted, violated, and then suffering from a fall from a great height?

Harry did not believe in coincidences. This was too specific, there were too many connections being drawn for him to ignore.

He closed his eyes, thinking back on that strange dream he had had just before waking up. The feeling of hopelessness that stuck hard in his throat choked him, and he could remember all too well the phantom sensations running along his thighs and neck.

Harry shivered lightly and opened his eyes, staring once more down at his hands. His thoughts swirled darkly.

What were the chances that he would have a dream about a situation similar to what this boy had endured, and then immediately wake up in his body.

He traced the lines of his palm with his nail, studying the delicate fingers critically.

He had no earthly idea what had happened to him – if he was really here, or if this was just another intense and disturbing dream. All that he did know was that, as of right now, he had no choice but to play along with whatever was happening until he figured out how to fix this.

Whatever *this* was.

Harry's head snapped up when he heard the door to his room open. A young woman entered, worry etched into her pretty features.

Their eyes locked, and she froze just on the threshold.

Harry raised an eyebrow at her.

She gaped for a beat, then promptly dashed from the room, shouting for a healer.

He sighed deeply, taking a seat back on the bed, and forced himself to wait for her to return. Maybe then he could finally start getting some answers.

Chapter Two

Chapter Notes

Well I am honestly a little shocked at the response, but absolutely giddy nonetheless. And the amount of you guys that have already read Haribo's masterpiece makes me want to cry because finally there are others - literally no one I know has read it and my heart hurts.

But anyway, hope you guys enjoy the new chapter. No Tom yet, but for those of you that know me from CS, you know I tend to spend some time building a plot and setting things up. Rest assured though, we'll get there haha~

Warning: There is some discussion of rape and suicide attempts in this chapter again. And these will be recurring themes, okay?

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

“Can you catch this ball for me, Nathan?”

Harry bit back a groan as Healer Johnson held up the soft fabric ball in question. Honestly, he wanted nothing more than to get some bloody *answers*, but the older man was significantly wily. Every time Harry so much as hinted at a question, Johnson kindly rebuffed him.

No one would enjoy being in this situation without even the basic facts, and here Harry was without even the date or time.

He understood the necessity of assessing his physical health, but that did not mean he had to like it.

Regardless of the scowl that wanted very much to cross his face, he nodded in agreement.

Johnson gently tossed him the soft ball from where he stood.

Harry followed its movements critically, and reached out to grab it as it came to him.

However, he missed, and it hit his chest. Instinctively, his arms rose to cradle the thing before gravity got to it, but his failure had him hissing in frustration.

This was going to take some getting used to. He had only been awake for little over an hour, and he was still having trouble adjusting to being so much *smaller*.

Walking was ridiculous, as he kept trying to take larger steps than this body could actually do; and his hand-eye coordination was only slightly less miserable.

For someone who relied so heavily on running and climbing and jumping, and needed to be able to catch and punch and handle things with care for his job, this lack of ability was swiftly destroying his patience.

They had been doing these short exercises for almost twenty minutes, with little improvement. He just felt so disconnected and it was driving him mad not being able to do such simple tasks.

A comforting hand landed on his scrawny shoulder and patted it. He looked up to see the kind elderly healer watching him with a gentle smile.

“It’s expected for you to have some trouble the first couple of days, Nathan. You were in a coma for three months. That’s a significant amount of time. Your body is just readjusting itself to the changes.”

He lead Harry to over to one of the closest chairs. Harry stared down at his feet in concentration, measuring the distance and taking small, shuffling steps. He sat, grateful that he no longer had to worry about not tripping over himself.

Johnson sat across from him, watching him closely.

Harry skilfully avoided the man’s probing gaze by focussing on the ball in his hands, squeezing it and moving it from left to right.

“Nathan,” Johnson said softly, “I know this is probably very scary for you right now. But I want you to know that we will do whatever we can to help you.”

I think it’ll take more than what you’ve got to help me, Harry thought privately. He could appreciate the sentiment though, and recognised the sincerity behind the words. For all his dodging questions, Johnson was a genuine man.

“Can you tell me why I was out for so long?” Harry asked, eyes raising to stare at the other man.

The healer blinked in minor shock, and Harry wondered just what was so surprising about the question. Surely he could at least tell him that.

But Harry could see the refusal building in the man’s mouth and carried on before he could speak.

“I already read my file,” he said plainly, “it’d been left in my room. I know what happened to me.”

Johnson frowned, and Harry suspected he was making a note of which nurse would have done that. Leaving a patient’s personal file in their room – regardless of if they were in a coma or not – was a serious breach of protocol.

The man nodded though, hesitant.

“When you fell,” he began slowly, eyes scrutinising him. Harry met his gaze confidently, and the man continued. “you landed on your front, and your head suffered from an extreme amount of trauma. It caused some swelling to your brain, and your body shut down.”

Harry nodded, and the healer started again when he showed no outward sign of distress or discomfort. “Your body recovered quite well, and we managed to reverse the damage. But your mind...” Again, he hesitated. “It was as if you were just...gone. Nothing we did could pull you back, you were unresponsive to everything.”

The healer rubbed his hands together, an almost nervous glint to his eyes. “To be perfectly honest young man, we’re shocked you woke up at all.”

Harry dropped his gaze, eyes unseeingly tracing the patterns on the floor. He did not like this.

The way Johnson had said ‘gone’ was rather telling. Nathan Ciro had been dead in all but body. And now here Harry sat, inhabiting his skin like some invasive spirit. He felt sick.

“Right.” He replied, for a lack of anything better to say.

The man reached over and touched his knee, smiling again, though it was a little stilted.

“We’ll get through this,” he assured him, “I’m sure it’ll be temporary. It is possible for someone with retrograde amnesia to recover most, if not all of their memories.”

Harry made a vague noise of agreement.

Amnesia had been the safest option for him, and after having dealt with a case of it before, Harry already knew how the illness differed from patient to patient. By using amnesia as an excuse, he could cover the gaps in his knowledge quite easily, while still being able to recall certain things without arising too much suspicion.

Their heads shot up when they heard voices just outside. Harry glanced over at the healer, eyebrow cocked.

The man cleared his throat, and pushed himself up to his feet. “That would be,” he gave another awkward smile, “your parents.”

Parents.

Harry closed his eyes to mask the annoyance he knew would be visible.

Fuck.

Of course Nathan Ciro still had parents. And of course they would be notified the moment he woke up. He breathed through his nose and resisted the urge to massage his forehead.

This just kept getting better.

“Now, I’ll have to inform them of the situation.” The man said, oblivious to Harry’s turbulent thoughts. “It would be best that they were prepared for your – reaction.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, “you should go do that.” He told him, attention on the door. The voices had risen to an almost-shout at this point.

The healer dallied in front of him, and Harry knew he was likely throwing the man off with his attitude.

What would a normal patient be experiencing right now? Anxiety? Fear? Surely not barely concealed irritation.

Johnson’s moment of indecision cost them, for the next thing they knew, the door to the office burst open and two people were sweeping inside.

The woman – middle-aged and blonde and well-dressed – locked onto him immediately. She started towards him, something undoubtedly fierce about her. Harry shot to his feet, every instinct in him demanding him to put her down before she reached him.

He twitched to do so, but stopped himself at the last moment, because her arms were wrapping around him and she was pulling him into her chest in a hug so tight he almost mistook it for an attack.

“Oh *Nathan*,” she breathed in his ear. She sounded so *relieved* and Harry felt like the biggest fraud in the history of the world. “you are awake.”

“Lady *Ciro*,” the healer began, coming forward as if to tug her away. “please, you have to understand -”

“I understand that *my son* has been awake for almost an hour at this point, and you tried to stop me from seeing him.” She pulled away from Harry, though only enough to fix the man with a glare as sharp as a dagger.

“My Lady -” Johnson tried again, desperately. “There is...something you need to be aware of.”

Harry debated whether he should detangle himself from the woman – Nathan’s bloody *mother* – or let her hold onto him for a little bit longer. His heart hurt for her, because what was coming would most definitely upset her, even though it was necessary for him.

“What is it?” The stern-looking man behind Lady *Ciro* said, so obviously her husband if the ring on his finger was anything to go by. He could see the resemblance between the man and Nathan. It mirrored that of Harry and his own father.

The healer gestured at Harry, expression falling into a perfectly acceptable mask of compassion. “Nathan, well. The injury to his mind was more substantial then we realised.” He began.

The mother’s arms tighten around him in fear.

“I’m afraid he doesn’t remember anything.”

Harry watched carefully as Nathan's mother's face crumbled. Her arms fell away from him and she stepped back in shock. She glanced from Johnson to him, blue eyes searching his face almost manically.

And Harry looked back at her with the polite concern of a stranger, because that was all she was to him.

This woman was not his mother. His mother had sacrificed her very life to protect him, with her fiery red hair and stunning green eyes. The two could not look any more different if they tried.

"No." Lady Ciro mumbled, her head shaking in denial. "*No.*" She repeated, more forcibly. Her hands came up to grasp at his forearms. "No, he has to remember. You know me, Nathan, yes? You remember me."

Harry looked behind her to see the same horrible hope shining in her husband's grey eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said, watching as their spirits were dashed. "I don't."

Harry watched as the mother turned and buried her face in her husband's chest. He felt much like he had just informed them of their son's death.

He supposed, to them, Nathan might as well be gone.

It was a horrible thing, for them to have to endure months of this body lying still on a bed, then have their hopes raised when they were told of his awakening. Only to discover he was not their son – not really, anyway.

Harry waited silently as the two consoled each other, batting away the guilt in his heart for essentially stealing their child from them.

"Is there any way to reverse it?" Lord Ciro asked, sounding as miserable as his wife looked.

Johnson made a vague gesture with his hands. "Only time will tell. There are several ways to recover lost memories, but Nathan is so very young, and using them could inadvertently do more harm than good. The best course would be to wait, and slowly reintroduce him to his life at a rate he is comfortable with."

The older man turned to Harry, nodding at him. "Rushing these matters never works well, and we must all be patient with Nathan, to help him through this process."

Harry slipped his hands into his pockets to stop himself from fiddling. It hardly seemed appropriate at this time to do so.

"I was hoping to wait until you got here to go over some of the crucial facts with him, as support for him." The healer had turned back to the parents, showing them where they could sit.

Harry's interest came roaring back now that he would be getting some answers. Finally, he would be able to start working out a plan.

“Yes, yes of course.” Lady Ciro said, her husband and her drifting to seat themselves. Harry moved to sit across from them, hands coming out to fold in his lap. The woman faced him again, uncertainty written all over her face. “I -” she stopped herself to take breath.

“What do we even say?” She asked quietly.

“How about we let Nathan ask, and then fill in more as we go along?” The healer suggested.

Harry almost sighed in relief at being given a small level of control over this. He had no desire to hear all about what kind of boy Nathan Ciro had been, because that would just make him feel even more like some sort of murderer.

“What’s the date?” He asked briskly, falling back into his auror training to stay as impartial as he could to whatever was said.

Lady Ciro’s eyes closed heavily, as if the simple question reinforced for her that her son had no memory of her. “The fifteenth of January.” She said, voice wobbling slightly.

Harry nodded, “And the year?”

“1942.”

Fuck...Fuck! Harry shut his eyes and sighed, doing the maths. *Fifty-eight years. How in the hell is this even possible?*

At least he knew how old this body was now. Fourteen, turning fifteen in March. That meant Nathan would have been in fourth year. He stored the information away, pushing past the surreal thoughts and denials to focus on getting more.

“Where are we?” They had to be in Britain. The accents were more than enough to tell him that, and while Harry was sure he knew where they were exactly, it never hurt to check.

Johnson answered this, “We’re at St Mungo’s, Nathan. It’s a hospital for our kind. We are in a ward that specifically cares for cases like your own – long-term residents, as it were.”

Harry leaned back in his seat, relieved that he was at least on familiar soil. It might be a few decades off, but Britain would always be Britain to him. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

His eyes strayed to the couple in front of him, taking in the tension in their seated forms, the grip they had on the other’s hand, and the way they watched him with such longing in their expressions it was actually hard to look at them.

“What are your names?” He asked, trying to soften his tone so he sounded less like an interrogator and more like a memory-less teenage boy.

Lady Ciro jerked, as if startled, and her eyes watered. “We are your parents,” she began, voice strained horribly. Harry politely kept his eyes focussed on her face, and not her hands, which were trembling. “I – my name is Cynthia Ciro. I am your mother, Nathan.”

“And I am Benedict Ciro, your father.” Lord Ciro added, his tone soft and careful.

Harry looked between them, taking in what he could.

They were both understandably distressed with the situation, but he pushed past the obvious and looked closer.

Their clothes were impeccably made and of the finest materials. Along with the title the healer had let loose, Harry concluded they were a very well-off family.

Benedict was stern and older, and he carried himself confidently. His hair and eyes matched Nathan's precisely.

Cynthia was young, fresh-faced and stunning in her beauty. Her golden hair reminded him faintly of Luna, and Harry's heart ached suddenly.

He was truly, utterly alone.

The realisation hit him like a brick.

The wave of despair that rose in him was overwhelming, and he pressed his hand over his eyes to keep his composure as he steadied his breathing.

There was a soft rustle, and then arms were surrounding him again. He recognised Cynthia's kind voice trilling in his ear, murmuring comforting nothingness as she combed her fingers through his hair.

Harry neither pushed her away, nor pulled her closer. He simply sat and soaked in the warmth of her body against his, and tried to battle against his emotions.

He was vaguely aware of Benedict's strong voice asking for privacy, and of Johnson's quiet departure from the room.

"Oh, my son," Cynthia whispered brokenly, "we will fix this, I promise. This will all get better. We will get through this together."

Harry leaned further back, silently asking to be released. Her hold on him remained for a good two seconds, before she let him go again.

Harry sighed to himself, rubbing at his eyes. He was exhausted already, but there was still so much he had to go over before he slept.

"What happened?" He asked quietly, gazing up at them from where he sat hunched over. "Why am I in here?"

He caught the flash of anger that burned in Benedict's eyes, and the storm in Cynthia's that was so at odds with the worried lines on her face. The two shared a glance.

Harry narrowed his eyes, preparing himself to ask again, when they sagged. "Are you absolutely sure you...want to know?" Benedict asked gently, "It is – not good." He pushed the last two words out with a visible effort.

“Yes.” Harry said before the question was even finished. “Tell me.”

“Well,” Cynthia said, and before his eyes, Harry watched as a mask fell over her features. It was such a pureblood trait, to be able to wipe their emotions so effectively. And, he knew from experience, a perfect defence mechanism. “you were attacked.”

“And?”

Benedict picked up when his wife faltered. “And you were...*assaulted*.”

Harry looked between them, mouth tightening as they danced around the subject. He could sympathise with their plight, but he was a war veteran and an auror, and being handled like spun-glass was not something he was accustomed to.

“You mean raped.” He supplied for them, and they flinched at the ugly word. Harry glanced off to the side, wondering if this was cruel of him to force them to relive what had happened to their child.

He needed to know though. He had to absolutely *sure* of the connection between his dream and this.

“And I tried to kill myself?” He asked, purposefully keeping his gaze away from them so he could not see their reaction. Harry saw them nod out of his peripheral – and was that not weird, being able to see so clearly without glasses.

“I’ve been here for three months,” he continued stoically. “did they catch them?”

Here, Benedict’s magic thrashed aggressively. “No.” He practically snarled. “There were no witnesses, and Knockturn Alley, where...*it* happened, is not the most reputable place.”

Harry pressed a hand to his chest, rubbing the spot absently. He remembered the dream vividly. ‘*No witnesses*’, his arse.

Harry was not entirely surprised by the shot of rage that ran through him. His entire life had been filled with tragedy after tragedy, misfortune following misfortune. He was no stranger to the harshness of the world, and knew there was no possible way to save everyone.

But he burned for revenge. He wanted to find those responsible for putting Nathan in the hospital, and he wanted them *punished*.

It was a familiar darkness he danced with every day of his job. The thin line between justice and vengeance was so easy to cross, and Harry had always been careful to keep himself chained to the right side.

He also knew, however, that sometimes the ‘right’ thing, was not always the *right* thing.

Maybe this is why I’m here, he thought distantly, *to catch the ones who did this*.

It was a silly notion. Trapped in a boy’s body, there was little Harry could actually do.

He somehow doubted Cynthia and Benedict would be willing to let him just saunter his way down Knockturn Alley, tearing through whoever he got his hands on until he found the ones he was looking for.

No, there had to be another reason this was happening to him. Harry just had to bide his time and figure this out.

But to do that, he needed to leave this hospital.

He turned to Nathan's parents.

"Can you get me out of here?"

OoO

It took just two days for the Ciro's to get him released. Considering Johnson had wanted to hold him for observation for at least a week, Harry greatly appreciated whatever weight they had thrown around.

On the morning of the third day since he had woken in Nathan's body – and yes, Harry had come to terms with the fact that he was officially stuck in this mess, almost sixty years in the bloody past – Harry was escorted out of St Mungo's by Benedict and Cynthia.

There were no detours on their journey, which Harry was both grateful for, and annoyed by. He knew he had to get researching immediately – and the Ciro's family library would be as good a place to start as any – but he would have liked to observe the changes a little more before he was whisked inside their home.

Harry shrugged off the coat they had given him and held it in his hands as he let his eyes roam over the foyer.

He might have been a little off in his earlier estimate. The Ciro's had to be on par with the Malfoy's, if this was their home.

Harry wondered why he had never heard of such an influential family before, then immediately decided he would rather not know.

A lot could happen in sixty years, and even though he had just met them, the idea that something tragic could befall these two kind people somewhere between now and his own time was unpleasant.

Cynthia and Benedict stood calmly behind him, though there was an expectant and hopeful air around them.

They want to see me recognise this place, he thought with a touch of sympathy. *They want me to look at these rooms and think of home.*

He turned to them and gave a stiff smile, shaking his head lightly.

Cynthia wilted, and Benedict's arm wrapped around her shoulders in support.

"It is okay, sweetheart," Cynthia told him, reaching to stroke his cheek, only to draw her hand away in uncertainty. "Simon should be here by now." She glanced over to her husband, who nodded in agreement. "We have already told him all about your amnesia, but he was so anxious to see you again we let him come home for today."

Harry hid his grimace at the reminder of Nathan's twin brother, lurking somewhere in the house. Cynthia and Benedict had revealed the fact to him earlier, and he was not particularly excited to have a child hover around him in concern or brotherly affection.

This would have been much easier if Nathan were an only child.

“Great,” Harry said with false enthusiasm. “I can’t wait to meet him.”

They guided him through the foyer and to a side room, taking the time to point out certain paintings or areas that had apparently held significance to Nathan.

Harry smiled and nodded.

Benedict separated from them for a few minutes, eventually finding them again in another hallway.

Cynthia was telling him about Nathan’s great-grandfather, and was speaking adamantly with his painting when Harry caught Benedict returning, and just behind him, was a boy.

Unlike Nathan, this boy was a perfect mix of his parents. The brown hair of his father, yet the eyes, mouth and nose of his mother.

This must be Simon, Harry thought, tilting his body to face them.

Cynthia cut off and followed his gaze, a smile coming to her face. “Simon.” She greeted, love obvious in her voice.

Harry waited for some cue as to how to act, when Simon burst into a run and crashed into him, arms wrapping around him and squeezing tightly. The other boy buried his face in Harry’s neck, and with a jolt, Harry realised that he was trembling.

For a lack of anything else to do, he dropped his hands cautiously on Simon’s back, patting the other boy in a sad attempt at comfort.

“I am so happy you’re back!” Simon said wetly, pulling back to grin at him. “I was so worried about you, brother.”

Harry returned the smile with a little one of his own, finding the boy and his care for his twin sweet.

“Thank you, Simon.”

“Mother and Father have already told me all about it,” Simon said seriously, his head cocking to the side. “you really do not remember anything?”

Harry scratched at the back of his neck, “Uh, no, unfortunately. Not a thing.”

“Oh.” Simon’s expression drooped, before brightening slightly. “Well, what are brothers for then? I will be here for whatever you need.”

Cynthia clapped her hands, expression delighted if a bit wistful. “Simon, darling, can you show Nathan back to his room. Your father and I must go take care of a few more things at St Mungo’s, and the Ministry, but we will be back in time for dinner.”

“Of course, Mother.” Simon agreed, slipping his arm through Harry’s with an ease that spoke volumes.

Harry was so busy staring down at the entwined limbs that he violently flinched back when a pair of lips brushed against his forehead.

Cynthia’s blue eyes were wide, and her hand had risen to her mouth in what looked like horror. “I am so sorry, Nathan.” She said, sounding distraught. “I was not even thinking -”

“It’s fine,” Harry stopped her apology. He could hardly blame the woman for doing something that was likely a habit bred from years of repetition. A mother kissing her son goodbye – it was not her fault for forgetting. “I’m sorry, it’ll just take some getting used to.”

Benedict gently took hold of her, and when she saw the easy smile on Harry’s face, she began to relax. “Very well, we will return this afternoon.”

Harry watched as they left down the hall, hand-in-hand.

They’re hurt, he thought with pity. They’re hurting and me being here is not helping. They want their son, and I can’t give them that.

A tug on his arm drew his attention back to his new brother.

“Come.” Simon ordered, pulling him in the opposite direction. His steps were confident and measured. Comfortable.

Harry wished he felt the same.

He followed along obediently, mentally tracing the path they took until they came to a stop at two large oak doors.

“This is yours.” Simon told him.

Harry stopped in front of the doors, hands suddenly clammy.

He was already invading this boy’s body. And now here he was, in his home, with his family, about to take over one of the last things Nathan Ciro possessed. His room.

Harry wanted to leave, but with the presence of Simon heavy at his back, he had no choice but to open the doors.

All or nothing.

It was an beautiful room, filled with light colours and with traces of silver along the furniture and ceiling. To the far end was a large bed, and a simple desk.

What Harry liked most were the windows though, big and open, offering a splendid view of the lush green grounds.

He walked inside carefully, eternally glad that he had finally gotten used to the change in height and could properly take a step without making a fool of himself.

Harry gazed around the room, turning as he studied the space.

His eyes landed on Simon, who was watching him coldly from where he was leaning against the door.

There was something in the other boy's gaze that caused Harry's attention to snap to him.

Simon's next smile was bitter and ugly compared to the relief and love there before. The change had Harry's feet automatically shifting to ground himself more.

"You know I hoped you would never wake up, but you have always been a hindrance, brother." Simon sighed loudly, eyes darkening. "Always getting in my way, always having to be the centre of attention. These past three months have been the best of my life, but you just had to wake up."

Harry blinked at the spew of vicious words, honestly surprised. He knew from his experiences with the Weasley's that siblings did not always get along, but this was far more extreme than he had been expecting.

He narrowed his eyes, suddenly able to see the same traits in Simon that Draco once had.

"I mean, there must be something seriously wrong with you if you actually *wanted* to come back to your life. I would have thought you finally wizened up to the fact that nobody wants you around when you jumped like a coward, but I guess I overestimated your intelligence."

Harry walked closer, keeping his expression blank. He had been willing to play nice with whoever Nathan's twin was, for the sake of all of them. Their family had already been through so much, the lest he could do was act nice.

But he already had enough problems to handle.

Whether or not he looked it, he was an adult, and he was an auror, and he did not have the time or the patience to deal with a spoilt little shit.

Simon sneered at him.

"You are a waste of space, brother."

Harry reached out and grabbed the boy by his collar, yanking him in close. The suddenness of it had Simon stumbling, his eyes wide.

"Listen here you brat," Harry began, voice as savage as his eyes. "you can stand there and say all the crap you want, but I'm going to do you the courtesy and just this once, give you a warning." He shoved the boy back so he was out of the room.

Simon still looked stunned.

“Stay the fuck out of my way.”

Harry slammed the door in his face.

He leaned against it with a groan, head smacking back against the firm wood and closing his eyes.

“This is such a mess.” He mumbled, hand running roughly through his hair.

Harry turned his attention back to the room, resolving to leave dealing with Simon to a later date. Right now, he had to start researching.

He walked around the room, careful not to touch anything. He treated the room like he would a crime scene, or the room of a suspect.

To better understand what was happening to him, he had to understand who Nathan Ciro was. And that meant pulling everything in this room apart until he could get a clearer picture.

With a sigh, Harry got to work.

Chapter End Notes

As some of you pointed out in the comments, a lot of your typical HP/TR time-travel fics have Harry, not exactly weak-willed or anything like that, but still someone who occasionally bends to the whims of others. From this chapter, you can see that Harry is not going to be going down that path.

He's older, he's smarter and he's a hell of a lot more dangerous than canon-Harry. I really like the idea of an older, hardened Harry who flirts with the darkness we all know is inside of him, but still refuses to succumb to it.

Chapter Three

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everyone for reviewing~ Glad to see so many people are enjoying this so far, and enjoyed the twist of Simon! I have a feeling a lot of you will grow to hate him haha (comic fans - you'll know what I mean.)

Just to clarify some things.

1. As of right now, Harry and Tom probably won't be in a romantic relationship, which is why I left it was just a "&" rather than a "/", though that could be liable to change depending on how the story develops. Rest assured, I will change the tags if that does happen, and give you guys an heads up. I really just want to focus on the fascination and dynamic they'll have with each other, before even considering doing anything sexual.

2. I do kinda have tumblr, but there's nothing on it so probably not worth looking for it. Sorry~

3. In regards to updates, CS is my main priority, so it will most likely *always* be updated before this one. Which is good for fans of both, since to update one, I must push myself to update the other. Hopefully that continues to give me extra motivation haha.

4. This story is only loosely based on "At the End of the Road", so I will only loosely be following certain aspects of the comic. It won't be a carbon-copy (obviously) and it will likely stray a lot from the actual plot of the comic.

I think that's everything....Eh, hopefully. Onto the chapter lovelies!

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

Harry sat with his legs crossed on the plush carpet ground, acting as the epicentre of the carefully constructed chaos around him.

He looked out over this map of Nathan's life, and felt nothing but sympathy for the child.

At first glance it was all perfectly ordinary – exactly what one might expect from a fourteen year old boy.

Clothes, books, random sentimental pieces that had accumulated over the years. Nothing abnormal.

But it was that that hurt Harry the most.

There were no pictures of the boy himself, or his friends. No letters addressed to him. Nothing he could see that could have been a gift from someone close that was not his parents.

There was no personality, no *spark*.

There was such a distinct lack of warmth.

Harry thought back to Simon's ruthless remarks, as well as the chilling glint in his eyes, and barely resisted the urge to hunt the little bastard down and break his jaw.

He cast one last, pitying look at the sad collection around him, and pushed himself to his feet.

There was little doubt in his mind anymore. Nathan lived a sad life before his attack. His parents – while completely doting and loving – were clearly not aware of how sad their child had been.

And Simon deserved to be pushed into a pool filled with grindylow, as far as Harry was concerned. What kind of brother – what kind of *twin* – could be so horrid to their own blood?

He remembered Fred and George. The complete trust the two had had for each other, the utter certainty, the way the two could share a glance and just *know*.

Of course, Harry knew he had barely any context over the relationship between Nathan and Simon. As much as it pained him, he had to wonder if they had always been like this? Playing the sweet, loving siblings for their parents, while trying to torment the other the moment they were free of scrutiny?

But no, that did not make any sense.

If that were the case, then why did Simon seem so completely thrown when Harry had stood up for himself? If they fought regularly, then Simon should not have been caught off-guard like that.

No.

Simon was clearly used to holding the power when dealing with his brother.

Harry narrowed his eyes.

Well, if he tried anything again, Harry would simply put him back in his place. He was not one to just sit twiddling his thumbs as someone confronted him. He hit back twice as hard until people got the message, or they stayed down. Whichever came first.

Harry sighed and ruffled his hair, grimacing as it easily fluttered back into its previous position.

He missed his own hair, dammit.

Harry placed his hands on his hips, finally turning his attention away from the array of Nathan's items and looking around the spacious room once again.

This could not be all of it.

He's a teenage boy. Likely a loner if his brother is that much of a twat. He'd have to have a secret stash somewhere; a journal – something.

With that in mind, Harry approached the bed, eyeing it with suspicion. He slowly began feeling his way around the edges of the mattress, tucking his fingers in every crevice he could.

He knelt and stuck his head under the base, wandlessly casting a *lumos* to illuminate the dim area.

Nothing.

Harry sat back on his hunches, frowning to himself.

There was a limit to the number of places Nathan could have hidden something, and Harry had to keep in mind that the boy was only fourteen. That cut out a large amount of concealment spells he could have possibly known or used. Harry knew from experience that children were hardly the craftiest beings alive.

He made his way to the wardrobe, shuffling his way through what was still hanging and through the drawers. He dug under the neatly folded clothes before pushing them back into place, all rumpled.

His eyes jumped left and right, finally coming to rest on a large, dark suitcase pushed up onto the upper shelf.

“Score.” He said with a grin, hands moving to once again wandlessly levitate the thing down to him.

It landed on the ground without a sound, and Harry unlocked it.

He hefted the heavy lid open and was immediately assaulted with green and silver. His buzz at his find shrivelled astonishingly fast.

“Oh you have *got* to be kidding me.” He hissed. “He’s a Slytherin? Bloody hell.”

Harry knew he had to get to Hogwarts. He needed the vast resources in its library to begin trying to find his way out of this mess. He knew he would have to play the student. He just had not expected to have to play a snake as well.

“Just great.” He muttered, carefully shuffling the uniforms out of his way, letting his hands feel their way through the contents of the case. His fingers brushed over the bottom and sides, searching for anything.

His finger caught on a knob that should not have been there, and with a slight push the knob moved.

There was a faint click, and Harry slowly pulled the bottom of the case up when he realised what was happening.

There.

A small, red leather book sat innocently under the false bottom.

Clever boy. Harry thought, reaching out and taking the book from its place. There was a faint outline left from the thin layer of dust that had settled in the months it had not been touched.

Harry closed the case and pushed it with his foot so that it was mostly out of the way.

He made his way back out into the main room, the book already cracked open to the first page.

The writing was smooth and bordered on calligraphy to Harry's eyes. It was the writing of someone who had been using quills and inkwells since their earliest days. Compared to this, Harry's handwriting was chicken scratch.

He quickly glanced around for a place to sit down and begin reading – because just a quick flick through showed that this diary was filled almost to the brim, and would take time to work through.

Harry took a seat at Nathan's desk, inhaled deeply to gather himself, and went to the first page.

It took him all of two seconds to realise that he may have miscalculated.

The words, while in English and clearly legible, were somehow wrong. The ordering of the letters was incorrect, random capitals appeared where they should not, and from the slating of the writing it looked as if it were written from right to left.

Harry's eyes became half-lidded in a mix of amusement and frustration.

"You sneaky bastard." Harry whispered, his appreciation of Nathan's ingenuity winning over any budding annoyance. "You coded it."

He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his slim chest, chuckling softly.

Clearly he had underestimated Nathan. Harry did not know many fourteen year olds that would go to the trouble of actually writing in a bloody code, on top of keeping their journal squirrelled away in a suitcase's false-bottom.

He was pleasantly surprised.

"Well," he looked over his shoulder to scan the room once more. "you have to have cheat sheet somewhere."

Harry had never particularly liked the section of auror training dedicated to decoding ciphers and riddles. He could do it just fine – God knew that after all his childhood adventures he had developed a knack for it – but it still frustrated him.

He enjoyed solving mysteries, he enjoyed piecing together clues, but he lacked the patience it took to sit down and correctly decipher something on this level.

Harry stood and restarted his search, this time looking for Nathan's cheat sheet – anything that might have been used when the boy created his code.

The sun was sinking by the time he decided to stop. He was fairly certain he had rooted through every inch of the room, and he had found nothing that might help him.

He collapsed back on the bed, scowling at the ceiling.

He had definitely underestimated this kid.

He could see why Nathan had been sorted into Slytherin now. The boy was a sly one, and if he had destroyed the cheat sheet – as Harry was beginning to suspect he had – then the boy deserved the green and silver tie for his cunning.

Harry sighed, rubbing at his eyes. It was so odd not having to mind his glasses for such things anymore. He missed the familiar weight of them on his face, and more than once had caught himself going to reach for his nose to push them up.

He huffed, arms flopping down beside him. He conceded defeat for today. He would have to find another way to decode the diary. There were other places Nathan could have hidden his cheat sheet, after all.

Someone knocked at his door.

Harry shoved himself up onto his elbows and stared at the wooden doors. It took him a few moments to respond. "It's open."

The door swung open, and Harry blinked at Cynthia standing in the doorway.

The woman's kind expression twisted oddly as she gazed around the room. Whatever she had been about to say died on her tongue.

Harry had the decency to wince as he took in the utter chaos he had unleashed on Nathan's room. Everything was pulled out and heaped in certain groups, categorised even if it did not look that way to the casual observer.

"I just wished to see how you were settling in." Cynthia spoke lowly, her voice remarkably controlled despite her turmoil.

"Sorry," Harry said, glancing away from her to avoid her gaze. "I'm just trying to understand."

Her face melted into something soft and loving. "Of course, darling. I cannot begin to know what this must feel like for you." She entered the room slowly, navigating her way through the mess to perch herself on the edge of the bed next to him.

Her hands were clasped lightly in her lap, but Harry could see how much she wished to reach out and hold him.

He appreciated her restraint.

“You must feel...uncomfortable. All of us acting so familiar with you, when you have absolutely no knowledge of us.”

Harry nodded, because it was true. He *was* uncomfortable with her, and her family. And while that was partly due to his unfamiliarity with them, it was also due to the fact that he had essentially stolen their child from them.

“I am sorry we did not think on how to ease you into this more gently. We are strangers to you, and you have no choice but to stay here with us...” She took a moment to gather herself. “I just would like you to know that we are here for you. If you need anything – even if it is space from us – you need only ask.”

Harry felt his chest warm at her words. This woman was so loving, and was trying so hard to make things easier for him. True, she believed he was her son, but the sentiment was the same.

He reached out and lay his hand over her folded ones. “Thank you,” he said simply. “I know this isn’t easy for you either. And I’m so sorry that I can’t be who you want me to be.”

Cynthia’s eyes watered and she stared at him with a starved glint in her eyes. “Oh, sweetheart. My precious, darling boy. Just having you here and awake is enough for me right now.” Her hands came up to frame Harry’s face.

“We will get through this. We are a family. I know we will be fine.”

He wished he could share her faith. But until he knew exactly what was happening to him, he was going to remain cautious with everything.

Still, he gave her a stiff smile and looked off to the side. “Actually, there is something I wanted to talk to you about.”

She retracted herself from him and sat with an expectant look on her pretty face. “What is it, Nathan?”

Harry took a breath. “I want to go to Hogwarts.”

Cynthia shook her head immediately, the skin around her mouth tightening. “No. I am sorry, but Nathan, I cannot allow that.”

“Why not?” And the frustration leaking into his voice was only a fraction of what he truly felt.

“It is...dangerous.” Cynthia told him slowly, “You have only just woken up, your body is still processing things, the healers need to run more tests...”

Harry's fists clenched, and he very carefully kept his teeth clamped shut, lest his tongue get the better of him.

Cynthia sighed from beside him. "Please, Nathan, understand. I only want you to be safe, and with everything going on right now, you returning to Hogwarts would not be best."

He did not reply, and listened as she shifted herself in discomfort.

"Nathan? Please."

Harry narrowed his eyes, staring resolutely at the wall and trying to keep his temper in check. He had to remind himself that Cynthia was only acting as any concerned mother would. She did not know the whole situation, did not know she was talking to a trained auror.

He loosened his fists. "Yeah. Sure." He told her blandly.

Cynthia hesitated for a few more moments, one hand hovering uncertainly over his shoulder. She did not touch him though, because the tension radiating off of his form was permeating the air.

Instead, she gathered her skirt, and stood. "Dinner will be ready in an hour, please join us then."

Without another word, she slipped out of the room, feet carefully stepping through the collage of her son's life.

The second he heard the soft click of the door closing, Harry collapsed back on the bed, hands rubbing violently at his face.

This was an inconvenience, but he was hardly going to let it stop him from going back to the boarding school.

He would just have to be patient for a little longer, deal with the Ciro's presence and whatever tests the healers put him through, then try again.

OoO

Dinner was a tense affair.

Harry tried to ignore the clear divide between the small family, choosing to focus more on making sure his fork actually made it to his mouth.

The past few days had definitely helped him grow accustomed to the changes in his body size, and his coordination – while not completely back to normal – was coming along nicely.

He ate slowly, only paying half an ear to the conversation of the other three.

“-and of course Professor Dumbledore thought I had made a very insightful observation-”

Harry swallowed wrong and immediately broke into a coughing fit.

Three heads snapped to him, two sets of eyes concerned, and one brimming with annoyance.

“Nathan!” Benedict moved to stand, but Harry held up a hand to halt the man in his tracks. He coughed several more times before finally clearing his throat and taking an unobstructed breath.

Harry took a large gulp of water, then looked up at the others. “Sorry.” He apologised, and turned to Simon, who was watching him closely in what would appear to be concern to anyone else. Harry saw the disdain in his eyes though, and resisted the childish urge to kick the other from under the table.

“Dumbledore?” He asked briskly, his mind practically vibrating. *Of course. Dumbledore! How could I have forgotten? He’d be the Transfiguration professor right now.* Harry wanted very much to slap his own forehead at his oversight.

“*Professor* Dumbledore.” Simon corrected helpfully, his tone borderline condescending. “He is a teacher at Hogwarts, and a brilliant man.”

“Too right.” Benedict agreed, settling back into his seat now that he saw his child was fine. “Absolutely incredible, and very powerful. Why, with him there, Hogwarts is one of the safest places in Britain or Scotland.”

“Really?” Harry murmured, focus already fading away as the topic turned to Dumbledore and his many achievements.

What am I going to do with this? Surely Dumbledore would notice something is wrong the moment he sees me? Should I tell him right away? He might be able to help me figure this out.

Harry took another sip of his water, frowning to himself.

His feelings about Dumbledore were definitely mixed. He respected the former Headmaster, more than anyone, but Harry was still bitter at the man's time playing God. Finding out your entire life was a carefully orchestrated lie was hard to swallow, and the years had not dulled Harry's anger at being so spectacularly manipulated.

He would have been content never having anything to do with the man again.

But he could not deny that he needed help here. Dumbledore would be his most likely bet at fixing whatever was going on.

He ate the rest of his meal in silence, only offering brief responses to any questions thrown his way.

Much later, Harry stood in the kitchen by himself, nursing a glass of milk and wishing it were firewhisky. It was well past midnight, and everyone had already gone to bed.

He *should* be in bed.

But it appeared his insomnia had followed him into this time as well.

Harry had gotten better at sleeping normally over the years, only driven to this state once every few months, when the memories got particularly heavy. It took a lot to unnerve him enough to affect his sleep these days.

This whole mess had him rattled though, and it was beginning to creep in on him.

He sighed, rubbing at his eyes as he leaned on the counter.

If he were where he was supposed to be, Ginny would be here with him. She would not say anything, just sit with him, holding his hand.

She always knew what he needed, even before Harry himself did.

Merlin, he missed her. It had only been a handful of days, but he ached for her.

He finished his glass in one long drag and placed the empty cup on the counter.

There was a quiet snap from beside him, and Harry looked down to see a house-elf staring up at him with wide blue eyes.

"Y-young Master Nathan!" She squeaked, shrinking away from him in surprise. Harry blinked, studying the tiny creature as she stood there, shuffling her feet awkwardly.

Finally, he gave her a small smile. "Hello," he greeted, his soft spot for her kind rising swiftly. "sorry for startling you."

Her big eyes grew even bigger, amazement overtaking her wrinkled face. "N-nonsense, sir. Giffy is sorry for intruding."

Harry shrugged, his smile widening. He shifted so he was facing her fully. "It's alright. You probably weren't expecting anyone to be up this late anyway. It's nice to meet you, Giffy."

Her expression quickly whirled through a number of emotions, from confusion to sorrow, before settling on understanding. She ducked her head bashfully, and slipped into a practised curtsy. "Giffy is pleased to meet you, Young Master."

Harry looked at her curiously. "Can I ask what you're doing? It's really late."

Giffy's face once again shown with astonishment, "Young Master does not need to ask." She told him, and Harry realised she was probably confused by his attitude. Most house-elves were used to being ordered around, rather than treated nicely.

Kreature's face flashed through his mind, followed immediately by Dobby's.

"It's the polite thing to do." He told her, and carried on before she could once again express her wonder. "What were you doing?"

"Oh," Giffy glanced down at her feet, only to peek up at him sweetly. "the Master and Mistress wished for Giffy to fetch them refreshments."

"They're awake?" Harry asked, frowning lightly.

Giffy nodded eagerly, "Yes, Young Master. In the sitting room. They are discussing-" She cut herself off, biting her lip and hunching her shoulders defensively.

Harry's attention was caught. "What are they discussing, Giffy?" He asked as kindly as he could. He made sure to keep his expression open and friendly, not wanting to scare her off. He doubted the Ciro's had explicitly ordered Giffy to keep their topic a secret, and familial loyalty compelled her to answer his questions as well.

Giffy shifted uncomfortably, "They are talking about you, sir." She whispered to him, as if afraid Benedict and Cynthia would hear her and appear.

Harry smiled encouragingly at her, "Oh, well that's not really surprising, is it?" He asked her, "Thank you, Giffy. You go do what they asked." She nodded, face tentatively smiling up at him as she snapped her fingers and two glasses and a tray zoomed towards her.

Harry waited until she had vanished before dropping his smile and going for the door.

He headed directly for the sitting room, measuring his steps and treading silently when he approached the double doors. Underneath he could see the slip of light, and the mumble of voices.

With a simple wave of his hand, his hearing sharpened.

"-handle this?"

"As we always do, Cynthia. He is our son."

“Is he?”

Harry’s heart lurched at the sharpness in Cynthia’s tone. She was always so kindly, that hearing the harshness in her words was off-putting. But above that was the sudden prickling of fear in his chest.

Did they suspect him? Did they know he was not, and never had been their son?

“Cynthia...” There was very real heartache in Benedict’s voice. *“You know the answer to that.”*

She sighed, loudly. *“Y-yes. I know. I know. It just becomes so hard sometimes. I love Nathan, I truly do. He is my son, but...I just...”*

“I know.” Benedict murmured, almost too softly for Harry to hear. *“You are the most wonderful mother, to both of them. And an even more generous wife, my dear. Things will get better.”*

“I want my son back. I want Nathan to remember. I feel like I am talking to a complete stranger and I hate that he does not recognise us.”

“I want that too,” Benedict assured her, *“but it is not that simple. We are strangers to him. We must be patient. As hard as this is for us, it is even worse for him. We must remember that.”*

“Yes. I know. Forgive me for acting so rashly. I merely want Nathan to be safe. After what happened to him-”

“We will find out who hurt him, I swear it to you. The aurors are following any lead they can.”

“It has been three months. If there was something to find, they would have it already.” There was defeat written in her words.

“Stay strong, my dear. We will get justice for Nathan.”

Harry cancelled the spell when the two dissolved into silence. He backed away from the room swiftly, making for the stairs to the next level.

His mind was humming with the snippets of information he had gleaned from their brief conversation.

Clearly, there was more involved with the Ciro’s than he had thought – something that Harry was not seeing. The way they spoke about Nathan, the way *Cynthia* did, it was curious.

But one thing he was sure of, despite the questions he had, was that Benedict and Cynthia Ciro were some of the most kind-hearted individuals he had stumbled across.

Their genuine love for Nathan made Harry’s jaded self soften slightly.

He scaled the steps and headed for the bedroom, passing Simon's on his way.

Harry stared at the dark doors bitterly, remembering one topic that had sprung up at the dinner table.

Tomorrow, Simon would be returning to Hogwarts.

And Harry would remain here, waiting impatiently until he could somehow talk his way into joining Nathan's prick of a twin.

He could hardly wait.

OoO

“Hey, Ciro!” Simon looked up at the call, his scowl lightening when he noted who was speaking.

“Black,” he greeted politely, his eyes sliding beyond the third year to land on the slightly larger form behind him. “Lestrangle.” The intimidating fourth year merely nodded at him.

Orion Black stepped up to him, well into his personal space, and clapped a hand on his upper arm in camaraderie. Simon stiffly let the younger boy do as he pleased. While their age difference might normally give Simon an advantage, the name hanging over Orion was more than enough to level the playing field between them.

And with Lestrangle looming at his shoulder like some form of bodyguard, Simon had little choice in the matter.

“How are you?” Orion asked kindly, grey eyes sparkling up at him.

“I am well. You?”

The younger boy brushed off the question with a dainty wave of his hand. “Fine, fine. Tell me, is it true?”

Simon’s jaw clenched, already knowing just what Orion was asking after. “Is what true?”

“Your brother, silly.” Orion shoved him lightly, “Word is he is up and walking.”

“Yes.” Simon answered mechanically. “Nathan’s awake.”

Orion smiled up at him, the expression holding too many teeth. “How fortuitous.” He commented, and the glint in his eyes was not dissimilar to a predator staring at his prey. Simon both hated and admired the younger boy for being so bloody *dangerous*.

“We’ve all be so terribly worried about him, haven’t we, Gus?”

Augustus Lestrangle said nothing, but Orion continued speaking without even glancing at his companion. “Any word on how he is?” The knowing expression on the other boy’s face let Simon know that somehow – likely familial connections, seeing as he was a Black – Orion was already well aware of Nathan’s *condition*.

Simon shrugged. “Unfortunately, it appears my dear brother has lost all his memories.”

Orion gasped, so perfectly timed and executed that if Simon did not know any better, he would have thought it real. “How terrible! He truly remembers nothing?”

“Not even my name.”

Orion and Augustus shared a look, and Simon shifted his gaze away from the two just slightly.

His relationship with Nathan was – *complicated*. But he knew that his brother's life at Hogwarts was hellish.

When they had first been sorted – him in Ravenclaw, Nathan in Slytherin – it had been fine. They were still able to see each other regularly, and both were quite content with the friends they had managed to make.

They had shared everything up until that point, so it was nice for them to finally be seen as separate people.

Simon and Nathan were so close.

But then, *that* had happened, and Simon could not even look at Nathan anymore. As far as he was concerned, the entire fallout was Nathan's own fault.

He *deserved* all of it. All the snide comments, all the cruel taunting. It was all on Nathan.

"Absolutely terrible." Orion said, stepping away from him. "Is he coming back anytime soon?"

Simon shrugged again. "It has not been decided. I imagine, at some point, yes."

He hoped he was wrong. Even at the bottom of the social hierarchy, Nathan had the uncanny ability to gain attention. Simon just wished his brother would *go* and *stay gone*. None of this awakening with a new personality business.

He preferred Nathan as a spineless, pathetic weakling, when he had to bother with him at all. Not someone with fire in his eyes and body braced as if ready to take on the world.

Orion made a noise in the back of his throat. "I see. Well, sorry to keep you so long. I'll see you later."

Simon nodded and walked away, keeping his posture as straight as he could.

Once he had rounded the corner, Orion turned to Augustus, eyebrows raised. "Did you see it?"

"He's unsettled." Augustus said quietly.

The two walked together back in the direction of the dungeon.

"More than that, he looked *pissed*." Orion chuckled happily. "He's so easy to read. Like a little book."

Augustus glanced down at him, sharp amusement in his dark eyes. "What do you think? About *Ciro* being awake?"

Orion smiled wider, his eyes narrowing. “I’m excited. It’s been a while since anything interesting has happened. Ciro was always so much fun to watch. I miss the easy entertainment.”

Augustus hummed in agreement. “He was too soft.”

Orion reached out and grabbed the other’s hand, swinging it childishly between them as they walked.

“The older years will be positively ecstatic, though. Their favourite toy is alive and kicking. Well,” he looked up at the roof, a finger on his chin. “alive might be more accurate. Ciro hardly ever fought back. He certainly never kicked anyone.”

Augustus rolled his eyes, walking faster and tugging gently at the younger boy, urging him to hurry up. “Come on, you are too slow.”

“You bastard!” Orion exclaimed brightly, “It’s not my fault your legs are abnormally long!”

“You’re just short.” Augustus shot back.

“Pfft, whatever Gus.” The boy’s grey eyes glinted. “Oh, did you get that book Tom wanted, as well?”

“Of course.” The other said smoothly.

“I don’t even know why he wants such a droll thing. He usually reads much more interesting texts.” Orion said, head falling back as Augustus guided him through the hallways.

“Just because you find genealogy boring, does not mean that everyone does.”

Orion laughed, “Come on, Gus. *Tom*, reading about ancient family lines? It’s weird. He’s never expressed an interest in our family histories before. Admit it, it’s odd.”

“Riddle’s always been a bit odd.”

“Well, that is true,” Orion said with a smirk. “but my point remains. He’s up to something.”

“Riddle’s *always* up to something, Orion.”

Orion rolled his eyes, but said nothing to refute the other. If there was ever an accurate description of Tom, it would be that.

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts? Feelings? Lemme know guys!

Chapter Four

Chapter Notes

Sorry about the wait lovelies, enjoy~

Harry slowed to a light jog as he approached the manor's back entrance, huffing as he opened the door and slipped inside, relishing the warm air that wrapped around him.

He trekked to the kitchen and got himself some water, drinking it slowly as his eyes lazily trailed over the impeccable tiles and polished utensils.

He wiped his mouth when he was done and quickly washed out the cup with a touch of soap, then placed it in the tray to dry. He dried his hands on his pants and leaned against the counter, head tilting back as he regained his breath.

It had been over a week since Simon had disappeared back to Hogwarts, and Harry would be lying if he said he missed the other boy.

He would prefer it if he were completely alone.

Both Cynthia and Benedict had hovered near him for the first few days, acting as if he would vanish if they turned their back for more than a second. Harry could sympathise with their fears, but he had made it as obvious as he could without explicitly *saying* the words, that he did not need them constantly near him.

And sure, if he was actually an amnesic fourteen year old he might actually crave the attention. He might seek them out, might try and connect with them.

But this was not his family, this was not his life, and Harry would much rather be left alone to plan than accidentally grow attached to these people.

He knew himself. He knew he had a bit of a weakness for helping people. Well – more than a 'bit'. His friends were always ready to chew him out for jumping head first into danger if he thought it could possibly help someone else.

But that was why he was being so careful to keep a firm distance from the Ciro's. Once he got invested in someone he would stay until he was sure they were okay; and no matter how much he wanted to give them their son back, Harry was more desperate to get *home*.

Home to Ginny. Home to Ron and Hermione, and the Weasley's. Home to his friends and his job and his *really nice life*.

He thought about the ring sitting in his desk at the department, and all those silly romantic plans he had been making. He thought about Angela's swelling middle and the fact that Ron and Hermione's wedding was in a few months.

He really had to get to Hogwarts so he could start trying to get back. The longer he was here, the more chance of him getting caught up in these people's lives; which would be a disaster for everyone involved.

The only good thing to happen to him recently was the physical therapy, and what it had done for his coordination. He was finally in control of his limbs.

The day of Simon's departure, Harry had once again been whisked to St. Mungo's to see Healer Johnson. The man had all but given him a trunk of potions, along with lengthy instructions on how to take them.

Harry had nodded along dumbly, pretending that he was not already intimately acquainted with nearly all of them from his tendency to land himself in the hospital.

The healer had also given him a schedule of easy exercises to stick to, to help get his body back in balance and put on a little more weight.

The exercises were pathetically easy to do, and Harry quickly found his body's current limits and decided to make his own routine – with a few *adjustments*.

Cynthia and Benedict were happy to let him do his therapy by himself, and as such had no clue that Harry was following his own instructions instead.

If Hermione were here she would probably whack him for disregarding the healer's orders, but Harry needed this body to be in a better condition than just *healthy*. He needed to be stronger, faster. He needed to be as prepared as he could for the future, because he literally had *no clue* what was awaiting him.

He was used to operating with a lot more mass, and as such, was determined to bring Nathan's body from average to damn-bloody-fit.

And who knew, once he got back to his own time and Nathan got his own body back – *hopefully, please God don't let the kid be gone forever* – he might be pleasantly surprised at his new physique.

With his run finished, Harry started into the sitting room, knowing it would be empty at this time.

He took a deep breath, then dropped to start some push-ups. His record in this body was twenty-one, which, considering Nathan was a scrawny-arse little thing before Harry took the reins, was pretty good.

He was looking to get to at least thirty-five in the next two weeks. With the help of the potions, as well as the planned diet he was on, Harry knew he was going to be able to do it.

Johnson had specifically designed his diet to help him put on weight, and Nathan was a growing boy smack in the middle of puberty, his body stretching and in the perfect condition to start getting a bit of muscles.

Harry was just doing all he could to help the process along.

He blasted his way through the first fifteen, arms beginning to tremble when he hit eighteen. He clenched his teeth and pushed more, stubbornness giving him the extra boost he needed to get to twenty-two.

Harry painstakingly lowered himself into a resting pose, breathing deep and slow.

It was...frustrating. Being confined in such a weak body. Having to work so hard to even get a hint of his former strength back.

The only thing he had other than his mind was his magic – and *that* was both a welcome relief and an unbelievable annoyance.

It was comforting that his magic – his *proper, powerful, familiar* magic – had tagged along with him. But at the same time it was a terrible, terrible thing, because they *knew* about it.

He remembered the look on Johnson's face when he had told Cynthia and Benedict.

"Lord and Lady Ciro, Nathan," Johnson greeted them, mouth twisted in a strained smile. His fingers tapped anxiously on the clipboard he held between it between them like a barrier.

Harry frowned lightly at the defensive stance, eyes roaming over the clearly uncomfortable man. He caught sight of the light perspiration on his forehead, and tilted his head curiously. Just what was so bad about his tests that could cause such an obvious reaction in the typically unflappable healer?

"Healer Johnson," Benedict nodded, one large hand balanced on Harry's shoulder in some effort to support him. Harry wanted to roll his back pointedly to dislodge the man's grip, but thought that might be a step too far. "what can you tell us?"

"Yes," Cynthia injected, "are the potions ready for Nathan?"

Johnson's smiled twitched. "Why yes, the potions will be ready for you this afternoon to pick up."

"Then why have you asked us here so early?"

Again, Johnson's fingers beat against the clipboard, almost frantically. The man licked his lips. "There were some...odd findings in our last tests for Nathan. The results are...well, I believed it would be better to reveal them to you now, rather than later."

Benedict's grip on him tightened, and Harry pursed his lips in annoyance at the hold. "What is it?" He asked, and Johnson's eyes, when they meet his, were a weird mix of fascinated and confused.

“It’s to do with your magic, Nathan.”

Harry tensed, body swaying forward. “What’s wrong with it?”

He had not felt anything odd about his magic. It worked the same as it always had, roiling under his skin, a constant companion, reassuring in its presence.

Harry’s heart pounded. What if there was something wrong with it that he just had not noticed? What if his magic was off? He had never had something actually happen to his magical core before. He knew there were curses that attacked your core, he knew how dangerous those were. But surely he would have felt something by this point?

“There is nothing – specifically wrong with it. It’s just -”

Tired of this avoidance, Harry held out his hand for the board. Johnson started to hand it over immediately, simply reacting, before he caught himself and handed it to Benedict instead. Harry wanted to snarl at the blatant mollicoddling.

His swiftly raising anger dwindled when he saw how tense Benedict had grown. “What does this mean?” The man asked, passing the clipboard to Cynthia. Harry tracked the object, barely repressing the desire to reach out and snap it from their hands.

This was about him. Surely he, out of all of them, deserved to see it?

Cynthia was frowning as she read the findings. She lowered the clipboard, attention fully focussed on Johnson. “This makes no sense.” She declared.

Johnson rubbed his hands anxiously. “We have no idea how this has happened. It’s... unprecedented.”

Harry gently tugged the clipboard out of Cynthia’s grasp and looked over the page, eyes hungry for whatever was causing their reactions.

“But...how can he have more magic?”

Harry glanced up, having just read the note as they spoke.

It was curious. More magic? He felt no different, but he supposed that was because it was his. It made sense, in some weird way, that his magic had somehow come along with him on this dubious trip through time.

Harry, as he was, had quite a well-developed magical core. Even as a child he had been stronger than most of his peers, he just lacked the patience to truly apply himself to it. Fighting in the war, and his training as an auror had definitely helped him improve his control.

He was one of the strongest wizards in Britain – even though he never really tossed that knowledge around.

If all his magic was with him now – which he suspected was true – than he could understand why everyone was so confused and anxious.

A fourteen year old should not have the level of magic Harry did. Hell, even if he had been an average adult wizard, it still would have been too much magic for a fourteen year old.

They probably thought something was very wrong with him, to have registered this high.

Johnson shrugged, helplessly.

Harry carefully schooled his expression into something confused and a little scared when they all turned to look at him. “Am I okay though?” He asked, pushing a slight waver into his voice.

Cynthia and Benedict melted at his act, and Johnson watched him with budding compassion in his eyes. “Yes, we have observed no negative reactions from this...increase in your magic. Tell me, Nathan, have you tried any spells since you woke up? Have you experienced any discomfort or strangeness when trying to cast something?”

Did wandless magic count, he wondered in exasperated amusement. “No, I don’t even have a wand.”

Fourteen year old’s could rarely preform intentional wandless magic. And admitting to having done so would likely just make them even more suspicious of him.

Johnson turned to the Ciro’s, “Perhaps it is best that Nathan begin using his magic again. The sooner he grows accustom to his new level of power, the better for him it will be.”

Harry sighed as he pushed himself to his feet, rubbing at his face. The trip home from that appointment had been uncomfortable. Having to act surprised at his own power was more taxing than he would have thought.

A positive though was the discussion of getting him a new wand. Seeing as Nathan’s original had been stolen during his attack, and the culprits had not been found, Harry had managed to convince the Ciro’s to get a new one.

Which meant sooner or later he would be allowed out of the manor’s grounds and into the world. He could hardly wait.

“Oh. Nathan.”

Harry turned to see Benedict hovering by the sitting room door. He was getting better and better at responding to the name, no matter how uncomfortable it made him feel. He still slipped occasionally, but he was improving his response time.

“Hi.” He said, rotating so he was fully facing the older man. His hands rested on his hips and he watched Benedict watch him. “Is something wrong?”

“No, no. I just, was not expecting you. Here.”

“Did you want me to go?”

“No, in fact, I was wondering if we could talk?”

Harry shrugged, claiming a seat to the right. Benedict sat himself directly across from him, hands clasped and brow furrowed.

“What’s up?” Harry asked, when the silence between them stretched on.

Benedict shot him a strange look, only to shake his head and speak. “Your mother and I were talking, and we were considering heading to Diagon Alley this afternoon to purchase a new wand for you. If you are feeling up to it.” He added slowly, cautiously.

Harry battled with the urge to grin, settling for a nod. “Sounds good. I’ll just go get changed.”

“Of course,” Benedict gave him a smile, though like always there were traces of sorrow clinging to it. “we will leave when you are ready.”

Harry darted out of the room, letting his lips curl upwards as he headed to get some new clothes. He stripped and changed, and in record time was standing in the foyer waiting for the Ciro’s to appear.

Cynthia tutted at him when she saw him, carefully reaching out and smoothing over his hair when he did not flinch at her approach. Harry dealt with the mothering, knowing that he tended to neglect brushing his hair. He was just so used to having a wild mess that brushing was not a big priority.

Unfortunately, he now had to deal with wisps of hair that *needed* maintenance. It was such a hassle.

“Alright,” Cynthia said as she stepped back, apparently satisfied with his appearance. “have you got your coat? It is quite cool today.”

Harry wanted to tell her he had already been running outside earlier, and obviously knew it was cold, but he bit his tongue and grabbed the closest outer cloak; slipping it on with a disgruntled expression.

“Perfect. Benedict, dear, are you ready?”

Harry ducked his head to hide his eye roll, opening the door and escaping the warmth of the house, leaving the couple to trail after him.

OoO

Diagon Alley was dead.

Well. Not dead, but compared to the alley he remembered in his time, this was as lively as a corpse. People shuffled to and from with hurried steps, eye darting and a sombre air encompassing the area.

Harry glanced around, frowning. “Why is it so deserted?” He asked quietly, and the Ciro’s looked down at him in astonishment that quickly morphed to understanding.

“Oh, how foolish of us.” Cynthia muttered, stopping him and placing her hands on his arms. “There is a muggle war going on at the moment, Nathan. A very dangerous, very large-scale war. While our kind are not directly involved, it is hard to escape the atmosphere.”

Harry blinked, and immediately felt like a complete idiot. It was *1942*. Right in the middle of the *Second World War*. God, he was so *stupid*.

Of course Diagon Alley was depressingly sparse. The Blitz would still be fresh in everyone’s minds.

This was right around the time the Wizarding World started cluing in to how deadly muggle weaponry could truly be. The First World War was devastating, but the years between that and this one would have slightly dulled magical peoples’ fear.

Now it was fresh, and suffocating.

Harry rubbed at his forehead, sighing heavily. He knew the war would end in 1945, at least. Dumbledore defeating Grindelwald was a huge step in ending the hostilities.

Two more years of war. Which meant, most likely, the entire time he was trapped here, he would be surrounded by the same horror and tragedy he thought he had finally escaped.

He let himself be hustled along by the Ciro’s, both of whom looked uneasy at being in such an open space.

Harry stepped up into Ollivander’s, instantly being reminded of the first time he had entered the store. Some of the tension in his shoulders loosened when he took in the stacks upon stacks of boxes – all containing wands.

He cast his gaze around for the man himself, suddenly eager to see a familiar face – no matter that he had no idea who Harry was right now.

“Mr. Ollivander?”

Much like the first time, Ollivander seemingly appeared out of nowhere, eyes wide and glassy. Harry bit back a grin at the sight of the odd wizard.

“Ah, Lord and Lady Ciro, and young Nathan. Welcome.” Ollivander’s eyes skimmed over them, lingering on Harry with curiosity. Harry wondered if the man could sense something was different about him. His breath quickened a little at the thought, though whether it was nervousness or excitement, he did not know.

“Mr. Ollivander,” Benedict started, “we are here looking to purchase another wand for Nathan. His previous one was – lost.”

Ollivander stared at the wall behind Benedict, frowning lightly. “Indeed?” Was all he murmured, before his attention was drifting back to Harry. The wandmaker studied him, some of the fog in his eyes receding.

Being under the man’s scrutiny was uncomfortable, but Harry had faced worse. He stared back, never one to hide.

A smile broke across Ollivander’s face, warm and approving. “Very well,” he said, “step forward and we shall begin.”

Harry opened his mouth to just tell him his wand – but the words caught in his throat. He absently allowed the man to start taking whatever measurements he needed.

Would his wand even recognise him? The main reason Ollivander had even given him that wand in the beginning was because of his history with Voldemort. But Voldemort did not exist yet, so there was no way Ollivander would try it unless by accident.

Harry bit the inside of his bottom lip as he thought. Was it worth the suspicion? Cynthia and Benedict were already so cautious around him, could he risk drawing more attention by outright asking for his wand?

No, he decided swiftly. He did not plan to be here too long. Any wand would work for what he had to do, and this way, the chances of him messing too much with the past were limited. Because if his holly wand went with Nathan Ciro in 1942, would it even be there for Harry in 1991?

He could not risk it.

So he stood there and endured the whirlwind experience of trying wand after wand again.

It brought back fond memories, and Harry had to smother a snicker more than once at the alarmed expressions on the Ciro’s faces, and the maniac glee on Ollivander’s as another wand was torn from his hand.

Finally, a dark, polished wand was slapped into his palm. Harry curled his fingers around it, closing his eyes at the rush of warmth that spread through him. It was not quite the same as his first wand, but the connection was still lovely.

Ollivander made an intrigued noise, drawing Harry’s focus back to him. “How curious.”

The words filled him with foreboding. Harry looked down at the wand suspiciously, silently wondering if his was the brother wand of Grindelwald, since that seemed to be a trend of his.

“What’s curious?” He asked anyway, because he was like a dog with a bone.

Ollivander smiled at him, though it was subdued and more *knowing*. Harry stopped breathing.

“This wand is made of ebony, with a dragon heartstring. Thirteen and a half inches, unyielding.” The wandmaker reclaimed the chosen wand and slipped it into its box. “So at odds with your original wand, Mr. Ciro.” His gaze seemed more piercing suddenly. “It would appear you have changed quite a bit from our last meeting.”

Harry quietly accepted the box as it was handed to him, studying Ollivander quizzically. Questions danced along the tip of his tongue, to ask if he knew that Harry did not belong in this body, in this time. If he knew what was happening to him.

But Benedict was already handing over the money, and Cynthia had guided him outside.

“Merlin, that man is unnerving.” Benedict muttered, an arm coming up to wrap around Cynthia and tug her into his side. “Come along, we should return home now, and Nathan, you should try a few spells once we get there.”

Harry nodded, fingers tracing the box with interest. He tried to dredge up what little he knew of wandlore.

He knew dragon heartstring was typically the most powerful core, and he was pretty sure ebony wood had something to do with combative magic.

He opened the box and stared down at the polished wand, intrigued to see just what it could do. He was a damn good duellist, and excelled at combative magic. With the backing of a dragon heartstring core, it was sure to be interesting.

He tucked it securely in his pocket and accepted Cynthia’s arm so she could apparate them back to the manor.

Later that afternoon, after Harry had proven to both of them that he had control over his magic, Harry approached Benedict’s office. He had never been in it before, and knocked carefully. When he heard the man’s call he opened the door and entered.

“Hey.” Harry shifted his feet as he waited for Benedict to look at him. The man signed one last document before giving him his full attention.

“What is it son?” The man asked kindly, gesturing for Harry to take a seat. His office was quite splendid, and Harry took a moment to simply soak in the richness of the space.

“I was just wondering if I could run something by you. It’s kind of been on my mind for a while.”

Benedict nodded encouragingly, and Harry knew this was probably the first time he had actively sought the man out for something.

He bit his lip, debating whether to just jump in and ask, or work his way up to it.

Oh screw it, he thought, I've never had any tact anyway.

"I want to go back to Hogwarts." He announced plainly. As soon as he asked, Benedict's face contorted and he leaned back into his plush chair. "Before you tell me 'no', let me explain." He carried on before the other could so much as open his mouth.

"I've been thinking, since I was eleven, I would have spent a majority of my time at Hogwarts. Months and months of my life have past *there*. It's probably the place I'm most comfortable at. Other than here." He added a moment later when he realised how that might have sounded.

"Hogwarts is like a home away from home, and I've been here for a while now and I've remembered *nothing*." He ducked his head, peeking up at the larger man from under his fringe. "I just figured that if there was anywhere else that might be as likely to jog my memories, it would be Hogwarts, right?"

Benedict was frowning, but he had not rejected the idea, which Harry counted as a win.

"You believe going back to Hogwarts could help you recover your memories?"

Harry shrugged, expertly hiding just how desperate he was for Benedict to agree with him. "I think it's a pretty good option."

Benedict stroked his chin thoughtfully, and Harry waited impatiently for him to say something.

"What about the workload, your schoolwork? You have missed a good amount of classes. You will be months behind your classmates. And the stress could be too much for you."

Harry allowed a brief scowl to cross his face, before smoothing it over. "I'm sure there are ways to catch me up. I'm a fast learner." He assured him, because he really was, when properly motivated. "And just because I don't have any – significant memories, doesn't mean I don't know how to do homework."

He was wavering, Harry could see it. "I just thought that going to school, being around people who are my... friends," he said hesitantly, because he was already sure Nathan had *no* friends, "and doing something as repetitive as assignments might trigger a memory or something."

Benedict sighed and looked off to the side, conflicted.

Harry clenched his fists, and went in for the kill.

"Dad, please."

The shock and bubbling joy on Benedict's face was gut-wrenching. Harry felt the world's biggest arsehole for using such a glaring weakness against the grieving man. He was definitely going to hell when his time came.

Benedict quickly covered his reaction, though his face had softened and his eyes were glowing with warmth. It was the first time Harry had ever addressed him as such. "Very well, Nathan. I will speak with Cynthia about getting you back into Hogwarts. If you truly believe it might help you, then I trust you."

Harry smiled at the man, grateful beyond belief. "Thank you." He stressed, pushing himself to his feet and moving to the door. "I really appreciate it, thank you." He repeated.

He slipped out of the office and promptly collapsed on the door with an explosive sigh.

Finally! He thought with relish. He could return to Hogwarts and start figuring his way out of this mess.

With a spring in his step he headed back to his room to pack. He had no idea how long it would take Benedict to tell Cynthia, and then organise everything, but God he could not wait to go home.

OoO

Harry fiddled with the silver and green tie, finger wrapping around and around it, the smooth material gliding over his skin easily.

“Are you absolutely sure?” Cynthia asked for the hundredth time. Harry nodded without glancing at her, mind too occupied with plans and ideas to get into the library at the first opportunity.

“Nathan, you know you do not have to do this. You can wait another year, until you are ready.”

“I’m fine.” He told her neutrally, eyes sliding over to where Benedict stood speaking lowly with Armando Dippet, the current Headmaster of Hogwarts, and Professor Slughorn. It had been a shock to see the Potions’ professor again, though why he had no clue.

Maybe because he seemed so bloody young. There was none of the guilt and fear clinging to Slughorn right now. He was bright-eyed and eager, with a jovial sort of air about him despite the serious conversation occurring between them.

Harry ran his hand through his hair, attempting not to glower when Cynthia immediately set about fixing it. He wanted to bat her hands away, and a part of him was so very glad he was going to be able to get away from her in a matter of minutes.

It was a horrible thought, but she was an overwhelming force of affection and Harry had never been particularly good at accepting people touching him unless he was utterly comfortable with them.

He kicked his legs back and forth, chewing on the tip of his thumb as he watched the three men talk and talk.

Cynthia gently tugged his hand away from his mouth, scolding him with a look.

God woman, just stop.

“Nathan, Cynthia.”

Harry’s neck snapped up to see the three of them staring at him. Benedict waved them over, and Harry detangled himself from Cynthia and hurried to them.

“Mr. Ciro, it’s good to see you.” Dippet said in a voice that suggested he had no idea who Nathan had been before any of this happened. It was distant and polite. Nothing at all like Dumbledore’s warmth.

“Thank you, sir.” He said respectfully, though he really had no knowledge of how good a headmaster this man had been. “It’s good to be back.”

Dippet smiled blandly at him, and Slughorn breezed forward to shake Harry's hand much more enthusiastically. "Welcome back Nathan, welcome back. I dare say, Slytherin hasn't been the same in your absence."

Harry raised an eyebrow, wondering if Nathan had even been interesting enough to register on Slughorn's radar. He somehow doubted it. From what he had already gathered, Nathan was just slightly above average in his schoolwork.

Slughorn preferred *gems*.

"I'm sure." He said, tugging his hand free from the sweaty grip and looking up at Nathan's parents.

Benedict clapped him on the shoulder, and Cynthia – with tears in her eyes – hugged him tight enough to leave bruises.

Harry tolerated the hug for its entirety to make up for his short attitude with the woman the past few days.

Her soft hands rested on his neck, half-cupping his jawline. "If it ever grows too much, or if anything happens and you want to come home, all you have to do is ask, sweetheart."

"I know, thank you." Harry patted her wrists comfortingly.

It took Benedict and Dippet both to pry the woman from him and out of the room. Harry huffed in relief the moment the door closed, turning to Slughorn for instruction. While he knew the location of the Slytherin common room, he did not know the password.

His new head of house beamed down at him, hand in between his shoulder blades as he began guiding him from the office.

"Now Nathan, I know it's been quite a trying time for you, but I want you to know that we are going to do all we can to bring you back to your previous level. It'll be like you never left!" He chuckled heartily, moustache jiggling with his lip.

"Everyone was so worried when we heard about your accident. Slytherin is many things, and a family is one of them. We have to stick together, you know?"

Harry hummed and hawed at appropriate times as Slughorn rambled on, having learnt from his time as the man's crowning jewel on how to handle him.

He was more interested in the looks he was receiving from the passing students. Many gazed on with shock, eyes wide and disbelieving.

Others stared at him blankly, like he was the most insignificant speck they had ever seen.

Most, though, were glaring.

Harry met each and every gaze with curiosity, wondering just what Nathan had done to warrant such intense reactions. It reminded him starkly of his own fourth year.

The irony was not lost on him.

Slughorn lead him directly to the dungeons, and stopped him in front of the section of the stone wall that lead into the common room. "Each week our house will change the password, so make sure to stay on top of that. If you miss it, or forget, just ask someone else and they will let you in. Here, you try."

The professor handed him a slip of paper.

"Moonseed." He intoned blankly, watching as the stone wall cracked open and revealed the Slytherin common room.

Every eye in the room moved to them, and Harry very much felt the urge to shiver at how hungry they all looked.

Oh, this is going to be a blast. He thought as Slughorn ushered him inside.

The silence was hostile.

Harry hardly listened as Slughorn gave his short speech, telling them about his current condition, asking for support and guidance from the other students in helping him find his feet.

"Of course, Professor Slughorn." A student said, stepping forward with a kind smile. He was older than him, probably a sixth or seventh year. He had the same glint in his eyes that Dudley used to have, and Harry wanted to groan.

"We will take good care of him."

"Excellent!" Slughorn clapped him on the back, and Harry grunted at the force of it as he stumbled. He scowled at the ground, jaw clenched when he caught a few sniggers from the observers. "Hear that, Mr. Ciro. If you have any trouble, just come to Mr. Carrow here. He'll watch out for you."

Carrow? Fuck me.

"Sure." He said, scanning Carrow intently. It was easy to categorise him.

In fact, Harry was going to go out on a limb here and just denote everyone to *enemy*.

He watched quietly as Slughorn nodded, confident in his decision, and then waddled out of the common room. The door closed, and instantly the air felt several degrees colder.

An arm slithered around his shoulders, and he was harshly dragged into someone's side, pinned in a vice like grip. Carrow smiled down at him with too many teeth.

"Welcome back, *Nat*. So glad you returned." Another boy boxed him in on his other side.

Harry dropped his head and closed his eyes for a second, reining in the buzzing in his chest. It was the exact same rush he always got before a fight.

He clenched his fists, and took a deep breath before returning his gaze to the two boys. He cocked his head slightly.

Bring it on, kids.

Chapter Five

Chapter Notes

Hey guys, sorry for the wait! Loved hearing your response to the last chapter, and hope this one doesn't disappoint.

Just letting you know I'm getting into assessment time right now, so it might be a bit before my next update. I honestly don't really know. I might get time, I might not - really sorry guys! But I figured I'd get you one last chapter before I really knuckle down.

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

Harry took all of two seconds to contemplate how to handle this.

He supposed he *could* just play along with this. Act like the meek little boy he knew Nathan was while he went about his business. The first couple of weeks would be difficult as he got used to it, but he had been on undercover missions before.

He knew how to lie to someone's face, he knew how to slip into a role and become someone else.

It would certainly make things easier. Once all the hype and interest surrounding his return had died down – provided he bent his neck to these people, gave them what they wanted – then they were less likely to pay close attention to him as time moved forward.

He almost snorted.

Yeah, that's not gonna work.

Harry knew he would be able to pull it off, knew he could play the part for however long he needed to. Unfortunately, he also wanted to avoid putting himself under any unnecessary pressure while he was stuck here.

Having to check his every move, every word, carefully monitor every bloody reaction would just agitate him until he snapped in a *spectacular* fashion.

It was better to just draw the line in the sand here and now. To make it abundantly clear he was not to be crossed.

Decision made, Harry stared up at the now-three older students towering over him, eyes narrowing. He *really* did not want to resort to violence. These kids might be vindictive, cruel little bastards, but they were still children; and Harry had little desire to start tossing them about until their egos were sufficiently beaten into submission.

That being said, he *would* retaliate – with force if need be – to whatever they tried. He had never been one to take an attack lying down, and bullies just made his skin prickle.

“Thanks, it’s good to be back.” He finally replied to Carrow’s words. Harry slowly rolled his shoulders, testing how tight the grip on him was. He focussed on the fingers, on how they dug into his upper arm, and was pleased to find it was nothing he could not get out of.

Satisfied, he returned his full attention to his would-be bullies, content to wait and watch for their next move.

“Oh, isn’t he cute?” Carrow cooed, vicious in his glee.

“The cutest.” One of the others agreed.

“It just has not been the same without you, *Nat*. ” The third said, sounding welcoming much in the way a Venus Flytrap was.

“Yes,” Carrow said, “it must be so confusing for you, not remembering anything.” He pulled Harry closer, a barely-there sneer gracing his face. “But we will get you settled in just right.”

Harry refrained from raising an eyebrow at this rather sad attempt at intimidation. Oh – he suspected it might unnerve an average fourth year, to be cornered and taunted by older students.

However, he had endured a hell of a lot worse than childish insults during his life. This was almost boring for him.

“You’re too kind.” Harry told them sweetly, glancing away to try and mask the amusement on his face. “But I think I’ll get on just fine without you, thanks.”

There was a lull, then Carrow laughed, loud and angry. “Fun thing, Nattie. That was not a suggestion.”

Just like that, he shoved him.

Harry stumbled at the force, having not expected this to escalate so quickly. He had hardly even said anything.

His hip connected painfully with the back of one of the lounges, and his hands had to come up to brace himself on the soft leather. He scowled, his annoyance swiftly rolling into anger.

There were a number of students occupying the set of chairs he was facing – most in the older years – but only a small handful were actually watching the altercation happening right in front of them. There was an air of normalcy around them, as if this were just any other day.

And Harry suddenly *hated* them.

What kind of person just stood by and let this sort of stuff happen?

Cowards, he thought feral, *bloody cowards, the lot of them. Not willing to take a stand.*

His fingers curled into the fine black leather, causing the faintest of creaks. He took a breath to regain his composure, before turning back to face his aggravators. He clenched his fists.

“See, this is how things work in Slytherin, Nattie. There is an *order* here, a hierarchy, if you will.” Carrow stepped towards him, and Harry felt his anger wash away into the icy calm he was so used to falling back on. Hearing them twist Nathan's name like that, hearing the *tone* they used did nothing but push him further.

“My friends and I are at the top.” Carrow explained as he prowled closer. “And you, *you*, Nattie, are all the way down the bottom. Do you know what that means?”

Please do tell me more, he thought as he calculated the distance between them.

“It means that we can do whatever we want to you, and you can only stand there and take it.”

They were almost chest-to-chest now, and Harry was forced to tilt his head back to meet the other's gaze. He could feel the weight of eyes on them.

“So, if I want to show you around, I can. If I want you scared and miserable and crying, I can. If I want you in pain, then guess what kid – I *can*.”

Everyone was watching now, but no one bothered to speak up. They clearly wanted a show.

Harry was more than willing to provide one.

He stayed silent, watching Carrow patiently as the boy moved to grab him, waiting as that hand drew closer. He refused to make the first move, but he was more than willing to end whatever they started.

It was only fair to warn him though.

“Don't touch me.” He said firmly, quietly.

Carrow ignored him, and Harry bit back a savage smile.

Those harsh fingers barely skimmed his shirt before Harry slapped it off to the side and away from his chest. Within the next breath, his open palm slammed solidly into Carrow's nose, driving up with all the force his skinny body could muster.

The obscene *crack* that sounded through the common room was accompanied by a chorus of sharp gasps, and it was like music to his ears. Carrow tumbled to the ground with a short spray of blood and a choked cry.

The nose was such a weak point in the body, and took only a small amount of force to break. The amount of power he had put behind that hit would have shattered more than one thing.

Carrow howled, hands cupping his bleeding face and muffling the noise. His eyes were squeezed shut against the pain.

Already, Harry could see the bruises forming. *Good*, a part of him purred in delight.

“Oops.” He offered in the wake of his attack, entirely unrepentant.

“You little *prick*.” The second boy came for him, and Harry easily side-stepped. He grabbed fistfuls of the back of his shirt and gave him a helping hand up and over the lounge behind him.

The students sitting there scattered like mice as the boy went careening through.

Harry ducked neatly, having already sensed the curse closing in from the third and final attacker.

He dodged the next one as well and sprung towards him, stopping just before him and grabbing his outstretched wrist. Harry spun into the other’s chest, keeping a firm grip as he did, so his back was to his chest. Harry threw his elbow back while twisting the boy’s wrist, winding him and forcing him to drop his wand.

He pushed him away, making the student stumble and almost trip as he tried to regain his feet.

Harry glanced around, daring someone to make a move.

No one so much as twitched.

He scanned the room one last time, something in his chest humming in approval at the stupefied expressions that were being levelled his way.

Maybe now they’ll leave me alone.

He turned his attention back to Carrow, who was still shaking on the floor. “You should probably heal that,” he told him calmly, gesturing vaguely towards his nose. “and next time, when I tell you *don’t touch me*, maybe you should listen.”

He stepped over the downed boy and headed out of the common area, not bothering to look back, and leaving a devastating silence behind.

He scaled the steps and slipped into the hall leading to the bedrooms.

Harry spotted the small sign with *Boys* written elegantly on the staircase to the left. He climbed to the fourth floor and sighed, rubbing at his hair.

He paused when he came to the long, dark hallway, the stone walls only broken by the oak doors running along them.

Harry had only been in the Slytherin common room once or twice since he had graduated – occasionally ducking to give a Defence lecture, or help particular students who were more troubled than the peers.

He had never strayed beyond the sitting area before, and was honestly surprised at how different it was from Gryffindor.

“They get individual rooms?” He muttered in disbelief, marvelling at how utterly *unfair* that was. “Bloody Slytherins.” He said with a shake of his head.

At least an individual room meant privacy, and with that, Harry could not refrain from grinning.

Once he threw up a couple of specific wards around his room, and enhanced the ones already there, it would be one of the most secure places he could do his research in. Harry was under no illusions. Up until now, he had planned to basically become a permanent fixture in the library to figure this out.

It was nice to know he now had a new option to use. Variety was the spice of life, after all.

He headed for the first door on the right, seeing Nathan’s name carved beautifully on the silver plaque. Harry took a moment to trace his fingers over the letters, allowing himself to feel yet another sting of sorrow for the boy he was pretending to be.

Being an outcast was not an easy thing – Harry knew this intimately, having always been *separate* no matter what he did. Too freaky for his relatives. The Boy Who Lived. The Chosen One. The Wizard Who Won. Always, *always* different – and being an outcast in Slytherin would be its own special brand of torture.

Hopefully, with his little display, he would be left relatively alone.

“That was amazing!”

“Fucking hell!” Harry jerked around, body falling into a standard defensive form. The curse fell from his lips without thought, and he winced at his volume.

A dark haired boy stared up at him, grey eyes wide and bright. The smile on his face was so sweet that Harry was immediately suspicious. No one was that innocent – especially not in Slytherin.

The boy looked horribly familiar though, even with his features softened with youth. Harry wondered wildly if he had encountered this one in his own time, when he was older and more worn.

Neither of them spoke after Harry’s outburst, and the silence was strained with something that sent warning bells blaring in the back of his mind.

Despite his instincts, Harry slowly eased out of his stance. He squinted down at the boy, trying to place his face, taking away the lingering traces of fat and adding age lines.

The kid continued to stare up at him happily.

“Can I help you?” He eventually bit out, tense in his uncertainty.

The boy’s smile widened, if that were even possible. His eyes crinkled in mirth. “What you did to Carrow, that was splendid.” He gushed, stepping closer. Harry’s shoulders pulled tighter together, and his lips thinned.

“He is such a twat, but because of his age, no one bothers to challenge him. But that – back there? Stunning. Absolutely fantastic.”

Harry leaned away from those too-shrewd eyes. “Yeah, thanks.”

“Completely moronic, of course. I mean, honestly.” The boy rolled his eyes, the tinge of playfulness in his voice curling over his words. “Now they are just going to go after you *more*.”

Harry used two fingers to push on the boy’s shoulder and gently move him back away, having grown uncomfortable with the lack of distance between them. A flicker of surprise flew through those grey eyes before being masked by the childish innocence.

“If they try something,” Harry told him plainly, “then they’ll get more than a broken nose and a couple of bruises.”

Approval lingered at the corners of the boy’s lips, and he suddenly seemed much older than he was. “I’m sure.” He murmured, eyes roaming intently over Harry’s face, searching for something.

“Look,” Harry started, “could you just, go away?” He waved his hand back towards the stairs.

“No.”

Harry clenched his teeth, “Kid, seriously. *Piss off*.”

The boy continued to stare at his forehead, and Harry was so used to that that he did not even think to question it. That is, until the boy’s hand whipped out like a snake and his fingers brushed against the smooth, unblemished skin there.

Harry snapped his head back, though his rage spluttered out when he saw the boy run his tongue over the tips of his fingers, taking away the smudges of blood there and leaving a layer of saliva.

“What the hell?” Harry hissed, reaching up and rubbing at his skin. His fingers came away with only the faintest red taint.

“You made Carrow bleed.” Was all the kid said, inspecting his now-clean fingers with interest.

Harry stared at the boy with a mix of shock and disgust. What kind of psychopath went around *licking up other people’s blood*?

“I’m Orion Black, by the way. I figured I should introduce myself, since we are going to be such good friends. And, you know, since you do not remember anything.”

Orion. Black.

Fuck.

This was Sirius' father. *That* was why he looked so familiar. It was all there, in the slope of his lips and the shape of his eyes, in his colouring and the wave of his hair. Even the glint in those grey depths was similar, though it was less playful than Sirius' had been and more taunting.

Harry stepped back suddenly, hitting the door with a dull *thump*. Orion watched him curiously, face too open to be anything but a trap.

"Are you alright? You look nervous."

I wonder why, Harry thought wildly, refraining from tearing at his hair in panic. He had never wanted to deal with any of this shit.

"-ro? Ciro?"

Orion had been calling his name repeatedly, hardly pausing for air.

"What?" Harry snapped, glaring at the smaller boy fiercely.

"It's rude to ignore your friends." Orion told him in a sing-song voice, so innocent and *oh-so-mocking*. His mouth stretched into that sweet smile again.

Harry had never encountered such a disturbing child before.

Black Family Madness, a voice whispered in the back of his mind.

He had seen it consume Bellatrix. He had seen Sirius struggle with it for years. Even Draco – after the war, drunk and tired, shoulder to shoulder with Harry one night – had spoken of his fear of being taken by the *curse*.

He could see it in Orion right now; in the slightly unhinged edge to his whole form, the energy bubbling in him.

"Orion."

The boy's head tilted in the direction of the voice, his eyes never straying from Harry's. "Yes, Gus?"

In his peripheral Harry could see another boy approaching, taller than both of them. "What are you doing?"

"Making a new friend." He replied easily, blinking and turning to 'Gus'. Harry took the chance to glance at the newcomer as well.

He was handsome in the same way most purebloods were, and carried himself with a subtle confidence. He was clearly on the precipice of manhood, body already shedding his childish looks.

Those dark eyes briefly flickered to Harry, giving him a cursory glance and nothing more, before returning to Orion.

“I see.” Again, his eyes darted to Harry and back. “Ciro’s clearly busy. And you have an assignment due tomorrow I believe. Have you finished it?”

“Oh, Gus.” Orion whined, leaning heavily against Harry and completely ignoring the way he turned to stone at the touch. “You suck the fun out of everything. I want to talk to Ciro.”

Harry stared down at the neat head of hair pressed against his chest, discontent. The change between Orion’s moods was swift and dangerous.

But at the same time he felt nothing but pity for the boy. He was so bloody young, and already he was being affected by his family’s affliction. It was – it was honestly *sad*. Because all he could see in front of him was Sirius.

Despite Harry’s desire to keep to himself, he knew, logically, that that would not be possible. He had already made such a big splash in Slytherin, and he had not even been here an hour. Going at this without even some tentative bonds would just put him in more trouble with the other students.

It would be a great help if he were ‘friends’ with at least one influential person. He knew Orion was influential. Young as he was, the boy was a Black, and the Black family was notorious in all circles. In Slytherin, he would be like royalty.

Sticking close to Orion might give him a slight advantage, might deter the less zealous students from coming at him with pitch forks.

And if his sort-of friendship just so happened to give Harry a chance to maybe help a young boy, well. He was not about to complain.

Harry cleared his throat softly and reached out to once again push Orion away from him. He kept a hand on the boy’s shoulders though, and gave a small smile when the other looked up at him questioningly.

“I’m sorry, Orion. I was being horribly rude to you.” He apologised, even as a part of his mind was still reeling from the fact that he was *speaking to Sirius’ father*. “You’re right, everything’s just so weird without my memories. I would be honoured to be friends with you.”

Orion’s eyes lit up in joy, and his smile was entirely genuine this time. “Really? Hear that, Gus?” Orion spun back to his friend, beaming. “Ciro and I are friends now.” He declared it with no small amount of smugness.

‘Gus’ nodded at the boy, though the moment Orion had turned back to his new friend, a vicious glare was shot at Harry. There was a warning in his gaze, one that Harry would be careful to heed.

He had no interest in rocking the boat more than he needed to.

“Well, this has been fun,” Harry said, patting Orion on the shoulder. “but I think I’d like to get in my room now. Got a lot to do.”

Orion hummed in agreement, and stepped back to give Harry space to open his door.

“We can have dinner together tonight,” Orion told him brightly. “Just wait for me in the common room and I will meet you there.”

Urgh, eating at the Slytherin table. God help me.

Still, he gave a smile. “Sounds great. See you then.”

Harry shut the door.

OoO

“He talks funny.” Orion proclaimed the moment he heard the door locked. His head was cocked to the side, intrigued, and he wandered back over to Augustus.

“I am more surprised that he talks at all. Ciro could hardly string two words together before.” Augustus said, obediently allowing Orion to grab his hand and tug him back down the stairs.

Orion laughed quietly, “Did you *see* how he beat down Carrow? Sure, it was terribly muggle of him, but one can appreciate the sentiment. The statement he just made takes a lot of guts.”

Augustus grunted, “I am more interested in finding out where he learned those moves from. Ciro – he couldn’t do that before.”

The smaller boy knew that was true. While the moves Ciro had used were not particularly astonishing or skilled, it was the *way* he moved that was fascinating. There was a confidence to Ciro now. He carried himself with a self-assurance he had lacked for years. He had so smoothly transitioned between Carrow and his two fumbling accomplices, subdued them with so little effort.

It made Orion’s heart quicken in excitement.

He thought back to the speckles of blood that had littered Ciro’s pale forehead. The *anger* in those eyes when he had tried to corner him.

His mouth twitched.

"He called me Orion." He told Augustus, tipping his head back to watch the other. His friend's face twisted, and Orion laughed.

They re-entered the common room, blatantly ignoring Carrow’s snarling and the whisperings of the other students.

Nathan Ciro had certainly made an impression.

Orion lead Augustus over to their spot. His shoulders tensed when he saw who had finally joined them.

“Riddle.” Augustus greeted for both of them, masking his discomfort.

Riddle glanced up at them, dark brown eyes assessing them blankly. “Lestranger. Black.”

They sat down on the unoccupied lounge to Riddle’s right. Orion glanced over at Thelonious Nott. The slim, pale boy was slumped in his own chair, eyes fixed blindly on the ceiling. Next to him, Linus Avery sat, back ramrod straight.

“When did you get back?” Orion asked, head swivelling to Riddle. He kicked his legs back and forth.

In Riddle’s lap sat the genealogy book he had precured for him. Riddle had never said why he wanted it, and Orion had not asked, but the other boy had been quietly devouring the pages for a good week.

“About two minutes ago. I couldn’t help but notice Carrow’s face had been rearranged.” There was a flicker of amusement in his voice. Orion knew Riddle had no love for Carrow, having been a victim of the older student’s ire for most of his first two years.

Orion’s legs froze mid-swing, a large grin overtaking his face. “Oh, you missed all the excitement!” He whispered, leaning over Augustus to get closer to Riddle. The other boy indulged him, curving his head towards him.

“Ciro’s back.” Orion said gleefully.

“I thought he was amnesic. Why would he be at school?” There was a hint of suspicion in those brown eyes, and Orion knew Riddle was already connecting the dots.

Orion smothered a giggle. “I don’t know why he is back. But memory or not, it didn’t stop him from breaking Carrow’s nose. You should have seen it, Riddle. One hit. That is all it took.”

Interest bloomed on his face, and Riddle canted his body more towards him. “Ciro hit him?”

“And sent Malcolm over a lounge, and probably sprained Kilan’s wrist when he went to curse him.” Nott piqued up airily, still staring at the ceiling.

There was a pause, and Riddle’s eyebrows ticked upwards. “And where is he now?”

“Hiding in his room.” Augustus said, disapproval emitting from his every pore.

Orion rolled his eyes, “Gus is mad at me because Ciro and I are friends now.”

“Friends?” Riddle asked, lips forming the word like it was from another language, tasting how it fell from his tongue.

Orion hummed. “I want to pull him apart.” He said happily. “He is so much more interesting now.” He wriggled around so his head was pillowed in Augustus’ lap. “Don’t you think, Gus?” He tugged on his sleeve. “We can have some fun now.”

Augustus smoothed a hand over his forehead, “School work first. Then you can play as much as you want.”

Orion pouted up at him. “You are such a stick in the mud.” Nevertheless, he brightened moments later. “By the way, I invited him to sit with us for dinner.”

His announcement was met with varying looks of annoyance from the others.

“What?” He asked.

“Are you serious?” Avery sneered. “I will be the first to admit he was surprisingly competent with Carrow’s lot. But he is still *Ciro*. You do remember who he is, yes?”

“I want him to sit with us.” Orion said, the slightest amount of steel entering his tone. He was satisfied to see the barest of grimaces pass over Avery’s face. “Riddle?”

Orion made no effort to turn to look at the other as he addressed him. There was a tumultuous balance in their group right now, and while Orion was at the top because of *blood*, Riddle was right there next to him in terms of powers.

The next two years would be crucial in determining who won, but honestly, Orion did not particularly care.

“Who am I to get in the way of your games?” Riddle said after a moment, and any tension evaporated from Orion’s body.

With the two of them in agreement, there was nothing the others could do to stop him.

“Great!” He chirped. “I can’t wait.”

OoO

Harry groaned tiredly as he stepped out of his room, clicking the door closed absently. He was exhausted, having spent a solid hour and a half reinforcing his room with every ward he could think of that would not set Hogwarts' alarms off.

As well as that, he had also had to unpack his – *Nathan's* – suitcase while trying not to feel like a creep for handling all of his personal belongings.

And now he had to deal with dinner and all the sneaky politics he knew Slytherin operated on.

With a sigh, he made for the stairs, fingers pinching the bridge of his nose as he battled with a fledgling headache. He might have overdone it with his magic.

Harry reached the first landing and as he rounded the corner, he smacked into someone.

They went down with a grunt, and Harry's mouth fell open without prompt.

"Fuck. Shit. Sorry," he pushed himself up. "wasn't watching where I was going. Fuck." He rubbed the back of his head where he knew a bump would likely form.

He reached out and picked up the thick book the other must have dropped, briefly skimming the title and scrunching his nose up at the thought of genealogy.

"Here you go." He held it out, finally looking up.

He choked.

Tom Riddle snatched the book out of his hand, jaw clenched in agitation, not even bothering to hide it.

"What the *fuck*?" Harry gasped, eyes widening.

Riddle – *baby Voldemort* his mind spluttered – frowned at him, eyes probing. "You kiss your mother with that mouth, *Ciro*?"

And God that voice was exactly the same as he remembered. It had been years since he had trudged through the memories about young Voldemort, but Harry could never quite wash the lingering presence off of his mind.

Harry stared at his parents' murderer.

He was so *small*.

Not as small as eleven-year old Riddle had been, but he was not the handsome prefect either. Caught somewhere between the two stages.

It was surreal.

When he failed to reply, Riddle pushed himself to his feet, glaring down at Harry. “Get up, you idiot.” He demanded.

Harry’s fists clenched at the order, hackles bristling because yeah – this might not be the mass-murdering Dark Lord, but he was sure Riddle was well on his way to taking the title.

“Fuck you, Riddle.” He spat, springing to his feet, and before he did something stupid – like punch him, or slam him against the wall – Harry raced down the remaining stairs like the devil himself was on his heels.

Chapter End Notes

So, Harry's bruised some faces and some egos, Orion is weirdly endearing to me in his own psychotic little way and is really interested in Harry, and yay - Riddle and Harry have made contact!

Next chapter will definitely have the dinner with Slytherin, and I'm hoping to get Harry submerged in Slytherin dynamics and politics and alliances soonish.

Lemme know what you thought guys~

Chapter Six

Chapter Notes

Hey guys - so so so sorry about the long wait! RL has been kicking me for a while and I had a lot of trouble getting this chapter out of my head and actually down on a document. But it's finally here so yay?

Thanks for all the beautiful comments and kudos, and I hope you all enjoy!

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

Harry's hand beat rapidly against his thigh in time with his steps as he made his way to the Great Hall.

He was only partially aware of Orion hovering somewhere to his right, chattering amiably, and the other boy – Gus – following half a step behind him.

He made the occasional soft noise whenever Orion looked like he was talking to him, to at least give the impression that he was interested in what he was saying. In reality, his mind was miles away, stuck in the past - *his* past.

There was no way they did not notice his lack of attention, but neither of the boys seemed too upset over the fact.

Harry went to adjust his glasses, only for his fingers to skim over his bare flesh instead. He huffed in irritation. Habits like that were ridiculously hard to get rid of, he supposed, and after spending almost two decades wearing the things the tick was not going anywhere anytime soon.

He felt naked without the familiar weight on his face.

Harry pinched the bridge of his nose instead to cover his mistake, and even that felt wrong – his nose much too thin.

His hand dropped and he scowled unhappily, his thoughts unwillingly trailing back to the problem plaguing him.

He wanted to be angry.

No. He wanted to be *furious*.

But no matter how his mind churned and his stomach clenched, he could not summon the familiar rage he had come to accept over the years.

It was disquieting.

Harry had never had a problem reacting to his emotions before. Anger, especially, was difficult for him to control on the best of days. He did not like to think he that was a violent person per say, but even he knew what his faults were.

His temper tended to get him into more trouble than anything. He was so used to it being right there for him to fall back on, right underneath his skin.

Having Tom *fucking* Riddle shoved in his face like that should have had him reaching for his wand or frothing at the mouth.

And yet the only thing he could muster was a sense of vague annoyance.

Because of course, *of course* he landed in 1942, smack in the middle of Riddle's student years. Only Harry could somehow pull off something this ludicrous and unfair without even meaning to.

He could barely get past his shock to even find the energy to be mad. He was more annoyed that he had not even realised the significance of the year.

Harry paused on the threshold of the Great Hall, eyes distant as he thought to himself.

Being around Riddle was definitely going to complicate things. Harry had no doubt as to his abilities to avoid and – if necessary – handle the boy. If he were younger, less sure of himself, maybe then Harry would hold some reservations about dealing with him.

But honestly, Harry was so far above in terms of knowledge and skill right now that he could easily wipe the floor with a fourteen-year old wizard, no matter how prodigious they were.

So no, he was not so much *nervous* about Riddle as he was cautious.

There was one thing he was absolutely sure about though. Riddle could not, under any circumstances, find out who he really was. There was so much he could do if he knew even half the information Harry had bumbling around in his head.

He might not have been the best history student, but he knew enough about this period to get by. Enough information to ruin everything. But it was more than even that. Harry had been, directly and indirectly in equal measures, involved in a number of crucial events in their future.

The last thing a budding Dark Lord needed was knowledge of the coming decades.

God, Harry thought with a sudden chill, *if he ever found out about Halloween, who's to say what he might do?*

Riddle could try so many things to avoid that fate. He could ignore the prophecy altogether. He could knock Lily out instead of killing her, thus removing the protection over Harry. He could just blow the Potter's house to kingdom come instead of personally killing them.

Stop it. He told his brain, before it spiralled out of control. *He's not going to find out. There's nothing to worry about.*

So, for the sake of preserving the timeline and protecting his own sanity, interacting with Riddle more than completely necessary – because he just knew the other would be coming for him, thanks to their less-than-stellar meeting – was a big no.

Which was fine with him. Harry had no idea how he would even react to the boy if he lost his temper around him.

Although...no Tom Riddle, no Voldemort, no war... He shook his head, reminding himself sharply that getting rid of Riddle would likely do more harm than good.

There might be a *possibility* that killing Riddle stopped it all. His parents, his friends, everyone who had ever died or suffered because of the man could be saved.

But there was also the possibility that he completely destroyed everything. That someone worse than Voldemort could rise in his place. He was sure that if Riddle never came into power, someone would have. Power and greed would always be there to corrupt some unfortunate soul.

And what right did *Harry* have to gamble with the lives of thousands – potentially *millions* – of people? He was not a god, and he was not selfish enough to take the chance of things being better based on a *gamble*.

It was better for everyone that he limit the changes he made as much as possible.

The temptation to eliminate Riddle would just have to be kept in check for however long he was here.

“Ciro!”

The hand reaching for him startled him loose from his thoughts, and Harry snapped his own around the thin, pale wrist to stop it before it touched him.

He blinked quickly, and saw Orion frowning at him. It had been him who had hissed at him, then.

“Shit,” he said, dropping the arm like it burned him. “sorry Orion. Are you okay?” He grasped the wrist again, gentler this time, and twisted it to examine the skin. There were no marks, at least, which made him sigh in relief.

The last thing he needed was to add assault to his long list of problems.

“I am fine.” The boy said, pulling himself away from Harry’s soft inspection. “Are *you* though? I was calling for you for almost a minute.”

“You were?” Harry cast a glance around and noted just how many people were staring at them. He scowled at the attention, knowing he would never really be comfortable with so many people watching him.

Orion hunched closer, lowering his voice. “Did you remember something?” He asked kindly.

Harry’s eyes shot to him, narrowed and assessing. It was so obvious to him what Orion was doing in that moment, trying to build a rapport between them by being supportive. Harry briefly wondered if he would have caught this if he were even two or three years younger.

He did want to help the boy, but what does Orion think he would gain from getting close to him?

Just a friend? A loyal follower? The Ciro’s were rich and influential, but they were nowhere close to the Black’s status, so monetary and social favours were out.

Harry tilted his head.

What do you want?

“No,” he answered after a pause. “Just lost in thought.”

Orion and Gus shared a look, before returning their focus to him. Orion hummed and took his hand, threading their fingers together much to Harry’s discomfort.

“Oh well, let’s go sit and eat now. I am famished.”

Harry tried once or twice to pull his hand free, but the boy only tightened his hold. *So much more aware than he projects*, Harry mused as he was dragged in the direction of Slytherin House.

He tossed one longing look over his shoulder at the blazing red and gold table, before folding under Orion’s insistent hands shoving him onto the bench.

The boy slipped in beside him, pressing closer than strictly polite, but Harry decided to ignore it for now. He somehow doubted the other would try anything harmful right now, so it should be safe.

He ignored the way Gus stared at him from over Orion’s head, gaze boring holes into his skull.

He ignored the side-glances he was receiving from essentially every table and every corner of the hall.

He ignored the whispers and snickers.

And he especially ignored the slim form of Tom Riddle sitting down across from him.

Dammit, Harry thought, staring down at his tiny, pale hands to avoid the other’s eyes; and absurdly he missed the maps of paper-thin white scars that used to stand out from his bronzed skin. This body was free of any marks except the ones that were shared with nearly every witch and wizard; callouses from where his wand sat in his hand.

And those were off too. Nathan Ciro had a different form to him, hands that gripped his wand in a way that felt unnatural to Harry. The callouses were only a centimetre or two out, but it was enough for Harry to feel the prickle of *wrong* in his chest.

“So, Ciro, this is a new place for you.” Harry looked up when he registered someone was talking to him, cocking his head to see an older student a little ways up watching him.

“What?” He asked, not understanding. He was still caught somewhere between wanting to claw his way out of his skin and just closing his eyes and wishing this all away.

Her nose wrinkled at his question, as if she smelt something rancid. “*This.*” She said pointedly, as if that would somehow make it clear what she was talking about.

Harry squinted his eyes at her, eyebrows raising slowly. “I’m sorry, I don’t understand.”

She snorted, lips snarling. “Well, at least that has not changed.”

There was a smattering of cruel chuckles, and despite himself, Harry felt his hackles raising. He never did handle being mocked very well.

He clenched his jaw, and in his lap his hands curled into fists.

“I meant,” she carried on, “that *you*, sitting *here*, is new. You must feel so very special.”

Harry glanced around, confused. What did she even mean? What was so special about sitting at the Slytherin table? Even an outcast in Slytherin would have to sit here.

Or...did she mean sitting with Orion? He knew hierarchy was important in most Houses, but more so in Slytherin than any of the others. If Nathan had been on the outskirts of his House, than Harry doubted he would have been sitting next to the heir of one of the most prominent families in Britain.

Were some of them actually *mad* that he was sitting with Orion?

Harry felt his lips twitch as his mood abruptly lifted, and the laughter burst out of him against his better judgement.

He covered his mouth with his hand, trying to smother the sound. His shoulders shook and he had to turn his face away from them all because their affronted expressions were too much.

“Sorry,” he gasped out, “sorry.”

“You think this is funny?” She snapped, leaning over some of the empty plates. The intimidation tactic might have worked if Harry did not spend most of his time staring down hardened criminals and murderers.

Harry, always willing to flirt with danger, leaned towards her to. His mouth twisted into a grin. “Oh love,” he said, “I think it’s hilarious.”

“You are treading on thin ice here, Ciro. Watch it, or you will find yourself in a world of trouble.”

“Is that a threat?” He asked, swaying forward a little more, taunting her. “You must have missed what happened in the common room then.” His grin turned vicious. “Unless you’re prepared to back your words up right now, I suggest you leave me alone. I don’t take well to threats, no matter how piss-poor they are.”

She jerked back, whether from his language or from his own warning, he did not know. Regardless, he knew he won the moment she showed that hint of weakness.

The girl sneered at him, but turned away.

Harry smirked.

“You should be more careful.”

The quiet comment immediately drew his attention, and without conscious thought, his eyes darted to Riddle.

The boy was watching him curiously, not a hint of anything remotely sinister in his eyes. Harry was not fooled.

“Why?” He asked, unable to resist. “If they come at me, I’m not going to just sit here and take it.”

Riddle tilted his head, curious. “You did before.”

Something about that remark made Harry feel ill. Maybe it was the reminder that no one, not even Nathan, had tried to put a stop to the bullying. Maybe it was just that Riddle was the one that said it.

He did not care which.

“Yeah, well,” Harry said, feeling defensive, “maybe I got tired of it.”

“I think it is good.” Orion said, smoothly inserting himself into the conversation. “Standing up for yourself is important.”

“But purposefully antagonising others and creating enemies is stupid.” Riddle shot back.

“Maybe I don’t care.” Harry said. “Maybe it’s *me* people should avoid making an enemy of.”

Riddle cocked an eyebrow, effortlessly catching the warning in his words. “Margaret Flint is not someone to take lightly.” He told him.

Flint? Harry glanced back at the girl, trying to find any trace of Marcus in her face. It was hard, seeing as how she was the same brand of beauty most purebloods were, and Marcus was...*not*.

Harry shook his head again. "Still don't care. If she picks a fight she better damn well be ready to follow through."

Riddle made a faint noise in the back of his throat, but turned his head towards the front of hall just as the teachers filed in. Harry sat back as well, glad that little conversation was over. He refused to be lulled into a false sense of security though. Riddle would be a feature in his life while he was here, and Harry knew these little questions would just build from here.

Dippet thankfully made no mention of Harry's arrival at the school, instead just giving brief notices about the next day, before summoning the food.

Harry let some of the tension bleed out of him as he ate. It had been a while since he had stopped by Hogwarts to teach a lesson, and he had missed the splendid array of food available.

He nibbled his way through his dinner, mind wandering.

It was after most of the teachers had finished their own meals and departed from the hall, that his peace was shattered when someone upended a jug of juice over his head.

Harry froze, fork halfway to his mouth as the sweet-smelling liquid cascaded over him.

The hall descended into silence, before erupting into laughter.

He was soaked, and his eyes burned from where a bit of juice had hit them. Slowly, he turned his head to see Carrow standing behind him, a dark smile on his face. "*Oops.*" The older student spat, and pissed as he was, Harry had to admit that regurgitating his own words back at him now was a nice move.

Carrow set the jug down on the table beside him, and Harry watched as he walked away.

Automatically, he looked at the Head Table, and his blood boiled when he saw that the remaining ones had already turned away.

What is wrong with all of them? He thought in disbelief. It had happened right in front of them, no attempts of even disguising the act. And they just *sat there*?

Harry turned his attention to Carrow's back, mouth tightening. He felt the surge of magic rise inside him, riding the coattails of his anger.

Harry barely paused to acknowledge that apparently his temper was still very much there, when he sent a wave of magic towards the boy. It snaked around Carrow's ankle and *yanked*.

Harry watched, satisfaction heavy in his stomach as Carrow went crashing to the floor. The boy's arms reached out to catch himself, but he grabbed a student rather than the table and brought them down with him.

It was just pure luck that that student happened to be Margaret Flint.

Harry took his wand out and cleaned himself with a simple flick of his wrist, marvelling at the chaos exploding from just down the table. A set of professors – Slughorn and one he did not recognise – raced over, and a part of him bristled at the fact that *now* the teachers were rushing over.

Slughorn was helping Flint untangle herself from Carrow, standing there placidly as the girl started ripping into the boy. He made only one or two attempts to defuse the situation, and Harry wanted to shake.

Apparently, Nathan Ciro was not important enough to warrant the same faux-concern from his own Head of House.

Harry stood up, tapping Orion on the shoulder. The younger boy blinked up at him, distracted from the scene, and he looked surprised to see that the juice was gone.

“I’m heading back to the common room. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He left without waiting for a reply.

OoO

Tom observed as Ciro slipped out of the Great Hall, his chin perched in his palm. His eyes slowly flicked back to the absolute mess Carrow and Flint had made of themselves, and how Slughorn was starting to finally step in and calm things down.

He looked to Orion next, meeting the younger boy's eyes easily.

"That was interesting." He murmured.

And it truly was.

Because what Ciro just did – that should not have been possible. Not for him.

Tom had only heard snippets of what had occurred in the common room, about the confrontation between Ciro and Carrow's lot. But even with the testimony of Orion and the others, he almost had not believed it.

The thought that *Nathan Ciro*, the most spineless little miscreant to ever walk these corridors, had not only picked a fight with, but also won against the current head of Slytherin was preposterous.

All of Tom's knowledge about the other boy was purely, consequentially, from sharing the same facilities with him for four years now. He knew enough to confidently say that never before had Ciro ever posed any form of threat to anyone.

To be perfectly honest, Tom had just never cared about Ciro enough to pay much attention to him. The other boy had been *boring*. There was nothing remotely interesting about him that Tom had not already discovered within the first two weeks at Hogwarts.

Ciro was a particular brand of uninteresting, and after Tom had studied him and found him lacking, he had rarely tossed another thought his way.

Now, however, Ciro was acting far too differently. The common room incident could possibly be explained away – because Tom never quite trusted second-hand recounts of anything, simply because people inevitably missed vital observations and that twisted their reports.

But what had just occurred, Ciro contesting Margaret Flint to her face and – more importantly – getting her to back down? Issuing challenges left and right with the brazen carelessness he thought only Gryffindors possessed?

Tom had witnessed it with his own eyes, and there was no disputing that it had happened.

And the way he had threatened Tom himself.

"*Maybe it's me people should avoid making an enemy of.*"

If Ciro had said that before his accident Tom would have laughed. Now though, with the way Ciro had met his gaze so effortlessly, the confident slouch of his body, the steel in his grey eyes...It was clear that Tom had to start recategorising the other boy immediately.

“He did that, didn’t he?” Orion whispered, eyes darting from Carrow and back to the open space beside him. There was something much like wary disbelief in his eyes. “Ciro tripped him.”

Tom hummed lightly.

“He did not use his wand,” Orion continued softly, so that only Augustus and Tom could hear him clearly. “I did not hear him say a spell either.”

“Wandless and nonverbal?” Augustus scoffed, tone sceptical. “Ciro can barely hold his wand correctly. You want to try and convince me that he tripped Carrow?”

“He did it.” Tom said, and Augustus settled due to the faint rebuttal in his words. “What intrigues me is exactly how he accomplished it.” His fingers drummed along the table once before he stopped them. “You’re partially right, Lestrangle. Ciro has some talent with a wand, but he’s hardly strong enough to manifest wandless magic.”

Orion chewed carefully on his mouthful of chicken, before looking up at Tom through his eyelashes. “He remembered the way here.” He told him. “I do not think he even realised it, but Gus and I were with him, and not once did he hesitate or look lost.”

“Really?” Tom asked, drawing the word out as he glanced back to the door of the Great Hall. “Subconscious memory, perhaps?”

Even as he said that, Tom had doubts. He knew little about amnesia, having never truly been interested in the subject before, but was it really that simple? Ciro had walked to and from the Great Hall at least once every day since he first arrived at Hogwarts.

He thought back over what Orion had said, of Ciro not realising he was leading their way. Was that just instinct? Muscle memory?

Tom frowned lightly as he took a bite of his dinner.

These questions brought him back to the biggest one that had been niggling at his mind since he had bumped into Ciro earlier on the stairwell.

Just how on earth did Ciro know his name?

OoO

The corridors were crumbling around him as Harry sprinted through the mansion. Fissures chased him as he rounded a corner, licking at his heels.

The portraits lining the walls were filled with warped faces, all of their mouths opened in silent screams. Their fingers were clawing at the frames, straining to break free from the thin canvases.

Harry gritted his teeth, forcing himself to ignore the grotesque images.

The ringing in his head grew and grew and grew until he was running with his hands clamped over ears and his eyes screwed shut.

A hand snagged at his collar, and blindly Harry lashed out, stirring through something that felt more like heavy smoke than a body.

He wrenched himself away and started running again, breath punching out of him.

The shadows reached for him, pressing in around him and Harry felt a sob building in his throat because he had never felt a helplessness like this before.

“Harry...” A voice crooned, barely audible above the screeches echoing around him.

He slipped into another hallway, hardly making it more than a metre before something hooked around his legs and forced him to the ground.

Harry thrashed, fingers digging into filthy carpet as he was hauled back.

He twisted onto his back, throwing a wild attack, but whatever was crawling on top of him continued undeterred.

It was a mass of utter darkness, shape indiscernible, and Harry choked because suddenly there was no air to breathe.

“Harry.” It whispered again, voice falling somewhere between reverent and mocking.

Something – a hand, but there were too many fingers – pressed against his side, sharp talons sinking into his skin and it burntburntburnt –

Harry screamed.

He flinched as he came awake. He was lying on his stomach, head resting on his pillow, arm buried beneath and the blanket curled around his legs.

Harry stayed where he was as his heart thundered away in his chest. His shirt was clinging to him and the night air was chilly, causing goose-bumps to erupt all over him.

He shuddered, trying to control his breathing into something not bordering on hyperventilation. Harry nestled his head back on his arms and counted down from one hundred, quietening his mind as best he could.

It had been a long time since he had had a nightmare like that. Even the dream - *vision?* – about Nathan had not felt like that. The all-encompassing dread and fear that was wholly unique to night terrors was something Harry was unfortunately familiar with, though not in recent years.

But even still, this dream had been...more somehow. Usually they revolved around whatever was bothering in his waking hours. Voldemort, the war, the cupboard under the stairs. Being chased by a shadowy figure was not what he would have –

Harry's whole body pulled taut as a sudden alarm blared in his mind. Honed instincts slammed into him, a prickling awareness he had spent years cultivating telling him one, terribly important thing.

There was someone in his room.

He breathed out slowly, expelling the tension in as natural a move as he could. All over his body his hair was standing on end for an entirely different reason now, seemingly drawn towards the intruder.

He waited to see if they would do anything, his senses painting an achingly clear picture in his head as whoever this was silently prowled from one side of his bed, down to the end, and back up the other side.

A cold flush washed over his skin, tracing their path with them.

Underneath his pillow, his fists dug into the bedspread.

They aren't doing anything. He thought frantically. *Is it Carrow? Flint? Riddle? How did they get past my wards?* It was the perfect chance for anyone who had a grudge against him to do something. He was vulnerable here, his possible movements limited, only one escape route that could easily be blocked.

Was this what Nathan had to deal with? Silent predators in the dark watching him? Ready to pounce at the slightest hint of weakness?

The tantalising wave of fear and anger that spiked in his blood was finally enough to push him through whatever was keeping him frozen.

Harry lurched upwards, hand outstretched towards whoever it was, sending a simple *stupefy* in their direction.

The blazing red zipped through the air and crashed into the shelf, rattling the books resting there. The brief flash illuminated the room just enough for Harry to feel confusion rise inside him.

There was silence in the wake of his attack, until he held his palm up and a soft white light sparked there.

The room was empty, save for him.

Harry cast his gaze around critically, unwilling to believe he had imagined that. There had to be *someone*.

But with each pass of his eyes, it became obvious that there was no one; and a scan of his wards proved that nothing had entered the dorm since he had returned from dinner.

Harry ran a hand over his face, tugging through his damp hair.

“That doesn’t make any sense.” He murmured. “There was someone. I’m sure of it.” He bit his lip, searching the room once more in an almost desperate bid to find something.

There was nothing.

He sighed, slumping over his drawn up knee and scowling at the bobbing *lumos* orb.

He must still be out of sorts from the nightmare, and dinner had rattled him more than he liked to admit. Being on the receiving end of such foul behaviour was difficult to swallow. Even taking into account his time with Dudley, and his horrendous fourth and fifth years, Harry had never really had to deal with physical bullying.

Having Carrow just so blatantly toss juice all over him had shocked him, mainly because he thought the others would not be brave enough to do anything in the most public place in Hogwarts.

But he was coming to understand that Nathan was not just bullied in Slytherin. No one from the other Houses had seemed particularly bothered by the act either.

Harry sighed again, straightening his legs out and pulling the blanket back, grimacing as it stuck to his body.

He started to get up, but the sudden flare of pain in his side had him hissing and slapping a palm over the burn.

Harry’s hand shook as he pressed against the spot.

With a burst of panicked energy he ripped his shirt up and shoved his pants down, his eyes roaming over his bare skin for any sign of what was hurting him.

His gaze zeroed in on a dark smudge, and with half a thought, the *lumos* orb drifted closer. The shadows dispersed and revealed the inky lines on his pale skin.

There, tattooed low on his hip, was a horribly familiar symbol.

Chapter End Notes

I think that's a good place to leave it.

Let me know your thoughts :D

Chapter Seven

Chapter Notes

Bless you all for the lovely comments~ It never fails to make me smile whenever I get to read all your wonderful comments/theories/despairing over my cliffhangers. Hope this one is just as enjoyable.

And yes to some of you who asked I did finish 'At the End of the Road' and ohmygurd I both intensely enjoyed it, and was a little unsatisfied and my emotions were so confused on what to feel haha. This story will be deviating quite a bit from the manga, though, so be prepared for many many changes darlings~

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

Harry hurried through the hallways, safely cocooned under the most powerful disillusionment charm he could put on himself.

Breakfast had only just begun, but he had already been up for hours at this point, unable to go back to sleep after his nightmare.

His hand absently curled over his hip, where the mark still sat, and his teeth sunk into his bottom lip in worry.

He needed bloody answers, and he needed them now. Because seeing it drawn so pleasantly on his skin had rattled him more than anything these past few weeks had.

It was a childish reaction, but Harry could not help but lick his thumb, and rub harshly at the small mark. When the symbol did not smudge or vanish, he closed his eyes, and took a deep, steadying breath.

When he looked again, it was still the same.

He choked back the urge to shout.

Viciously, he dug his nails into his skin and dragged across it. Angry red lines slashed through the blackness.

The burst of fresh pain cleared his mind.

He dropped his shirt, covering the sign of the Deathly Hallows.

Harry braced his elbows on his knees, and rested his face in his cupped hands. "Okay," he said, voice shockingly loud in the quiet of his room. "okay. That was not there before."

His whole body shuddered, and he hunched a little more. The fragile calm he had been clinging to all this time shattered.

“What the hell is happening to me?” He asked, the words frantic and confused. His fingers gripped his hair brutally as he stared at the carpet.

His eyes prickled horribly, and Harry clamped them closed to stop the tears.

He had not cried since this entire thing had happened, had barely given himself time to dwell on what this could mean for him.

But now it was all bubbling to the surface.

The fear. The uncertainty. The rage and desperation. The questions that had been plaguing him.

If he was here, did that mean Nathan was in his body? Or what if Nathan was really gone, then what was happening in Harry’s time? Was his body lying in the hospital, his friends and family standing around the bed, waiting for him to come back to them?

“I’m trying.” He whispered. “I’m trying but I don’t know how.”

And God, Ginny. Harry missed her terribly. If he thought hard enough, he could almost feel her hand gripping his tightly, refusing to let go.

It just – it was so unfair. All of this. Had he not done enough? He had lost so much already. He had...he had sacrificed himself for everyone. When was all this just going to stop? Why could he not just live a normal, peaceful life?

And now this, this symbol inked into his skin, so smooth and seamless, like it had always been there. Like it belonged on him

He stayed like that, with silent tears on his cheeks, until dawn started to peak through the curtains.

Last night had not been a good one. The surprise of the Deathly Hallows symbol showing up on his body, especially after such an intense, vivid dream, had kick-started his need to research.

So he decided to head to the one place he thought could help him.

Hermione would be so proud, Harry thought as he slipped through the library doors and into the quiet entrance room.

The desk was unmanned, which was just perfect. The last thing Harry wanted to deal with was a nosy librarian suspecting that there was someone in here sneaking around. Because that type of behaviour would just lead to trouble he would rather not deal with.

Harry moved further into the library, bypassing the bookshelves as his eyes ran over the section titles. He stopped at one and started scanning the shelves from the small, blue book he

needed.

His fingers caught one, and Harry pulled it free. *The Beedle and the Bard* stared back up at him.

It had been a while since he had heard the story, but Harry was not particularly well-versed in Wizarding fairy tales anyway. His Muggle upbringing was both a blessing and a curse sometimes.

He tucked the book under his arm and set out for the restricted section. The door opened without a problem, and Harry stood still as the wards washed over him, probing.

His time as a substitute professor had taught him a little about how Hogwarts worked. The restricted section only reacted favourably to students carrying an enchanted permission slip, or to an adult wizard.

Harry was hoping he met the latter criteria.

With no choice but to try, Harry picked out the closest chained book and slowly opened it. He wanted for the protective spells to work, his mind playing back the last time he had done this without approval.

No screaming faces appeared, and the book stayed perfectly content in his hands.

“Huh,” Harry murmured, “guess I do register as an adult, then.”

He had suspected as much since that meeting with Healer Johnson. His magic was exactly the same as it had been in his time, after all.

Harry considered if he should look for the Trace. It automatically broke when someone reached adulthood, registering the change that occurred in one’s magic. Harry had already dropped the Trace in his own time, and he wondered if his fully developed magic being stuffed into Nathan’s body somehow circumvented the Trace on the boy.

It was worth looking into. Being able to perform underage magic without the Ministry cracking down on him would be good.

Shaking his head, Harry replaced the book and began searching in earnest.

“Time travel, time travel, time travel...” He mouthed, flitting through the books without a clue where to start. “There we are.” He stopped when his eyes spotted *The Essence of Time*. Next to it were twelve similar books, ranging from *Time Turners and Their Limits* to *Time and Space and How to Understand It*.

Harry took them all and found the most secluded spot in the library that he could. He set up a number of charms and simple wards to discourage people from approaching, and tugged a notebook, quill and inkwell from his bag.

With everything prepared, Harry sat down to start reading. He pulled *The Essence of Time* to him, but paused when he saw the little blue book sitting there so innocuously. He nibbled at

his lip.

Unbidden, his hands grabbed it and flipped through the book until he came across the first page of the story he needed. The page before it was illustrated with the title and three human skulls drawn in unnecessary detail. On the forehead of one, was the symbol now branded onto his hip.

Harry swallowed at the sight of it.

““There once were three brothers who were travelling along a lonely winding road at twilight.”” He read softly, and in his ear he swore he could hear Hermione’s gentle voice beating in time with his as he went through the lines.

““But Death was cunning.”” Harry took in the pictures etched on the thick, aged parchment.

The image of Death was chilling. It looked not like a skeleton, or a hooded figure, like many muggle iterations showed. It was like smoke, thick and heavy, with a darker figure depicted in the centre. The drawing swirled on the page, and Harry had to tear his eyes away from it. Sweat trailed along his neck.

He followed the tale of the brothers. One too drunk on power to care for consequences, one overcome with a desire to humiliate and ridicule, and one wise enough to understand the danger of what they were given.

““...and there he greeted Death as an old friend, and went with him gladly. And equals, they departed this life.””

Harry took a shaky breath, unnerved. On the last page was a more intensely designed version of the Deathly Hallows symbol, looking Celtic with the twisting knots and thick, intricate lines.

He ran his fingers over it.

Antioch. Cadmus. Ignotus. The wand. The stone. The cloak.

He slammed the book closed, chest heaving.

Harry shoved the book across the desk violently, wanting it far away from him in that moment.

He had not thought back to that night, that moment, in a long time. He had put it in the past, and ignored what his actions could have brought on him.

He slumped on the desk, cradling his head. “It’s just a stupid story.” He spat. “He killed the horcrux. Not me. That’s why I came back. It wasn’t me.”

But still...the smoky figure...

A hand snagged at his collar, and blindly Harry lashed out, stirring through something that felt more like heavy smoke than a body.

It looked just the same.

It was a mass of utter darkness, shape indiscernible, and Harry choked because suddenly there was no air to breathe.

“Harry.” It whispered again, voice falling somewhere between reverent and mocking.

He shivered, fingers winding around the pile of other books, and dragged them closer to him.

Harry pushed the memory of that crooning voice away and picked up the first book on the stack. If he was going to skip his lessons today, he at least wanted something to show for it.

OoO

Simon looked around the potions classroom with boredom, eyes blinking tiredly.

Slughorn was up the front, shuffling through papers and the roll as he prepared for the lesson. The man was a strange one, what with his tendency to *collect* students like trophies, and ignore anyone who was not well above average.

Simon hated Slughorn for that attitude, mainly because he had never been able to make the cut and impress the man.

The only thing that soothed the balm of that was that Nathan had never gained Slughorn's interest either – and his brother was in the man's damn House.

No, his mind snarled, not my brother. He's not my brother.

Spurred by the savage thought, Simon glanced over at the Slytherin side of the room, looking for the painfully familiar form of Nathan.

He blinked when he saw the empty back desk.

Simon knew that Nathan had never been close with his housemates, especially not after *that* got out, but he had never missed a class before.

He sat straighter, mind twisting over what this meant.

Last night had been spectacular, because it was the first time since he had woken up that Simon had seen Nathan falter in that stubborn confidence he had somehow developed while in his coma. The other had looked downright shocked to be on the receiving end of so much disgust, and Simon had enjoyed every moment of it.

Now though...

He knew that in the past, Nathan would become withdrawn whenever the bullying got too hard for him, but skipping a class? That was different. That was noticeable in a way Nathan did not like being.

Did something happen in the common room? He wondered with a light frown. *Did they do something to him after he left the hall?* There were quite a few hours between when Nathan had retreated from dinner, and this morning. That was a long time where something could have happened.

He wasn't at breakfast either, now that I think about it.

Simon shook his head and looked forward, angry. *Stop it. He's not my problem anymore. What do I care if they did something to him? Nathan is like a cockroach. He just keeps coming back.*

But try as he might, Simon's eyes could not stay away from the other side of the room. He looked to the Slytherins themselves, to see if he could glean what had happened from them.

Only Lestrangle seemed to be really aware of their missing housemate. The tall boy kept glancing over his shoulder to the back desk occasionally. Each time the dark glint in his eyes burned deeper. He looked one step away from furious.

Simon winced at the expression. Lestrangle was, in his opinion, absolutely terrifying. The only person who seemed capable of even managing to keep the other under control was Orion Black, and everyone knew that kid was a few chess pieces short of a full set.

He quickly looked away before the taller boy spotted him, eyes darting to the person in front of Lestrangle.

Tom Riddle was far more interesting than anyone else in the room anyway.

Simon could admit that a part of him admired the other boy, despite his blood status. Riddle was the type of person that without explicitly knowing he was not a pureblood, you would not be able to tell otherwise.

There was just something so incredibly forceful about Riddle that drew attention, and charmed whoever he turned his focus on.

It had initially irritated him last night, when he saw Nathan being invited into Riddle and Black's circle. His brother was *hardly* worthy of being in their company.

But Carrow's timely interruption had effectively driven Nathan back from the idea.

"Now, attention please class."

Simon turned back to Slughorn, who was slipping his glasses onto his nose and unravelling the roll.

The man made his way down the names with a pace that was unnecessarily slow.

"Nathan Ciro?"

No one spoke up.

Simon bit his lip and glanced back over at the Slytherin side, just as everyone did.

"Mr. Ciro?" Slughorn raised his eyes as well, but rather than searching the room, he looked directly at Riddle.

The boy smiled, "I'm afraid he was not feeling well this morning professor."

Slughorn nodded, "Ah, very well then. Thank you, Tom. Someone be sure to let Mr. Ciro know what the homework is for today."

And there was the negligent behaviour they all knew. Not even assigning a specific student to the task, just assuming someone would eventually do it.

The Slytherins all agreed obediently, but Simon doubted any of them would actually pass the information on.

“Simon Ciro?”

“Here, sir.”

Simon was about to look away, when the oddest thing happened.

Once the class’ attention was firmly back on Slughorn, Riddle turned around to trade a look with Lestrage. The two boy stared at each other, before Lestrage shook his head.

A slight frown came to Riddle’s face, his eyes narrowing just slightly as his gaze shifted to the empty back desk.

He looked annoyed, but only for a beat, before he too was facing forward.

Simon hummed to himself, intrigued. So Riddle must have been lying about Nathan’s wellbeing. And if that look had been anything to go by, neither Riddle nor Lestrage actually knew where Nathan had scurried off to.

Interesting. But Riddle hates Nathan. Why would he cover for him?

Simon finally pulled his full focus back to the blackboard once Slughorn had finished with the roll. He listened with half an ear as the professor told them of the potion they would be evaluating today.

He wrinkled his nose in distaste. He hated the Polyjuice Potion.

“Now, of course we shan’t be making this potion for assessment, due to its incredibly advanced nature.” Slughorn explained with a polite chuckle. “But it never hurts to know and understand just how these high level potions are created, and what their purpose is.”

The man turned to the blackboard and began writing. “If you all turn to page 42 of your textbooks, there will be a passage about the effect of the Polyjuice Potion.”

Simon opened his textbook and started reading, ignoring the persistent echo in the back of his mind.

OoO

Harry left the library with a heavy head and pounding temples.

He was no stranger to long nights parked at his desk, because sometimes being an auror meant writing reports more than catching criminals, but this was something different.

Nathan's body, while becoming gradually stronger thanks to his exercise, was still rather scrawny, with more limits than Harry was used to.

He was also a growing child, meaning that his body protested a lot earlier than Harry anticipated. He had forgotten just how exhausting it could be to be a teenager at school.

Harry sighed, rubbing at his face as he stopped next to a window. It was late afternoon. He had missed an entire day of classes, and he had next to nothing to show for it.

Because *apparently* time travel of this magnitude was impossible, and if it ever was successful, would be horribly unstable. Words like 'ceasing to exist', and 'loops', and 'alternate timelines' were in abundance.

"Thanks for those comforting pieces of information." Harry grumbled. Being told his situation was impossible did nothing to help since *clearly* it was if he was here.

One thing all the books had stressed though was not altering the timeline, which Harry had already decided against. He knew the consequences, but having them listed in front of his eyes was a good reinforcement. The last thing he wanted was to accidentally cause the people he cared about to never be born.

Harry blew out a loud breath and leaned against the wall, massaging his growing migraine.

He knew he needed to head back to the common room soon, or else swing by the kitchen to get some dinner so he would not have to spend it with his lovely housemates again.

And I do need to go to class tomorrow. Harry scrunched his face up at the thought of attending lessons. He would already know most of the answers, since not only had he done this year before, but he was also a stand-in professor.

He just knew it would be painfully boring for him in class.

Repeating school was like one of those abstract stories some muggle movies liked to joke about, or that nightmare Ron sometimes claimed to have.

Harry felt his lips twitch upwards at the thought of his best friend.

He missed them all terribly, and last night had made the ache sharper than it had been before.

Harry sighed once more, deciding to head to the kitchen since he had skipped both breakfast and lunch. His stomach was rebelling, but at least the house-elves would happily prepare something for him.

Plus he loved the atmosphere of the kitchen, the buzz of magic, the pans and utensils whizzing about the air, and the tantalising smells. It was all so mesmerising.

Later, stomach pleasantly full and mind fuzzy, he stumbled back into the common room. Nobody really looked up as he entered, save a few. Of those that bothered, most glared.

If Harry was inclined to care about their opinions of him, he might have done something about it. As it was, he was much more interested in heading to bed.

“Ciro!”

Or not.

He tilted in the direction of the voice, his response to the name thankfully becoming faster.

Orion waved at him from where he was sitting surrounded by boys their age. And Riddle. Fantastic.

Harry groaned quietly but made his way towards them. “Orion, hey.” The younger boy tugged on his arm, wordlessly pulling him down to sit next to him. On the boy’s other side, Gus watched carefully.

“Where have you been young man?” Orion asked, though the voice he put on made it more humorous than demanding. Harry swallowed the urge to smirk.

“Out. Why?”

Orion shoved him, “Uh, because I’ve just heard from the others that you were nowhere to be found today during class. People were saying you were sick, and yet here you are, perfectly fine.”

Harry nodded along, mildly surprised about the lie of being unwell. It was a good excuse, except that meant that if word got back to Benedict and Cynthia, they might do something out of concern.

“Well?” Orion prompted.

Harry shrugged, “I was feeling a little under the weather, but I was fine towards the afternoon.” He looked at the books around them and swiftly changed the subject. “What are you working on?”

Orion looked at him, unimpressed, but answered anyway. “Transfiguration homework. The others are doing their potions stuff.”

“Oh, nice.” Harry leaned forward, reading over the younger boy’s questions. “Animagi, huh? Are you interested in them in particular, or was this assigned?”

Orion squinted at him in confusion. “Both. We have to write an essay on the benefits and affects of a type of transfiguration. I chose this.”

Harry nodded. “Well that’s pretty easy. There are heaps of benefits to being an Animagi.”

The younger boy cocked his head, and he looked to be humouring him. “Oh?”

Harry narrowed his eyes, not appreciating the sarcasm. *I’m smarter than you by a long shot, kid, he thought testily, and I’m not afraid to prove it.*

“Sure.” He answered, and a smug grin pulled at the corners of his mouth. “As an Animagus your emotions are not as complex, so while you retain all of your mental facilities, you are not as prone to emotional outbursts. Very helpful against something like, say, Dementors, which directly affect someone’s emotions. Being able to think clearly without being dragged down by the sense of hopelessness and cold is pretty important.”

He carried on when Orion’s eyes flickered with something like shock.

“And whatever animal you transform into can sometimes influence how you act as a human, which can be both useful and dangerous, I guess. A dog Animagus might be unfailingly loyal to the ones they love, or a wolverine Animagus might exhibit aggressive tendencies.” He paused, remembering a particularly vicious unregistered witch who loved attacking in her wolverine form. Two of the aurors with Harry that day had been critically injured and had spent months recovering.

He blinked and came back to himself, adding one last piece of information. “It’s also possible to forcibly turn an Animagus back to their human form.”

One of the boys off to the side snorted loudly, and Harry turned to him, a little surprised to find the entire group watching him. The boy sneered at him. “There is no way to turn an Animagus back unless they wilfully do it.” He said, sounding too confident.

Harry raised an eyebrow at him. “Sure there is,” he told him. “the Homorphus Charm.”

“The what?” The boy asked, forehead creasing and face showing just how insane he thought Harry was right now.

Harry twitched, looking down and thinking frantically. *How do they not know about it? It was a revolutionary development in countering Animagus transformations.* He wanted to shift uncomfortably. *Oh God, has it not been invented yet? Shit. Why did I even open my mouth?*

He cleared his throat, excruciatingly aware of their eyes on him. “You know what, never mind. Clearly I don’t know what I’m talking about.” He turned back to Orion. “But that stuff before, about the emotion and traits crossing over is definitely true.”

“Thank you.” The younger boy said, making no move whatsoever to reach for his work or take his eyes off of Harry.

Harry looked away from that stare, eyes coming to rest on Riddle without even meaning to.

The other boy had a roll of parchment spread out on a polished wooden lap desk, balanced perfectly on his crossed knee.

Riddle was writing, but Harry knew that he was paying attention to what they were saying.

He nibbled on the inside of his bottom lip as he stared at the young Dark Lord.

He looked so normal, and even with the small amount of time he had spent here, Harry was almost accustomed to the sight of Riddle already.

The main odd thing was just how painfully young Riddle was right now. He did not look like a particularly evil or vicious individual. In fact, if Harry did not know any better, he would think he was just a regular, albeit smart, student.

But he was not. And Harry had to remember that even at the tender age of fourteen, Tom Riddle was dangerous.

Still. Watching him do something as ordinary as homework was as fascinating as it was unsettling.

Shouldn't you be plotting murder?

"Do I have something on my face?"

Harry blinked, "Huh?"

Riddle glanced up at him, expression mocking. "You're staring awfully hard."

The boys around them snickered, and the undercurrents of cruelty had Harry's lips thinning. "Am I making you uncomfortable?" He asked, almost demanding in his tone.

"Not at all." Riddle replied swiftly.

"Then what's the problem?" Harry smiled, teeth kept firmly behind his lips.

Riddle returned the gesture. "No problem. Just curious." He stopped, and out of nowhere he held out a handful of loose pieces of parchment. "Here."

Thrown at the sudden change of topic, Harry stared blankly at the paper. He hesitated to touch them, his brief time as Nathan strengthening his already heightened vigilance. "What is it?"

If Riddle was offended at being left hanging, he showed no sign of it. The boy merely watched him with those inquisitive eyes. "Your assigned classwork. I made sure to get it all for you. Can't have you falling behind even further."

Harry strangled back the biting comment he wanted to make at that. Slowly he reached out, and just before he touched the parchment, he sent a wave of delicate magic over them, probing for curses or anything remotely dangerous.

They were clean.

“Thanks.”

Harry took the offered pages and leafed through them, taking in the questions and assignments with disinterest. He only just caught the glance Riddle shared with Orion and Gus. Harry’s attention snapped back to them. “What?” He asked, lowering the homework.

Orion smiled sunnily at him, “Nothing.” He patted Harry’s shoulder. “Would you like some help with your homework, Ciro?”

Harry returned his focus to the neatly written words and shook his head. “No, that’s alright, I’ll be fine.”

Orion’s hand lifted away from his arm. “Are you sure? It would only be fair. And you might have some...gaps.”

Which is a nice way of telling me my brain is broken.

Harry smiled brighter, but his eyes were sharp. “I’m sure I can manage, Orion. Thank you, though.” *It’s not like I haven’t done all of this already.*

“I’m heading up now. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“And will you actually be attending class, Ciro?” One of the boys he did not know asked, and Harry had trouble picking if he was more against the idea of him being in class, or skipping.

“Oh, definitely.” Harry assured him, unable to keep the amusement off his face. “I can’t wait to learn all this *very important information*. Have a good night, kids.” He ended with a quiet snort and a half-hearted flap of his papers.

He made for his room, pausing only slightly at the door and scanning the interior for any signs of tampering or unwanted visitors. The chill from last night crept up his spine again, reminding him of the there-but-not presence he had felt.

“You’re losing it, Potter.” He muttered, closing the door firmly behind him and feeling the wards gently reform around him.

He chuckled the pile of paper onto his desk and rubbed at his face. “Now the question is, do I suddenly become a genius, or dumb it down?”

Harry tossed a glance at the homework Riddle had gathered for him. And was that not a disturbing thought.

Why would he even bother? It’s not like he and Nathan were close. And I sure as hell haven’t given him a reason to play the friend card.

What did Riddle think he would even gain from associating with him?

He ruffled through the paper absently, deciding to ignore Riddle and his confusing actions. He doubted he would be able to figure out what the murderer-to-be wanted right now anyway. Riddle's mind was like a bag of cats.

He had more important things to consider.

Nathan was only barely above average. Everyone would get suspicious if he suddenly started topping every class. Then again, do I really want to spend however long I'm here writing mind-numbingly boring pieces of assessment?

Harry scratched at his chin, missing the faint stubble that usually cropped up every couple of days.

"It's not worth it." He eventually decided with a sigh. "Mediocre, here I come."

Chapter End Notes

And you finally have some answers to certain questions. Most of you had already guessed what symbol it was so kudos for all you smart cookies haha~

Chapter Eight

Chapter Notes

Hey guys! So, so, so sorry about the wait for this one. But it's finally here? So yay?

To clarify: *This fic is not abandoned*. And if I ever did abandon it (not likely to happen!) I would put up a notice of it, okay?

That being said, ybtm(ibty) isn't a 'priority story' I guess you could call it. I don't even have a concrete plot hammered out for this one. Like, I know where I want it to go, but getting there is going to take a while for me to figure out. So thank you all for being so patient with me, and I ask that you hold out a little longer!

Anyway, onwards!

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

Harry slowed to a jog as he came up around the final bend of his trek. To his right, the Forbidden Forest stretched out as far as his eyes could see. To his left, Hogwarts dominated the skyline. And in front of him, the Black Lake starkly resembled a puddle of ink staining the landscape.

His hands were clasped behind his head as he walked the last few metres to the top of the hill, trying to get rid of the stitch gnawing at his gut. His eyes were closed and his breathing was as steady as he could make it.

The sun had yet to crest the hills, but the first few rays were already lightening the sky to a pale grey. It was a beautiful, if chilly, morning.

Harry stared out at the Black Lake, watching the way the water moved and stirred in the early breeze.

There was, he knew, far more going on beneath the tranquil looking surface than meets the eye.

Everyone knew of the Giant Squid that lived in the lake, and some students were lucky to occasionally catch a glimpse of one of the elusive merpeople - whenever they were curious enough to taste the air, that is.

But Harry was one of the few individuals that had been into the lake, deep, *deep down* where the light had trouble reaching and the water choked you with the weight of its presence.

Harry had never been particularly afraid of water before, but the Second Task had opened a door for dreams of drowning to creep in on him. Forcing him to wake up covered in sweat

and for a few endless moments, believing he was still in that darkness, with the water pressing in on him, down his throat, no Gillyweed to save him and no one coming to rescue him -

That was fine, though. Compared to the usual demons that plagued him, drowning was almost preferable.

His side twinged, and Harry's face fell into a scowl. His eyes slid away from the picturesque scene before him to bore a hole through his shirt where the mark sat. "Shut up." He hissed at it, despite how ridiculous he knew it was.

The mark had been acting up all through the night, alternating between sending stabbing pain through his body - like a hot knife, slicing through the skin and muscle and bone like butter, twisting his insides and boiling his blood - or buzzing with, for a lack of a better word, *fondness*.

It was irritating and, frankly, terrifying, because sometimes Harry felt completely fine; but then his whole side flared and it was like his head was clogged and his throat was barely holding back a scream.

He wanted so desperately to understand what was happening, but he had seen what desperation drove people to and he had no interest in joining that long list of victims. He would just have to be patient and plough his way through the research at his own pace.

Harry slowly dropped his arms and sighed, lowering himself into a comfortable squat. He had to get back to the common room before the morning truly kicked off and he missed breakfast.

Today would officially be his first day back at school. He had gotten lucky yesterday with ditching, but the professors' sympathy for his situation would quickly run out if he was constantly dodging his classes or homework.

He should definitely head back.

He just...really, really did not want to.

It was not so much the prospect of being a student that had Harry malcontent. He had always loved Hogwarts, and no matter what his friends said, he did enjoy learning.

It was more to do with the fact that this was not *his Hogwarts*. There would be no late nights spent in the Gryffindor common room talking with Ron and Hermione. There would be no friendly faces walking passed him in the hallways. There would be no secret smiles shared with Ginny from across the table.

Instead he was trapped with a bunch of his future enemies, getting an unwanted, unnecessary front row seat to Tom Riddle's descent into darkness.

Just the thought of his painfully young adversary flooded him with confusion and uncertainty.

Harry knew Riddle's life story forwards, backwards, upside down and every other way one could possibly conceive. He had trudged through years of memories surrounding the other,

had tasted his emotions and almost been crushed under the sheer vastness of the Dark Lord's mind.

He knew what Riddle would become, like a witness to a slow-motion car crash, seeing every fold of metal and splintered piece chip away, knowing the outcome but utterly, horribly fascinated at what was unfurling before his eyes anyway.

It was inevitable.

Harry knew that. He had already accepted that he would not be *interfering* with Riddle's life any more than he absolutely had to. There was no telling the magnitude of damage he could inflict on the future, and it was that knowledge, of potentially destroying what he was trying to get back to, that kept him in check.

But it was surprisingly easy for Harry to keep those thoughts suppressed. Far easier than it should be, all things considered.

Maybe he was finally growing up? Hermione would be so proud.

His small grin dimmed, before disappearing altogether.

Harry sighed, the air heaving its way out of his chest and into the cold air.

He pushed himself back to his feet, swaying a little as his blood rushed. His sweat was cooling rapidly, and the sharp drop in adrenaline had him wincing. He really needed to get back to the dungeon before he accidentally fell asleep out here.

Harry made his way towards the castle, feet beginning to throb in time with his heart beat.

Eventually though, the rough path melted into smooth cobblestone, and Harry quickened his pace, eager to have a shower.

The silence that engulfed the castle was ancient, every noise echoing down the hallowed hallways. It should have made him feel small, but all it did was draw Harry in, surround him and make him feel like he was as much a part of Hogwarts as the stones that formed it.

He used one of the first labyrinthian shortcuts he came across, navigating his way by memory.

His legs were beginning to protest in earnest now, and he was vaguely tempted to keep going down the narrow passageway and just slip directly into the common room.

But his rationale side smacked that idea down before it could take root. It was early, but there was always the chance that other students were up and about. These secret passageways were an ace up his sleeve right now, one he was not willing to lose.

Collapsing a section of the Slytherin common room wall that was not supposed to be able to move would just cause a panic.

So Harry did the right thing and exited the hidden corridor two turns away from the common room.

The dungeons were deserted, the candles lining the walls only providing the barest amount of light with which to see. As Harry walked the flames grew brighter, illuminating more of the freezing hallway.

Harry stuffed his hands deeper into the pockets of his pants, clenching and unclenching his fingers in a vain attempt to get the blood flowing properly.

He mumbled the password at the door and waited impatiently for it to shift out of his way.

The warm air that cascaded over him was euphoric, and he darted inside. The room was still and quiet, for all intents and purposes completely empty.

But his instincts prickled, and Harry followed the pull until his eyes landed on figure reclining on one of the lounges closest to the fireplace.

For a second, his lungs constricted, his breath punching out of him and drawing the boy's attention from the open book in his lap.

Harry swallowed the name on the tip of his tongue, because while the resemblance was uncanny and painful to behold, the eyes were the wrong colour. More silver than either of his descendants.

But the blond hair, and the delicate features, and the way his chin tilted just enough to convey curiosity and contempt in equal measures was too much for him.

Harry wrenched his eyes away from the other, head lowering and eyes squeezing shut.

Tears stung his eyes, and he could almost hear his friend's haughty voice mocking him for *crying*.

I'm even missing Draco, he thought with biting amusement, *clearly things have become desperate*.

"Ciro. I had heard that you'd crawled your way back into Hogwarts."

God, they even sounded similar. Right down to the way they paced their words, and the underlining cultured tone that made everything falling from their mouths sound like rich honey.

Harry cleared his throat, lips pulling into what he hoped was a smile - but from the traces of a sneer being aimed at him, he suspected he failed.

"Sorry," he said, "who are you?" It was a genuine question. He was sure Draco had run Harry through his family line at least once, but Harry had trouble remembering his own family tree, let alone one as intermixed and twisted as the Malfoy's.

The real question though, was if this boy was Draco's grandfather.

His harmless inquiry only seemed to agitate the other, for he frowned and snapped his book shut in distaste. "As if you are even worthy of addressing me." He said cuttingly.

Harry blinked, then shifted his gaze to the side. He wondered how rude it would be if he just went to his room.

He wondered why he even cared.

“Well, alright. I’ll just leave you then.” He told him slowly, body half turning to face the stairs leading to the dorm rooms. But the moment he faced them fully, he stopped short once again.

Riddle’s eyes darted from Harry to Malfoy. He was dressed, his uniform painting the picture of the perfect student. Neat, hardly a crinkle to be seen, tie knotted precisely at his collar. Even his hair was impeccably done.

Not even Malfoy was dressed for the day, because it was *not even six in the morning* - but of course, *of course* Tom Riddle was a morning person. Of course he got up at a reasonable time, and was ready to go well before he needed to be anywhere.

Just another addition to his long list of sins.

Harry hunched his shoulders and glowered at the Slytherin. Riddle, unflappable prick that he was, merely raised a questioning eyebrow before descending the rest of the way and gliding into the common room.

“Abraxas, welcome back.” He said, but the lack of warmth in his tone turned the pleasant greeting into something bland and uninterested. He completely ignored Harry as he brushed by him.

Abraxas - Harry internally winced at that, forever glad his parents had been merciful when naming him - sniffed, his gaze dismissing Harry and moving to Riddle. “Thank you, Tom. It’s good to see you.”

Harry used the distraction to start making his way to the safety of his room; but like a spider feeling the vibrations in its web, Riddle’s head swivelled to pin him in place. The boy’s eyes scanned him, finally coming to a rest on Harry’s face.

“What were you doing?” Riddle asked, then, before Harry could answer, “What are you wearing?”

Harry looked down at himself, taking in the plain long pants and simple shirt he had on. He looked back to Riddle, confused. “I went for a run.”

Riddle’s eyes widened just slightly, his eyebrows shooting upwards in unmasked surprise. Behind him, Abraxas snorted, and scathingly asked, “You can run?”

Harry’s lip curled in a faint snarl before he calmed himself. He refrained from commenting, taking his bubbling emotions and forcing them down.

They burned like acid.

“And why, pray tell, were you running, Ciro?” Riddle asked, sounding intrigued, but Harry could read the scepticism all over him.

He smiled blandly, “Because Riddle, shockingly enough, waking up in a body that’s done nothing more than lay in a bed for three months has negative impacts on one’s health.”

Irritation - sweet and deadly - zipped through Riddle’s eyes, and Harry eagerly chased it with his own, savouring the reaction.

This younger Riddle was far easier to read than his older self, still fresh and soft in many ways. It was an exhilarating experience, being the one holding the power between them.

Harry had briefly thought on it before, but watching Riddle as he was now really rammed home the fact that he still had a long way to go before he became the vicious creature Harry had defeated.

The difference between their levels had been gaping and disgustingly obvious, back in Harry’s youth. Voldemort had always been so much more in terms of strength and knowledge - an adult, hardened and cruel. Whereas Harry spent most of their encounters bumbling his way through by the skin of his teeth - uncertain and scared and *a child*.

But now their places were reversed. Now it was *Harry* who looked down at Riddle and viewed him as a boy. It was *Harry* who had the advantage. It was *Harry* who knew more, and had experienced more, and *was more*.

The revelation was as delicious as it was unsettling.

Unexpectedly, the mark on his hip started itching, and Harry automatically slapped his hand over the point. Riddle’s gaze dropped to follow the movement, and Harry was not up to fielding anymore questions.

He spun on his heels and quickly sped up the stairs, trying not to look too much like he was fleeing.

He needed a shower to clear his head.

OoO

Harry had miscalculated.

Badly.

He had thought he would be able to handle having familiar people thrown in his face. Abraxas had been a surprise simply because Harry had not been expecting him to pop in out of nowhere. But the ones Harry *knew* he would encounter? He thought he would be fine. He had been fine with Slughorn.

But that was a lie.

He watched, heart caught between a distressing amount of sorrow and soul-crushing happiness, as Dumbledore explained the easiest way to preform cross-species switches.

It had been years since Harry had seen his old Headmaster, and having him in front of him now - with *red hair* - felt like a hand reaching into his chest and squeezing.

But the almost welcome reunion was soured by the kernel of betrayal that had steadily been nurtured in Harry's core.

Because this was the man that would one day orchestrate Harry's entire life. The one that would force him to grow up in a loveless environment, purely to mould Harry into someone that craved approval. The one that had no qualms about sending children to fight his battles for him.

The one that could read minds, and had likely done so to Harry for years.

Harry kept his head lowered, eyes fixed on the blank parchment in front of him, as Dumbledore once again swept passed him.

Other than the initial *welcome back* and *if you need help just ask* speech, Dumbledore had studiously avoided so much as glancing in Harry's direction.

It was an odd change of pace, considering how closely Dumbledore had entwined himself in Harry's life before.

But maybe that was just because now Harry did not have some predestined role as a sacrificial lamb hanging over his head, and was therefore not important in the man's mind. Or perhaps it was because his tie was green this time?

Or – maybe it was because of his bench-mate.

Next to him, Riddle was diligently taking notes, his quill sailing over his paper. Harry was tempted to ask why he was even bothering – because as if the other was not already two years ahead in terms of curriculum at this point.

“Mr. Ciro?” Harry tilted his head back to the front, where Dumbledore was frowning lightly at him.

So now he was finally paying attention to him.

“Sir?” Beside him, Riddle’s writing slowed down a touch, signalling that his focus had shifted the moment Dumbledore had addressed him.

“You’ve not written anything. Are you having trouble keeping up?”

A spark of annoyance flared to life low in his gut. The temptation to specify that it was less *inability*, and more *boredom* that had him sitting still, was increasingly strong.

But running his mouth had never been particularly helpful to Harry when it came to his professors.

Instead, he ducked his head lower and willed his face to blush. It was decidedly cruel of the older wizard to do this, in hindsight. It was mortifying and confidence-destroying for a struggling student to be called out. Drawing everyone’s attention to the fact was just like adding salt to a wound.

These were Nathan’s peers, and anyone - especially a genius like Dumbledore - would know how damaging that could be for him.

Harry had no doubt that if he had been a Gryffindor, Dumbledore would have quietly approached him and inquired after his wellbeing privately.

Blatant favouritism from teachers had always pissed him off - Snape, and even McGonagall, both equally guilty - and experiencing it now, as an adult and far more aware than he was as a student, left the back of his mouth tainted with disgust.

Harry lifted his lips in an embarrassed, pitiful smile and hunched his shoulder, rebelling against his natural instinct to bare his teeth.

For some reason it was so much harder to stand there and not defend himself against the man. Not even Riddle had inspired such a desire to fight in him; and arguably, it was by Voldemort’s hands that Harry had suffered more from.

But maybe that was it exactly. Harry had never viewed Voldemort as his ally. He had never placed his utmost faith in the Dark Lord, and barring his experience with Riddle’s diary horcrux, Harry had never remotely trusted Voldemort.

Dumbledore, though? Dumbledore had held Harry’s unwavering loyalty from the very first moment. Harry had *trusted* him, had believed that the man knew best, all the while he was *planning his murder*.

Harry did not care about the ‘Greater Good’ Dumbledore so steadfastly clutched at. A betrayal was a betrayal, and Harry was not a naturally forgiving person. Oh, he could be reasoned with, and he was capable of putting his opinions to the side. But those that stabbed him in the back tended to feel his wrath sooner or later.

“I’m sure I’ll be fine, Professor.” He mumbled, and it was such a weak assurance, something any student not willing to draw notice to their failures would say. Yet, Dumbledore simply nodded and carried on.

Harry let his disbelief at the lack of reaction crash into him and cascade down his back.

“Do you want help?” Riddle asked, casual as you please.

Harry’s eyes slid away from Dumbledore’s eye-searing robes and glanced at the boy.
“What?”

Riddle inclined his chin at Harry’s still unmarked parchment. “I’d be happy to explain the concept if it’s too hard.”

The offer, genuine on the surface but no doubt mocking underneath, had Harry scoffing. He looked away in disinterest. “Thanks but no thanks, Riddle. Like I told the professor, I’ll be fine.”

Of course he would be. He had already study all of this before, despite his own fourth year being slightly more harrowing than this. Nothing the professors gave him would be too much for him to handle.

“If you’re sure.” Riddle replied, his smile polite, eyes cold. “We’re housemates after all, we have to look out for each other.”

And those words, God, they had Harry’s magic fluttering as his rage ticked over.

The inkwell on his desk rocked violently and spilled the dark liquid all across his desk. Harry kept his eyes trained on Riddle, even as the girl sitting at the next desk over let out a small yelp at the mess.

All he could think about was how empty Nathan had felt, how alone and sad the boy must have been. How the only way he found to escape from everything was to *jump off a building*.

Harry leaned into Riddle’s space, his magic buzzing in the air between them, a warning and a promise. “Don’t act like you give a shit about anyone but yourself, Riddle. You think I would even *want* your help if I needed it, after everything you and your House have done? Why don’t you tell me why I woke up in the hospital after a *suicide attempt*.”

The clock on the wall hit the hour, and Harry shot to his feet, bag slung over his shoulder and hand absently waving to clear away the ink stains. He stared down at Riddle contemptuously.

“If that’s where you ‘looking out for me’ leads, forgive me if I’m a little apprehensive.”

OoO

Tom licked his bottom lip in consideration as Ciro all but marched to the exit of the classroom and disappeared into the throng of students.

He wanted to say the other was running, but the way his hands had been clenched hard enough to make his knuckles white told Tom it was more like Ciro was removing himself for both their sakes.

Which was odd, but not more so than his reaction to Tom's offer of assistance.

If it had not been apparent since his return, it was certainly solidified in Tom's mind now.

Ciro was dangerous.

It was not a thought he had ever believed he would have, but the proof was undeniably playing out in front of him to peruse.

Before, if Tom had ever accidentally let his eyes land on Ciro for any significant amount of time, the timid boy would shrivel and hide.

Now, he almost seemed to dare Tom to look at him.

It was...interesting. And more than a little mysterious.

Could losing all your memories so drastically change a person, as it seemed to have with Ciro? Did it somehow transform who you were at your core?

Because Tom knew that Nathan Ciro had never possessed such fire before his clumsy attempt to kill himself. He had been weak and inferior. He had never provoked anyone, and he had definitely never stared Tom in the eyes and challenged him.

But looking into Ciro's grey eyes now, it was like there was a predator gazing back, lurking just behind a flimsy veil of protection. It reminded Tom eerily of the old cat that prowled around the orphanage's garden sometimes, watching the children run around with unconcealed disdain; like they were so far below it they did not even register as potential threats.

Yes. Ciro certainly held some resemblance to that vicious, feral creature.

It was unnerving, if only because it was *wrong*.

It went against everything Ciro was - who he had been for years - and no matter how Tom tried to buck against the urge, he could feel his mind already hooking into this new puzzle.

It had been so long since something fascinating had happened, and he was bored.

He supposed Orion had had the right idea in approaching and claiming Ciro. There was something more going on with him than amnesia, and Tom was on the precipice of wanting to find out.

Unfortunately, he had already given Orion his permission to play with Ciro, and taking the other's toy away from him so soon would be distasteful and rude.

Tom began to pack up his equipment leisurely, because as much as he wished to chase down Ciro and continue to observe all of his new little traits, he knew there was no need to hurry. They had double Defence next, and Tom was confident Merrythought would keep to her habit of putting high achieving students with the lower ones.

Ciro had been mediocre at Defence, but his months away would prompt Merrythought to pair him with the top of the class. A position which Tom held greedily.

He would have plenty of time to begin his recategorisation of Ciro over the next few days.

He slid his bag strap over his head, eyes already drifting to where Lestrage was waiting for him by the door.

"Ah, Tom, may I speak with you?"

Safely facing away from the vexing man, Tom let his scorn bloom into existence. He gestured at Lestrage - no more than two fingers flicking out - and the other slipped from the room, leaving the two of them behind.

Tom pivoted, an insincere smile aimed at his most hated professor. "Sir? Is something the matter?"

Dumbledore did not even bother returning the attempt at civility. Tom wanted to gouge those sharp eyes out with his nails.

"Yes, I believe you noticed Mr. Ciro's lack of effort in today's class."

Tom's eyelids drooped, his lips pursing in faux-commiseration. "I did, sir. But when I offered to help he turned me down."

"Perhaps you should try harder, then." Dumbledore suggested gently, "Letting one's friends suffer needlessly is not appropriate behaviour."

Perhaps you should finally crawl into a hole and die, he thought, content that his mental shields were too strong for Dumbledore to get anything substantial.

Honestly, who did Dumbledore think he was kidding? They both knew Nathan Ciro had no friends - and if he did, Tom would never be one of them.

If the man was trying to prod Tom in that direction by antagonising him, he was in for a sore surprise.

“I’ll take that under advisement.” He intoned glibly. “Was that all? Because my next lesson starts soon, sir.”

He could see the frustration in Dumbledore’s eyes, but the man dismissed him nonetheless, likely far too used to being rebuffed at every turn.

Tom left the room, his mood ruined as it always was whenever the old man stuck his nose into his business.

Lestrangle was waiting for him, only the rapid tapping of his fingers against his forearm giving away his impatience. He straightened when Tom approached though, and fell into step with him when he started walking.

“What did he want?” Lestrangle asked.

Tom grunted, eyes narrowed and focussed ahead of them. “To explain to me the importance of not letting my friends fall behind in their work.”

Lestrangle cast him an amused smirk. “Ciro?”

“Ciro.” Tom confirmed.

“The least he could have done was accept your offer. I watched him for most of the lesson. The little idiot never even touched his quill.” Lestrangle rolled his eyes. “With that attitude, there’s no way he will catch up. Although,” a thoughtful expression pulled over his face. “if he fails his classes, that means we won’t have to deal with him next year. Maybe you should not help him after all.”

Tom’s lips twitched in response, though now that Lestrangle mentioned it, he thought back to Ciro’s stationery, and remembered how suddenly his inkwell had tipped over.

The electric jolts he had felt running along his arms when that heavy presence had draped itself over them plagued him. It had been magic, raw and unfettered, and powerful. The way it had wound along his limbs, whispering danger and threats against his skin had left him breathless.

And it was yet another puzzle piece Tom was struggling to fit together.

It had been the first time Tom had come into contact with Ciro’s pure magic, and it was like nothing he had ever experienced before.

That magic had been thick and rich, so cold it burned at Tom’s core. It had been *intent* and *will* and *bold* in its emergence. Taunting. Teasing. Giving him a small glimpse of the thing behind Ciro’s mask, before snapping back to hide from his hungry curiosity.

And then Ciro had fixed the mess, a flick of his wrist, his mouth never moving, and it had vanished.

Wandless. Nonverbal. Once again, demonstrating something he should not be able to do.

They rounded a corner, and both Tom and Lestrage stopped at the end of the hallway, eyes taking in the scene in front of them.

Ciro was sitting on the ground, the contents of his bag splayed out on the stone floor. Above him, three Gryffindors stood, all wearing smug expressions.

None of them had spotted their new audience.

As Tom watched, he saw one of Ciro's hands come up from where it was bracing him and wipe at his mouth. The pale limb fell back, and Tom spotted the streaks of red marring his skin.

Lestrage stepped forward, either to disperse the situation before a professor discovered it, or to lend some help to the Gryffindors. Tom raised his hand and pressed it against Lestrage's chest, halting the move.

The silent order was obeyed without question.

"Not so hot now, are you?" One of the three sneered.

Ciro, when he replied, sounded far more collected than Tom thought he should be. "Want me to show you what happened to the last person who touched me after I said no?"

A second boy brayed a laugh, "I wasn't aware you even *could* say 'no'." He spat, derisive and tactless in his insults. "I heard you usually *beg* -"

Quick as a snake, Ciro's legs swung out in a wide arc, catching the boy by his ankles and bringing him to the ground brutally. In the same movement, he rolled and sprung to his feet.

Ciro brushed off his uniform, but the smudges of blood at the corner of his mouth painted him like an animal.

"Still want to do this, boys? I'll give you one last chance to back out."

For one moment, Tom actually believed that Ciro would *brawl*. The way his hands were raised, fists ready, seemed to hint at an oncoming fight.

However, the second the Gryffindors stepped closer, Ciro's hands opened and pushed outwards. The hallway was drenched in a wave of magic - the same that had caught Tom's attention earlier - and all three of them went flying back.

They collided with the wall, their bodies slapping loudly against the rough stones before they tumbled to the ground.

In the beat of silence that followed, Tom breathed out shakily. He could still taste that roiling energy in the air, and from the corner of his eye, he could see Lestrage too had been affected by the magic.

Ciro tilted his head down at his three unsuccessful attacker, all of whom were still conscious and were now staring up at him in disbelief and no small amount of confusion.

“Scram.”

They did.

Ciro shook his hand as the three ran away from him, clicking his tongue in disapproval. He turned to pick up his bag and shuffled his belongings back inside.

As he pushed himself to his feet, he finally saw them.

Ciro faltered, his annoyance melting into uncertainty. But not fear.

Tom felt his interest give way into something deeper.

Oh, he was going to have *so much fun*.

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts? <3 <3 <3

Chapter Nine

Chapter Notes

Sorry about the wait for this guys. RL has been a bit of a shitstorm lately with a number of family stuff cropping up, plus I'm just finishing up my semester at uni so assessment has been breathing down my neck haha.

Thank you for all the lovely comments last chapter - I think we were over 100 just for that one, which is *huge*. Hope you all enjoy this update!

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

Harry knew he was being followed the moment he turned the first corner on his way to Defence. He could feel the tingle that raced down his spine – the way the hair on the back of his neck stood at attention – and did not know whether to roll his eyes in annoyance or hiss in frustration.

He was already unsteady from his little quarrel with Riddle, his stomach knotted and fingers tightly curled into a fist to stop his boiling magic. He did not want to deal with anyone else yet.

It was just... Those words – the kindness of the offer masking the callousness of Nathan's housemates...

It made him so angry.

What right did Riddle have to suddenly be willing to lend a hand, when before he had been content to let Nathan struggle?

The hypocrisy and arrogance and –

Harry squeezed his eyes shut, coming to a stop and pinching at the bridge of his nose. He forced himself to calm his breathing and allow his magic to settle. Letting himself get out of control would do nothing except cause more problems.

The prickling at the edge of his senses grew sharper, and Harry cracked his eyes open but made no move to lower his hand, effectively shielding most of his face from whoever it was watching him.

He was honestly growing tired of some of the students' incessant need to bully him. It was childish, and petty, and he could feel his patience running thin.

The entire mess was already trying enough – all the unknowns he was handling, all the questions and fears piling up in his mind, the stress nipping at his heels and the *damn symbol*

on his hip - without having to deal with things like school and homework and the cruelty of children.

He did not particularly want to hurt anyone, especially a bunch of school kids. He was an auror first and foremost, and he had made a vow to protect. But Harry had learnt a long time ago that bullying, no matter what form it took, had a habit of escalating to catastrophic levels.

Nathan, a prime example.

With deliberate slowness Harry lowered his arm and started walking again. He was painfully aware that the passages were now deserted, having fallen so far behind the initial rush of students moving to their new classes. He was, for all intents and purposes, alone.

Whoever it was that was following him, if they thought being by himself would somehow make him an easier target, they would be in for a nasty surprise.

His steps echoed horribly, bouncing off the stones and alerting anyone nearby to his approach. He made no effort to disguise them.

He turned another corner, entering a new hallway – one narrower than some of the others in the castle – when a lone figure emerged in front of him; nowhere near the biggest opponent he had faced, but still appearing somewhat intimidating.

Harry stopped once again, cocking his head and scanning the boy ahead of him critically. He was more than a little disappointed to see the Gryffindor tie.

He knew that his old House was hardly the shining example of integrity he had first believed it to be, and that Gryffindor had problems aplenty. He should have anticipated that he would be confronted with members from the other Houses. But some part of him was still saddened to see Gryffindor stooping so low.

It also pissed him off.

Harry pursed his lips, eyes sharp as he waited to see if the other was going to do anything.

There was a tense pause when neither moved. Then, just behind him, Harry heard the approach of others.

He tossed a quick glance over his shoulder, spotting two more Gryffindors coming around the corner. They must have been the ones following him.

Harry adjusted the strap of his bag and slowly let himself be herded further down the hallway. The first boy put a hand up as they drew closer. His smile was too wide and his eyes too hard for Harry's tastes.

"Ciro! Been wanting to talk to you since you got back."

Harry stared back blandly, preparing himself for whatever was about to happen. There were so many ways they could go about this – and while Harry was more than capable of handling physical or verbal confrontations, he did not want this to drag on more than it had to.

“Is this going to take long?” He asked abruptly, cutting through whatever stupid façade they were trying to lull him with. He never understood why some people liked pretending so much, he much preferred when his enemies just outright acted hostile. It was so much easier that way. “I have a class to get to.” He gestured at the hallway behind the boy.

The other two slinked their way around to their friend’s sides, forming a makeshift wall that blocked his path. Harry let his eyes jump between them.

They had to be fifth or sixth years. It would only be a year or two, but the differences in their height compared to Harry was too prominent for them to be the same year.

“Well?” He prompted when they took too long to respond.

Frowns rippled over their faces, twisting their features unpleasantly. There was also a spark of uncertainty in their eyes, and Harry suspected that they were thrown by his attitude. Just seeing that was enough to make him glad that he had not bothered pretending to be Nathan more than necessary.

Just thinking about how long Nathan had to suffer under this torment made him gnash his teeth. He had had no one to look out for him. No one who had been willing to step up and defend him. He had dealt with everything they threw at him until he felt he had to end it to get away.

It was about time someone shouldered some of the burden – even if Nathan might not ever get the chance to see it happen.

He stepped to the side and started walking, a determined weight to his steps.

“Hey!” An arm swung out and halted him, pushing against his chest until he was forced backwards again. “We didn’t say you could go.” The second boy spat, his face flushed.

“You’re wasting my time. If you have something to say, get it over with.” Harry snapped back.

“Oh ho.” The third boy laughed, rocking back on his heels with a grin that promised nothing good. “Look at you, Ciro. Finally got some bark, huh? Pity it took so long for it to develop – might have helped with your *accident*. ”

Harry could feel his anger rising. *Don’t do it kid*, he thought viciously, *don’t you dare turn that into a joke*.

“Yeah.” The first said gleefully, picking up where his friend left off. They must have seen something in his eyes and known they had hit a nerve. “But then again, you probably didn’t put up much of a fight in the first place.”

Harry clenched his fists, hiding the crackles of magic he *knew* were running along his fingertips. This was the first time anyone had been brazen – hell, *repulsive* enough to bring it up with him in such starkness. There had been whispers of insults nipping at his heels since he had come back, but no one had been stupid enough to say it to his face until now.

Do they even understand what happened? Do they have any idea what it can do to a person? Do they know what it feels like to be violated in such a way?

Harry's upper lip curled in a faint snarl. Because of course they did not. They were nothing more than children that had never experienced a hardship in their life.

They did not know how demoralising, how destroying, how *painful* it was to be forced down – *pinned* – and have your body and mind desecrated in one fell swoop.

Harry did though – he might never have experienced it, not fully – but he had seen the aftermath of what happened to Nathan. He had seen plenty during his run as an auror. Had taken statements of men and women, had seen the hollowed out look in their eyes, or the disgust they felt at *themselves*, or the sheer anger at what they had gone through.

It was not something you just got over. And it certainly was not something to *laugh about*.

“You don't know what the fuck you're talking about.” He said lowly, guttural. He could feel his magic bubbling at the back of his throat, demanding to be let loose. “So I suggest you get out of my way before you cross another line.”

“Yeah?” One of them – Harry did not even care to tell them apart anymore – sneered, leaning too close. “What are you going to do about it, Ciro? Huh?”

Harry was too focussed on the one invading his space, his vision tunnelled dangerously on that face, that he missed the quick movement of one of the others.

A flash of vibrant pink hit him squarely in the nose, and Harry was blown to the ground. He grunted as the air was knocked out of him, his bag going skittering along the ground somewhere behind him.

The scent of iron was thick, and Harry brought his tongue out to lick at the trail of blood dripping down over his lips to pool at his chin.

The three Gryffindors stood over him, looming threateningly with arrogant glints in their eyes. Harry absently rubbed at his face, either smearing the blood or wiping it off.

They don't deserve to wear that crest.

“Not so hot now, are you?”

Harry took a breath, relishing in the sting that erupted as the air rushed through his nose. He could feel as his temper froze over, becoming a blizzard instead of a raging fire. His voice was steady, not a hint of his emotions dripping through when he replied. “Want me to show you what happened to the last person who touched me after I said no?”

One of them laughed obnoxiously, and Harry's mouth curved into a sharp grin at the conceited sound. “I wasn't aware you even *could* say ‘no’.” He said ruthlessly. Harry calculated the distance between their legs. “I heard you usually *beg* –”

His leg shot out, flying swiftly, kicking that boy's feet out from under him and bringing him to his arse. Harry used the momentum to roll himself onto his feet and stare the three of them down. He took a second to fix his rumpled uniform before addressing them.

"Still want to do this, boys? I'll give you one last chance to back out." Harry really hoped they did not back out. He raised his hands in preparation.

And like the stupid boys they were, they tried to rush at him. Harry smirked, flinging his hands out and letting a small trickle of his magic retaliate.

The sound of them hitting the wall was like music to his ears.

Harry straightened carefully, gaze switching between them rapidly. He liked the look in their eyes – the realisation that they were in over their heads.

"Scram." He ordered, satisfied as they did just that. He watched after them for a moment to make sure they were successfully cowed before turning to pick up his belongings.

He was just getting to his feet again when he looked up. He shifted uneasily at the sight of the two boys at the end of the hallway.

That just figured, really. It had to be Riddle that saw him scare off three older boys.

Harry slipped his bag on properly, narrowing his eyes at the unsettling expression on Riddle's face. He absolutely did not want to know what the Slytherin was thinking.

He looked to the other – Gus, that had to be a nickname, Harry really needed to learn all of their names soon if he was going to be around them for who knew how long – and found nothing but partially concealed shock. Which was marginally better than whatever was going on in Riddle's head.

Do I say something, or just leave? Harry's feet were already twitching, his body starting to turn, when Gus spoke.

"What in Merlin's name was that?"

Harry paused at the question, debating whether to answer or not. On one hand, it really was none of their business what occurred between him and the Gryffindors. On the other hand, Harry knew that they would only continue to hound him until they got an answer. Best to give them one now, before they had time to really think over what they saw and come up with more questions.

"They picked a fight. I defended myself."

Gus' expression crinkled in disbelief and no small amount of frustration. "You used nonverbal magic – you used *wandless* magic."

Oh. Harry bit his lip. That made more sense for the boy to focus on. But was there anything he could say in response to that? He *had* used wandless and nonverbal magic against the

Gryffindors. He had been using it more than he had his wand since he had returned to Hogwarts, now that he thought about it.

Harry was by no means a master at both, but his larger than average core meant that sometimes it was just easier to forego his wand.

Gus brought up a good point though. Nathan Ciro would not possess the level of magic or skill needed to preform consistent feats of either nonverbal or wandless.

Which meant Harry would have to stop using his magic so carelessly, especially while at school. Yet another restriction he had to place on himself.

Harry shook his head and came back to the conversation. He spread his hands innocently. "I was scared," he started, trying to inject the right amount of wavering into his voice, "my magic responded. It happens all the time when we're younger. I guess I just reacted."

He watched as the boy digested that, and Harry knew it was a simple lie to swallow. It was far more believable that a fourteen year old had lost control and instinctively protected themselves, rather than purposefully controlled their magic to such a degree.

Gus should believe him, if only for his own peace of mind.

"Funny, you didn't look particularly frightened."

Harry barely refrained from glaring at Riddle. "I was." He told him, though he cursed the moment he responded because there had been far too much force in his tone.

There was no way Gus would fall for it now. Not with Riddle raising Harry's hackles as he did.

Riddle drifted closer to him, steps measured and light. Harry clenched his jaw and did not react to the predatory gleam in the boy's eyes. It seemed no matter what age, Riddle would always be some manner of disturbing.

"Truly?" Riddle asked, coming to a stop only a few feet away. "Now why don't I believe you? That's the third time you've done nonverbal and wandless magic, from what I've seen. First, tripping Carrow at dinner. Then, cleaning the ink spill. And now this. Too many to be anything but intentional I think."

"Do I look like I care what you *think*, Riddle?"

He needed to calm down. It was bad enough that Riddle was already paying such close attention to him, but actively antagonising him would do nothing but put himself more firmly on his radar. What small satisfaction he might get from running circles around the fledgling Dark Lord was hardly worth the trouble it would inevitably give him.

Riddle, however, looked delighted at his challenge. The taller boy leaned closer, head tilted like a bird. "No. No, you don't. Which is just *fascinating*, since before you would hang on my every word, whenever I decided to bother with you."

Well, at least he had dropped all pretences of being a caring housemate. This suited him more, in Harry's opinion. Cold and intelligent with danger leaking through the cracks.

"Maybe I got a wake up call." Harry replied, and it felt like he was cutting himself on the sharpness of his voice. "Maybe I've always been like this and I just decided to finally stand up for myself."

"No one is that good of an actor."

"You are." It was out of his mouth before he could check himself. Harry winced at his recklessness.

A laugh escaped from Riddle, tinged with enough surprise that Harry knew it was entirely genuine. The Slytherin bit his lower lip lightly in consideration. His amusement faded into a pensive little expression, his eyes raking over Harry's face curiously.

"It's like you're a completely different person." He murmured to himself.

Harry forced himself not to react. That was –

He knew Riddle was terrifyingly intelligent. He had been on the receiving end of that brutal mind more than once – had been *inside* that mind enough to know its twists and turns. But to have Riddle so blatantly guess the truth of Harry's situation was disorientating.

He carefully expelled the air in his lungs, loosening his tense posture and rolling his eyes. "Don't be stupid, Riddle. You're just annoyed you never saw through the guise. Now, if you're done with your little interrogation, we should probably head to Defence before we get a detention."

OoO

Galatea looked up from her scroll when the door to her classroom opened with a creak. She blinked, brow furrowing as her three missing Slytherins quickly made their way to her desk.

“Mr. Riddle,” she began, eyes briefly darting over the other two, lingering on Ciro, before cycling back to her top student, “is there a reason you are more than ten minutes late?”

Tom smiled at her apologetically. “Yes, Professor Merrythought. I was held back by Professor Dumbledore to discuss some academic matters and it took a bit longer than intended. On the way here, Augustus and I encountered Nathan. He was a bit lost so we had to show him the route. I’m sorry for the delay.”

Galatea relaxed, turning her attention to Ciro. The boy was staring at Tom’s back, the beginnings of a scowl on his young face. Now she understood. It was rare that Tom was late to her classes, but if he was helping his housemate then she was willing to let it go.

“Of course Tom, thank you for being so considerate.” The boy’s smile widened, and Ciro’s expression darkened. Galatea felt a prick of sympathy for him. It must be hard to have to accept help for even something as simply as travelling between classes.

“Mr. Ciro,” she said, lowering her voice so that none of her overly curious students could hear. “I’m happy to see you back at Hogwarts. I understand that your situation is delicate at the moment, and until you have recovered your memories, I think it’s best to place you with Tom. He is the top of the class and should be able to provide you any assistance, plus being in the same House will give you ample opportunity to catch up. If that is alright with you, Tom?”

“Perfectly, professor.” Tom agreed, his attention fixed on his classmate. “I’m happy to lend a hand.”

Ciro muttered something under his breath, but he uncrossed his arms and looked up at her with blank eyes. It was disconcerting to have a student, one that she had known for years and watched grow, stare at her like she was a stranger. “Thank you, Professor Merrythought. I’ll do my best to get up to date. I wouldn’t want to give Riddle more work.”

Ciro aimed a smile at his housemate, brittle and completely insincere. Galatea frowned at the deliberate disrespect. She knew Ciro and Riddle had not been friendly before the boy’s accident – and a part of her ached for what had happened to her student, because she should have taught him more defensive spells, she should have been a better teacher to him, maybe then he would have had a chance – but he seemed entirely ungrateful of Tom’s help.

Was it pride? Was Ciro merely feeling like relying on his classmates was a sign of weakness? That was not like him. He had always been a painfully polite young man, and lacked an arrogant bone in his body.

Her eyes darted between them, but whatever silent conversation that was happening in front of her was beyond her understanding. Slytherins had always been like this, she knew. But no matter how often she witnessed the dynamics at work, she was always felt uneasy at the constant plays.

“Take your seats boys, I will mark you present on the roll. Make sure to answer the questions on the board, then we will be moving onto a class discussion.”

The three of them moved after a beat, and Galatea watched with bemusement as Tom all but steered Ciro to their joint desk.

He was such a bright student, but so odd at times.

For a long time the only noise was the scratching of quills, and Galatea contented herself to alternating between marking her older students' assignments, and keeping an eye on her class.

She paid particular attention to Ciro, just to make sure the boy was not struggling. Other than the abnormally large pauses between his answering of questions, he seemed to be fine. In fact, Galatea found that he was one of the first students finished even after missing the first ten minutes.

How intriguing, she thought quietly. Ciro had always been a studious one, but there was nothing stellar about his abilities. He was an average student, with average marks, neither standing out nor fading into the background.

She watched him covertly, but as more and more students completed the questions she was forced to continue with the lesson. She stood and called for their attention.

“Now, who knows the most common form of hex-deflection?”

Hands rose. “Miss Langton?”

“That would be *protego*, Professor Merrythought.”

Galatea nodded, “Good. *Protego* is one of the simplest, yet most effective methods of protecting yourself from curses and hexes. However, it typically only blocks moderate-ranked attacks. There are a number of variations of this spell. How many are there?”

She cast her gaze around. “Mr. Riddle?”

The Slytherin lowered his hand, “Other than *protego*, there are four variation. *Protego duo*, *protego horribilis*, *protego maxima* and *protego totalum*. ”

“Excellent, five points to Slytherin.” She turned to her blackboard, and with a wave of her wand, the chalk piece began to write. “Is there anything else the *protego* can accomplish?”

She glanced over her shoulder, blinking in surprise at the first hand she saw. Galatea slowly rotated, debating whether to call on him or not. In many ways, if he were wrong it might

cause him undue embarrassment. But not calling on him when he was one of the few with his hand up could be equally damaging.

“Mr. Ciro?”

He was leaning back in his chair, looking completely confident in his answer. “If the caster is paying proper attention they can block physical blows. If they’re particularly talented, they can even redirect hexes cast at them back at their opponent. That takes a level of focus not a lot of people are capable of though.”

She blinked in surprise. “That’s...correct. Well done, Mr. Ciro.” That was a more obscure fact about this defensive charm, and not many users were ever skilled enough to reach that level.

A flicker of a smile crossed his face at her praise.

OoO

Augustus pressed his lips together tightly as Professor Merrythought carried on with her lecture. His eyes drilled into Ciro's back, silently baffled that the other had known the answer.

He is supposed to have no memories, and yet he was able to answer a question in one of the most difficult subjects on his first day back.

Augustus looked down at his parchment, his eyes roaming unseeingly over the jotted words. His mind continued to loop back over the incident in the hallway, and Riddle's intense reaction to it.

It reminded him sharply of Orion's own budding fascination with Ciro. He had known for years by this point that Riddle and Orion were cut from the same cloth in many ways, and shared the habit of fixating on certain things to a dangerous level.

He had never expected either of them to grow interested in Ciro.

Although, now that he had had a chance to watch the other boy, he could at least understand their reasonings.

Ciro was different from before.

His gaze lifted, inevitably drawn to the back of Ciro's head once again. He was only a desk behind them, giving him ample opportunity to observe the amnesic boy.

Augustus watched as Ciro all but lounged in his seat, one arm thrown casually over the back of it and a comfortable slouch to his posture. He was following the professor dutifully, but there was a distant gleam in his eyes that told Augustus that Ciro was not fully present.

It was disquieting how much he had changed.

Before, Ciro was – small. He never had the courage to project even the faintest traces of confidence, keeping his arms tucked in close and his head lowered.

Why is he so different? Augustus thought furiously. *Losing his memories should have made him more pathetic, not less.*

As he watched, Riddle's head tilted towards Ciro, the movement of his lips was barely discernible. And even this close Augustus had trouble hearing what was said. But he did spot the tension that rippled through Ciro's shoulders.

Ciro's head snapped around, and Augustus stared as the other leaned into Riddle's space with a snarl on his face.

Ciro's reply was little more than a harsh whisper, but regardless of how fierce it was, Riddle merely smiled.

Augustus carefully looked away once more.

He had learned years ago that when Riddle smiled, nothing good followed.

It made him nervous as well. Orion had already laid claim to *Ciro*, and had been explicitly clear about his intentions. If Riddle was thinking to do the same...

Neither of them were the sharing type.

There was still another year or two before the official hierarchy had to be established within their group. But if Orion and Riddle clashed now it could have potential ramifications well into their last year. Orion might not care too much for House politics, but giving up his position without a fight would be a sign of weakness – which was not something he would tolerate.

Augustus hoped it did not come to that. Pre-emptively going after each other – and all because of *Ciro* – was not worth it. They had to know that.

Though Riddle and Orion were both more than a little mad at times.

“Alright,” Merrythought called, clapping her hands sharply to draw their attention, “we will be partnering and taking turns helping each other to cast a proper *protego*. I want you all to remember what you have learned in your Charms classes, as well as what we have discussed here. Professor Morgan and I both expect you all to be able to conjure a steady shield by the end of the week.”

Augustus grimaced as he stood with his partner, a Ravenclaw girl that trembled when their eyes met. As if he would be careless enough to hurt her in plain view of their professor. He refrained from rolling his eyes as he pulled his wand free.

“Help each other's wand movements. If your partner is struggling, try and help them fix their stances. Your peers should be the ones you ask before coming to a teacher. Attempt to solve it amongst yourselves first.”

Augustus sneered when his partner stepped closer to him, hands held out uncertainly. “*Protego*.” He said, and with a wave of his wand, a faint shimmer appeared before him.

Her eyes widened appropriately, a flush of embarrassment overtaking her cheeks. “Um, I'm still having trouble with conjuring one. I can only hold it for a few seconds before it vanishes.”

She cast it, and Augustus watched dispassionately as the shield failed mere moments into its life. What a shameful display of magic.

“You need to push more magic into the spell.” He informed her, words absent of any kindness. She flinched at his tone.

“I try, but I can never concentrate it enough. It’s hard.”

The derisive curl to his mouth became more pronounced. “It’s one of the easiest forms of defensive magic,” he said pointedly, “if you cannot even cast this then what good are you?”

“Hey now, no need to be rude.”

Augustus’ eyes cut to his left to see Ciro scowling up at him. The shorter boy reached out and pushed at Augustus’ chest, moving him to the side with a soft force. So stunned at the boldness of the action, Augustus let it happen.

Ciro was not the type to initiate contact. He had been bitten more than enough to reinforce an aversion to touch.

Ciro turned his attention to the Ravenclaw girl, face thoughtful as he stared at her. “Lots of people have difficulty with this charm in the beginning. It’s perfectly normal.” He soothed, moving closer. “What you’re missing is confidence. You’re more than capable of conjuring a shield, you’ve just got to have the right push.”

The girl stared at Ciro perplexed, like she did not know why he was even talking to her. Ciro did not seem to notice the rapidly forming annoyance in her eyes.

“Do it again.” He commanded with the ease of a teacher.

“Excuse me?” She arched an eyebrow at the boy.

Ciro – shockingly – rolled his eyes and sighed. “Do it again, please?” The added request did nothing to hide the demand still coating his words.

The girl’s shoulders locked. “I’m sorry, did I ask you, Ciro? What would you even know about this – you’ve been out of school for months. I bet you can’t do one either, and you think you have the right to lecture me?”

Augustus was tempted to agree, but he caught sight of Riddle hovering just behind Ciro with a captivated twist to his expression. Then he remembered the hallway, and the dinner in the Great Hall, and the incident with Carrow – and he was forced to admit that maybe Ciro was more capable than they gave him credit for.

Again, Ciro was unfazed by the irritated attitude. Instead he half-turned to face Riddle. “Hex me.”

To Augustus’ surprise – they were in a *classroom* for Merlin’s sake – Riddle did not even hesitate.

The hex shot at Ciro with concerning speed, only to clash with a perfect *protego* a few inches before Ciro’s unimpressed face. The bright flash of colour drew the immediate attention of everyone in the room, including Merrythought.

“That’s the best you can do? A stinging hex?” Ciro tutted, and the curve of his grin was daring. His wand was held loosely in his hand. “Come on Riddle, put a little effort in. I’m

trying to prove a poi –”

The next hex was even faster – Augustus had not even seen Riddle’s wand move – but it too connected with the shield charm, dissolving harmlessly.

“Better.” Ciro proclaimed, turning to the girl and leaving his back completely open. “See? Now your problem is you don’t believe your shield will actually stop anything. It’s a mental block. You doubt yourself so of course it doesn’t work. You need to have more faith in yourself; you’re stronger than you think.”

“Mr. Ciro! Tom! What on earth is going on!” Merrythought descended on them like one of the furies. “I did not give you permission to cast any hexes!”

“Just a little demonstration, Professor Merrythought.” Riddle said smoothly. Augustus glanced at him probingly, but there was not even a wisp of what Riddle thought about Ciro blocking his attacks so effortlessly. “Sylvia was having some trouble, and we thought it best to give her a practical showing of how the charm works.”

The way she wavered in the face of Tom’s explanation was ridiculously obvious. “Still. I do not want to catch another spell being thrown that I have not asked for. Understood?”

“Of course, professor. We’re terribly sorry.”

Ciro nodded along. “Won’t happen again.”

She studied them both before departing to help another pair.

“How do you know how to cast a shield charm?” The girl asked irascibly. “How can *you* block *Tom’s* hexes?”

Ciro flapped his hand uncaringly. “Riddle’s not as good as you think. Are you going to give it another shot? Focus on your shield, about making it as thick as a wall. Think how nothing can get you from behind it.”

Sylvia hesitated, clearly unwilling to trust Ciro to such a degree. Her gaze landed on Riddle, who merely nodded in encouragement.

She returned the nod, steeling herself as she raised her wand. “*Protego.*” She said firmly, slashing her wand through the air.

In front of her, a shimmering barrier appeared. Sylvia’s eyes widened in delight. “I did it.” She breathed.

Ciro smiled at her, reaching out and plucking a quill off of the desk next to him. He tossed it underarm at her shield, and they all watched as it bounced off. “Strong enough to block physical attacks as well. Nicely done.”

Something brushed against his elbow. Augustus cocked his head enough to glance at Riddle from the corner of his eyes. “He blocked your attacks.”

The other boy hummed in agreement, attention entirely fixed on their Housemate. Augustus tapped his fingers against his arm in contemplation. “And now he is attempting to teach others? I do not understand him. How has he changed so much? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“No, it doesn’t, does it?” Riddle said quietly.

Chapter End Notes

I'm now on tumblr as well! So if anyone has any questions/just wants to scream at me drop by! <https://childotkw.tumblr.com/>

Now I need to go and cry because QLD is currently losing State of Origin T-T

Chapter Ten

Chapter Notes

I'm a terrible updater. My apologies.

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

Harry did not linger once the class had ended. He just grabbed his bag, thanked the heavens that he had not bothered unpacking anything, then booked it before Merrythought had even finished talking. No one tried to stop him.

His skin had a permanent itch to it right now, one he was unfortunately quite familiar with. It always came to him whenever he felt eyes on him, unwavering and heavy like shackles.

He needed to get some space before he did anything else dangerous.

Helping the Ravenclaw girl – while it was right, and let Harry forget, for a brief instant, the confusing mess that was his life – was unequivocally *stupid*.

He should have known better than to draw too much attention to himself. He should have known better than to put himself in such a position.

You're an idiot, Potter. He thought harshly.

And baiting Riddle like that... Harry knew he was not the smartest person out there, and that his self-preservation instincts were a bit lacking – but even he knew better than to push Riddle the way he had. Young and unrefined though he might be, this was still the boy who would grow up to topple a government and destroy an untold number of lives – Harry's included.

Playing around with the other was inviting disaster down upon himself. The last thing he wanted was to get involved in Riddle's affairs. Harry might lose his temper and accidentally murder the little arrogant bastard.

It had been a close thing, when Riddle had thrown those hexes at him. Sure, Harry had asked him to do it, but in that moment, with Riddle staring him down, wand raised, he had struggled to remember where he really was. He could not afford to make that mistake again.

Unbidden, the memory of Riddle's expression as Harry deflected his attacks flashed through his mind, and Harry's mood soured further.

He knew that look, and he absolutely hated whenever it was directed at him.

“Ciro!” Harry’s feet faltered at the call and his eyes closed in an effort to reign in his sparking anger. He would know that voice anywhere, and a glance over his shoulder showed it really was Riddle walking towards him. Just behind him were two other Slytherins, ones he recognised from the common room.

Harry watched the group approach with a scowl, though some vindictive part of him noted that they would have had to run to catch up with him, even if Riddle looked as unruffled as ever.

Prick.

Harry briefly debated making a run for it. Riddle’s legs were undoubtedly longer, but Harry was sure he knew the castle better. So many sleepless nights studying the Marauder’s Map had left dozens of secret passages engraved on his brain.

Riddle must have seen the shifty look in his eyes, because he spoke before Harry could so much as lift a foot. “Don’t be a child. I would find you eventually.”

Harry squared his jaw, wanting to bolt just to spite the other, before his sense of logic overrode the desire. He knew he would not be able to avoid Riddle forever since they were in the same year and house right now.

But God if he was not tempted.

“What do you want?” He snapped, his fingers wrapping around his wand, tucked securely in his pocket.

Riddle’s eyes darted to catch the movement, but he merely glanced back to Harry’s face without comment. “You forgot this.” He said, holding up a few pieces of parchment. “Professor Merrythought handed them out at the end of class, but you left so quickly I offered to give it to you instead.”

“Purely out of the goodness of your heart, I’m sure.” Harry said waspishly. He ignored the hint of a smirk on the other’s face and held out his hand. “Fine. Give it here.”

Riddle hummed in consideration, and the two boys with him snickered. “No.”

Harry’s hand dropped as his shoulders drew up in agitation. “You know, the purpose of an errand boy is to deliver things.” He said with a bit of acid. “So why don’t you just do your job like a good little boy?”

Riddle’s face darkened, his smug mask cracking. Harry watched with a sharp smile.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re exceptionally dislikeable?”

Harry snorted, “Every damn day of my life.” He murmured to himself before speaking louder. “If I gave a damn what people thought of me, Riddle, I wouldn’t have made it this long.” And that was the truth. Harry had adopted a rather vicious disregard of the opinions of anyone he did not hold dear. The media in particular caught the brunt of his ire, much to the consternation of his superiors.

Harry was barred from interacting with reporters without someone else present. It was a surprisingly efficient arrangement.

“Funny,” Riddle said in a tone that implied it was not funny at all, “I was under the impression that it was because of everyone’s opinions that you took your little dive off that roof.”

Harry’s back straightened and he felt his magic coil around him like a snake, rearing back in preparation to strike. “Don’t.” He snarled, stepping into Riddle’s space and staring him down. “You don’t have a clue what you’re talking about.”

Riddle’s eyes were bright. “Don’t I?” He asked silkily. “It was all over the school, after all. Why, I’d wager I know more about it than you. Little Nathan Ciro got lost in some alley in Knockturn Alley and finally put some stock in those rumours.”

“What rumours?” Harry demanded, his control fraying remarkably fast. He knew what Riddle was doing, but damn him if it was not effective.

“You know,” Riddle said coily, cocking his head and smiling like he had won something, “your *exploits*. How you were a little *slut* and spread your legs for any –”

Harry’s hand grabbed Riddle by his collar and yanked him down so their faces were inches apart. “Watch your mouth, you little *bastard*,” he hissed, “or I’m going to break your jaw.”

Riddle clicked his tongue lightly, “So beastly these days, Ciro. So uncouth. Hard to imagine that you grew up in a high society family with language like that.”

Harry’s teeth ached from how hard he was grinding them, but he forced his fingers to loosen their hold when his common sense finally decided to apply itself.

Getting into any sort of fight with Riddle was not worth it, even though Harry knew, with a dark stab of pride, that he would win.

The two other boys that he had been steadfastly ignoring now shifted into his view, their wands drawn but aimed towards the ground in uncertainty.

“You alright, Tom?” One of them asked cautiously.

“He’s fine.” Harry said, snatching the parchment from Riddle’s hand now that he was close enough. He flicked through them, using the distraction to gather what little remained of his calm.

“I wasn’t asking you, Ciro.” The boy snapped back.

“Do you think he’s so delicate he can’t handle a little tussle?” Harry asked pointedly. He watched as the other’s face twisted in annoyance as he tried to answer. It was almost amusing to see him squirm, when it was not even a difficult question. He tuned out whatever stuttered reply the other gave, trying not to roll his eyes too hard.

Harry turned his attention back to the parchment, only glancing back up when it was obvious that the others were not leaving. “Don’t you lot have class of something?”

“Free period.” Riddle answered back smoothly, his hands absently fixing his rumpled uniform. “And we should discuss our assignment.”

“Huh?”

Riddle wrinkled his nose at him, and the move was so pretentious Harry finally did roll his eyes. “Our Defence assignment.” Riddle said slowly, like the arsehole he was. “Professor Merrythought assigned us together, for your benefit, naturally.”

“Naturally.” Harry echoed with only a twinge of mocking. “I don’t even know why I’m surprised anymore.” He said, turning and walking away abruptly.

Riddle followed him, easily keeping pace. Harry hated him. “I was thinking of doing a variation of a protection spell.” He said out of the blue.

Harry shot him a look, noting that the other two were also trotting after them, but keeping their distance. “What?”

Riddle rolled his eyes and sighed, like Harry was being purposefully obtuse. “For our assignment. Keep up, Ciro. We must pick a defensive spell and write a report on it, including the various applications of it.”

“So why not just pick something simple, like *protego*?”

Riddle stared at him. “Because unlike you, I have standards.” He sniffed, looking away before Harry could murder him with his glare. “And there is extra credit if we learn to cast whatever we chose, marks are comparable to the difficulty of the spell itself.”

Harry huffed, “Fine. What one were you thinking, then? Is it a spell that protects an area? A person? Something inanimate? Or are we going more abstract, like a secret? There are plenty of spells that affect information. They’re classified as ‘defensive’, particularly if it’s sensitive in nature, or protecting something important.”

Harry had dabbled quite extensively in defensive spells, for obvious reasons. His entire time on the run had demanded it, and his time as an auror had merely reinforced his expertise.

Nearly all auror files were under some type of protective charm, to keep the information inside from slipping into the public. And luckily, Harry knew how to cast a majority of them.

He could not tell that to Riddle, but if he could push them in that direction, then it would not be hard to complete this assignment.

And as far as he was concerned, the less time he spent with Riddle, the better.

He turned to face the other, only to find Riddle was already staring at him with a raised eyebrow.

Harry hunched his shoulders, immediately uncomfortable with the scrutiny. “Stop looking at me.”

Riddle’s other eyebrow joined its twin. “We’re having a conversation. It would be rude to not look at you.” He pointed out, like he was the epitome of propriety, and had not called someone a whore just minutes ago.

Harry frowned. “Well I don’t like being stared at like I’m an insect, so quit it.”

The confusion in Riddle’s eyes burned brighter, and Harry wondered what he had possibly said that caused that reaction. But Riddle blinked and a wall appeared to erect behind his eyes.

“We can ask Professor Merrythought about your suggestion later. I think the more abstract, the better our report will be. It will stand out from the rabble.”

“And you’re all about standing out.” Harry could not help but mutter. Riddle’s eyes shot to him, clearly having heard. His mouth opened to say something, but Harry cut him off. “Well great. Glad we got that sorted out. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have somewhere to be.”

“Really?” One of the others asked with a hidden sneer. “And where’s that?”

“Away from you.” Harry answered bluntly, taking the next corner, knowing there was a passageway coming up that he could slip into.

OoO

Harry spent the rest of his free period holed up in one of the various unused classrooms in Hogwarts.

He had wanted to go to the Room of Requirement, but he did not know if anyone else was aware of its existence yet – the D.A. would hardly be the first students to stumble across it – and the last thing he wanted was to risk running into anyone else.

So, he had picked a classroom that had been in disuse for apparently decades, and set to re-establishing it to its former glory.

He watched with a critical eye as the furniture moved around under his guidance, clearing layers of dust and grime away with careless waves of his hands, and cracked the windows to let the stale air out.

Once he was satisfied, he set to protecting his little hideaway. The spells and charms he applied to the classroom were complex – most actually ones developed to preserve crime scenes or monitor a certain area of interest – and he was confident that only a handful of the castle's inhabitants would be able to get passed his work once he was done.

Security taken care of, Harry cast a *tempus*. It was well into lunch, and he did not fancy going to the Great Hall amid the rush.

He summoned one of the school elves and asked for a small plate to be made up for him. The bubbly little creature jumped at the request, and blushed heavily when Harry thanked her before she vanished back to the kitchens or wherever she was needed.

He leaned back and savoured the rich food, enjoying the peace and quiet the room afforded him.

He was halfway through a bite, fork still stuck in his mouth, when his side flared up again. Harry's teeth clamped over the fork prongs, stinging his gums and tongue as he curled over himself, hand pressed to the burning mark on his hip.

He gritted his teeth and forced himself to breathe through the waves of pain blinding him. He stayed there for a good five minutes before the agony dulled to a faint ache.

Harry sat back carefully and moved his shirt and pants enough to see the mark. The skin was unbroken, but there was a very real splash of blood smudged around the symbol.

He cleaned it away with a flick of his wrist, but the sight was still unnerving.

“What the hell are you?” He asked, running a finger tenderly over the throbbing lines of the triangle.

He sighed heavily and tucked his shirt back into his waistline.

He needed to figure this all out, and fast. The last thing he wanted was this thing – whatever it was – getting worse. He had been lucky so far that no one had really noticed the mark acting up, but if anyone saw it, he had no idea what they would do.

Because he was not an idiot. The symbol might mean something specific to him, but here, in 1942, it meant something else entirely. He did not want to know what reaction he would get from walking around with Grindelwald's mark tattooed on his body.

Harry groaned, scrubbing at his face in irritation. He pulled out one of his textbooks and a roll of parchment, deciding to use the last half of lunch to get a start on his homework. He would save his more dubious research for when he was not trapped by his schedule.

OoO

Harry spent the rest of the day dying of boredom in his classes and avoiding Riddle as best he could.

He had no desire to encourage Riddle's budding fascination with him, but it seemed that the more Harry pushed him away, the more determined Riddle became.

It was remarkably childish of the other, and not at all what he had been expecting.

Riddle – Voldemort – had always been so much more refined to Harry. He had carried himself with a poise few could match and delighted in verbally running circles around others. There were moments where he had lost his composure – mainly to do with Harry derailing his plans, of course – but it had never really managed to shatter the image he presented.

Seeing Riddle acting like this was bewildering to say the least. Like a child that was being denied a toy. And Harry very much disliked which role he appeared to be playing in that scenario.

But for all of Riddle's tenacity, Harry had one advantage. Riddle's reputation, and he abused the loophole it gave him without restraint.

Riddle could not be seen as someone who ran around after someone like Nathan Ciro. It would damage others' opinions of him, and that meant he could only be seen around Harry so much a day.

And even once classes ended, and the threat the common room posed to him began to loom, Harry wasted no time in changing into simple clothes and leaving before anyone could think to stop him.

He followed the route he had carved out for himself the first day and slipped into a light jog. His weeks of inhabiting Nathan's body had done wonders so far for his stamina, and everyday Harry could feel some of his familiar strength returning. The faint burn and stretch of his muscles was fantastic, and it was the easiest way he had to reduce the building stress in his shoulders.

His feet pounded against the flat ground, before he started down the stone steps that would lead him past where Hagrid's hut would one day sit. Harry refused to look, because the empty lot of land made his heart squeeze uncomfortably.

He jogged along the edge of the forest, down the winding hills as he drew ever closer to the lake. The grass changed to dirt, then rocks, before eventually rolling into sand. His legs burned as the ground shifted underneath him with each step.

Harry's eyes roamed the area ahead of him, constantly scanning without really looking for anything. He was still on Hogwarts' grounds, and even this close to the Forbidden Forest, he doubted anything would try and approach him.

Which was probably why he was so surprised to see someone wandering around in front of him.

Harry slowed automatically, eyes darting up and down the figure curiously. His wand was sitting in the holster on his thigh, but he refrained from drawing it.

He walked closer, keeping his stance casual.

It was a girl, and she was wearing a Hufflepuff uniform as she paced between the water's edge and the tree line, back and forth unerringly.

Harry stopped a good way off from her, because she was soaked through to the bone, and although her feet pressed into the sand, there were no footprints.

He swallowed uneasily. "Hello?" He called gently, but she either did not hear him, or was ignoring him. She continued on her path, back and forth, back and forth. Her lips were moving, but no matter how hard he listened, he could not hear anything.

She looked lost.

The pit in his stomach became cavernous.

Harry stepped closer, his hands rising in preparation. "Hello?" He said again, keeping his voice soft. "Are you okay?" He was close enough to make out her features, blurry though they were.

She still ignored him, and as she turned to make another loop, Harry caught sight of the large gash on her temple. It was a brutal wound, and the side of her face was covered in fresh blood, the pale skin mottled yellow and purple.

A ghost. Harry had never seen her before – had never even heard mention of a student's ghost hanging around the Great Lake. Hell, he had never seen a ghost in such vivid colour before. All the ones he knew were washed out in greys and whites, and mostly transparent.

To see one like this was disconcerting.

"Hey." Harry finally said when he got close enough to reach out and touch her if she were corporeal. "Are you alright? Can you hear me?"

He reached out tentatively so his hand was hovering in her way. He knew it would do nothing to her, but maybe the disturbance to her aura would be enough to –

His hand smacked into her stomach.

Harry lurched backwards in surprise.

The girl froze where she was, her pale lips falling still as her head slowly rotated so her milky eyes were locked on him. They stared at each other in a moment of shared disbelief. And then something in her expression rippled, and she *screamed*.

Harry's hands shot to his ears as the unearthly screech echoed through his head. He gritted his teeth and felt his magic stir in response to his spiking heartbeat. He could not go for his wand, not without risking his ears rupturing, but when he went to back away, the girl stepped after him.

There was something terrified and animalistic to her now, and Harry felt his own fear slam into him.

Her scream cut off so abruptly it left him reeling, but the relief was short lived because she *lunged at him*.

Harry stumble back, arms raising instinctively –

Her nails – claws, she had *fucking claws now* – sliced through his skin like a hot knife through butter and Harry choked on his own scream as ice poured through him.

He dropped to the ground like a brick and scrambled backwards, but the sand was too loose, and he could not get away fast enough as she stalked after him with shambling steps.

Harry's magic bubbled to the surface and his hand found something in the sand behind him. The familiar feel of a wand sent a jolt of clarity through him. He jerked the wand forward, knowing it was futile, that ghosts were largely immune to magic, and all he wanted was for her to *leave* –

The space before him was empty.

Harry sat there, panting frantically, wand held aloft in his bloodied, shaking hand. Slowly, he lowered his arm and stared at the spot she had been in, his mind rushing to make sense of what he had just seen.

A splash distracted him, and his head snapped to the side. There was nothing there, but the water near to him rippled out like something had just dropped below surface. A twig snapped in the next moment, and he turned the other way. He caught a glimpse of something taller than a human moving deeper into the shadows, and he could faintly make out the sound of hooves beating the ground.

The feeling of eyes on him had his skin breaking out into goose bumps, and a shiver trailed down his spine as the air seemed to grow colder. Harry gingerly picked himself up, biting his lip as he once again looked around for any signs of the ghost that had attacked him.

There was nothing.

He backed away slowly, disliking how hostile the beach suddenly felt. He turned around and sprinted back the way he had come, not stopping until he was back within the castle and leaning against the cool stone wall.

Harry sank down to the floor in the deserted hall, shivering lightly as the chill in his bones reached deeper inside him.

He sat there staring blankly at the opposite wall, his hands resting in his lap limply.

“Ciro?”

He blinked suddenly, registering how dark it was with the detached sort of realisation that came with being in shock. His head shifted enough to see a figure standing a few feet from him. It took him a few moments to place his face.

“Gus.”

“Augustus.” The other corrected instinctively, his steely eyes pinned to Harry intensely.

“Ah. Right.” Harry continued to look up at the other. “Shouldn’t you be at the Great Hall?” He asked casually, his mouth moving without his input.

Augustus’ frown deepened, and there was something related to concern showing on his face. He came closer. “I was –” He cut himself off, eyes widening and shoulders tensing. “What the fuck happened to you?”

Harry looked down at himself, taking in the gorges in his arms, the blood splattering his clothes and the sand sticking to every available patch of skin. He looked back up with a small grimace. “I think I need to go to the hospital wing.” He declared, pushing himself to his feet with trembling legs. His arms burned with pain now that he was paying attention to them, and he hissed quietly.

“Bloody hell,” he muttered, “what a mess.” He glanced at Augustus speculatively. “If you’re not going to help, you can go. I’m fine.”

The boy shot him a look that clearly conveyed what he thought of that statement. Harry wondered at the sight he must make, covered in sand and blood and looking seconds away from fainting.

He did not wait for the other to make his decision, he merely started off towards the hospital wing, measuring his steps with more care than he was used to.

Augustus caught up with him just as he turned the first corner. The boy did not offer him a hand, nor did he ask any annoying questions, and Harry was oddly grateful for the silent company.

They made their way to the hospital wing without running into anyone else – a minor miracle.

The poor woman manning the desk looked up at their entry, only to shoot to her feet when she caught sight of Harry’s state. “Great Merlin!” She exclaimed, busily around the desk to his side, surprisingly spry for such an elderly woman. “What on earth happened?”

She guided Harry towards one of the closer beds, her wand already fluttering around him frantically. “I went for a run.” Harry explained with the ease borne of years of lying to people’s faces. “I tripped over and rolled down a hill.” He held out his arms in presentation. “My arms got the worst of it, I think I caught them on a log or something and scratched them up badly.”

It was easy, the excuses.

The witch stared at him like she did not fully believe him, and the soft light of concern in her eyes hardened as she looked to Augustus. “Please go and get Professor Slughorn for me. Tell him I require a bottle of Murtlap Essence immediately. I told him two days ago I needed a new supply.”

Augustus’ face did not show his thoughts on being ordered around, but after a prolonged pause he turned to leave the wing as he was bid.

The healer turned back to him and the anger in her face vanished. “Oh, you poor boy. Here, let’s get you cleaned up.” She took a hold of his arm and twisted it to get a better look at the gashes. With a wave of her wand, the sand and blood disappeared, leaving the wounds clear for inspection.

“A log, you said?” She probed, aiming her wand at the longest one and concentrating.

Harry hummed, not at all bothered by her disbelief. “That’s right. Caught me by surprise.”

She glanced at him for a moment, searching for something, before returning to her task. “These don’t look like normal scratches.” She informed him, again with that tone.

Harry met her gaze and said nothing. Her mask cracked, and she sighed heavily. “Oh, Nathan. Please don’t do this again. Tell me, was it...him?”

Harry blinked in confusion. “Who?” He looked over her shoulder to the door as understanding flooded him. “You think Augustus did this? Why would he bother escorting me here if he was the one who hurt me?”

Her face tightened. “It wouldn’t be the first time someone brought you here to avoid suspicion.” She said with venom.

“I...appreciate the concern,” he started uncertainly, “but Augustus didn’t hurt me. He found me in the hallway and followed me here.”

“Then who?” The sorrow in her voice was too genuine to be faked, and Harry felt his chest warm at her gentle compassion. The ice that had been crawling through him finally started to ebb.

“No one. I got this because I was an idiot.” He confessed, quirking a smile at her. He remembered Madam Pomfrey and her steadfast love for her patients, along with her exasperation every time he was dragged through the doors.

The witch studied him critically for a few beats, before her shoulder slumped in defeat. She wordlessly started to work on his wounds, her mouth still pinched in worry.

The next minute passed in silence, and only broke when she made a slight noise of concern. Harry watched her with a raised eyebrow. “It’s...not healing.” She told him in confusion. “The skin isn’t reacting at all. That’s not right.” She tried another spell, but there were no obvious signs of mending.

Harry frowned at that. Healing spells were notoriously difficult – anything more than an *episky* typically required a lot of training – but they hardly ever failed completely. There should have been some reaction from his wounds.

The door to the wing opened again and Slughorn trotted inside, Augustus at his heels, as well as Dumbledore, for some strange reason.

Harry's expression shifted into something more neutral as he avoided Dumbledore's gaze, focussing instead on Slughorn. The Potions' Master was breathing a little heavily, but he handed over the bottle of Murtlap without question.

The witch took it with only a slight pause, clearly still bothered by the failure of her spell. She turned to Harry and began to drip the yellow liquid on his arms. They both stopped and watched as nothing happened.

Harry was about to speak, when he felt something caress the skin of his arm. Before their eyes, the skin slowly began to mend together until nothing but faint white scars remained.

"Well." The witch said, more to fill the silence than anything. She fiddled with the bottle, twisting the lid back on. "That should do it. I want you to remain overnight, however. Just to be sure there's nothing more wrong with you."

Harry bit back the firm refusal that wanted to escape. She was just worried about him, after all. Considering the general lack of care the other teachers had been showing, he felt marginally more tolerant towards this woman.

"See Albus," Slughorn proclaimed with a nervous laugh, "young Mr. Ciro is perfectly fine. No cause for concern, isn't that right?" The last part was directed at him. Harry's gaze flicked between the two older men. "No need to worry your parents." The man continued with a leading tone.

Ah, Harry realised with dark amusement, they don't want to deal with Benedict and Cynthia. They don't care beyond not pissing off a rich family.

"Sure, professor." Harry said brightly, smiling up at the man with sincerity dripping from his tongue, so thick he wished he could gag on it.

OoO

Fingers were running through his hair, tenderly brushing the strands, nails scrapping over his scalp just hard enough to be pleasant rather than ticklish.

Harry sighed in delight, turning into the touch.

Someone was humming softly in his ear, a melody that tugged at his memories, from some distant past. It reminded him of red hair and the scent of flowers.

“It’s alright.” The voice whispered to him and he twitched, because it was a rough sound, not at all sweet like the song still echoing around him.

He tried to open his eyes, but they were so heavy.

“It’s alright,” the voice repeated, “just go to sleep, Harry. You must be so tired, you should rest.” A cold mouth brushed his cheek, and Harry finally managed to pry his eyes open enough to see yellow and red.

The girl staring down at him was familiar, but he could not remember where he had seen her before. Her blue lips peeled up into a kind smile, and the blood flowing over the side of her face shone in the moonlight.

She shushed him, the hand in his hair petting him soothingly. Her other hand reached up to his mouth, her freezing palm dragging across the soft flesh of his lips as she covered them.

Harry frowned, trying to tilt his head away because she was so cold.

She tugged him back into place with a giggle, and her hand shifted, creeping up to cover his nose as well –

Harry thrashed, instincts blaring to life as his air was cut off.

His fist flew up, but he missed, and she wrestled him back into the bed, pressing down and pinning him with unnatural strength.

“I won’t.” She hissed at him. “I won’t. I won’t. I won’t. You can’t *make me*. I won’t go.”

He bucked, hands shoving at her soaking form, his nails digging into her lifeless skin and clawing as fear filled him. She shushed him again, cradling him like a lover and watching his eyes with a fervent kind of desperation.

His vision grew dark, and he focussed on something over her shoulder. A figure approached them, and Harry looked up at where he thought its head was.

He could not ask for help – but he wanted to *live*.

Something latched onto the girl's arm, and she looked over her shoulder in shock. But her expression morphed into terror as she was wrenched away from him.

Harry gasped for breath, throwing himself up and out of his bed, hitting the ground harshly. He rolled, his body moving automatically to get away from whatever the fuck that was.

He looked up, wand in hand, and almost wrenched.

The girl was hanging limply from a dark hand, her neck twisted at such an angle that he knew it was broken. The thing holding her was nothing more than a shadow. It was tall, and large, and Harry's eyes burned just looking at it. He blinked, and the thing's head – or what he thought was its head – was facing his direction.

Harry took a step back, his legs knocking into the bedside table and rattling the bottles on top. He scrabbled for a hold to keep himself from collapsing without moving his gaze.

The thing tossed the girl's body away from it like she was a doll, and Harry watched as her form disintegrated completely before it could even hit the wall.

A sound like crackling glass reached his ears, and Harry realised with dread that it was *laughter*.

Harry blinked, and the thing was in front of him. He jerked back, but its hand – the one that had snapped a neck like it was nothing – clamped around his hip, stopping him from running.

It curled close to him, stooping until he could almost see something inside the thick darkness.

"Harry." It crooned.

And then it was gone.

Chapter End Notes

Well safe to say this last part of the chapter derailed hard from what I intended.

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Notes

Hey there, it's me, ya girl.

Thanks for being so patient with me everyone! I'm sorry for such a long break on this one, but hopefully you enjoy this chapter :D

There's probably a bunch of mistakes because I'm posting it at midnight and I'm tired but yolo.

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

He did not go back to sleep that night.

Harry spent the hours before dawn on the other side of the hospital wing, back braced against the chilly stone wall, wand held in a death grip, eyes scanning warily over the silent and dark room, and a curse balanced on the tip of his tongue.

His body was still trembling, even in the long minutes after *whatever the fuck that was* had disappeared, and he was beginning to feel the familiar weight of exhaustion creeping in on him. But his mind was running too frantically for him to succumb to the pleading temptation.

He just – he could not do it. Not when he could still feel the cold, clammy hand of that girl pressing over his mouth and nose; her abnormal strength crushing him and blocking his airways. And her voice – gargled and hoarse, like she had not spoken in years, like her throat was ripped raw and her lungs were full of water – echoing in his ears, over and over again.

And that black mass. That looming figure with a laugh like dancing shadows. It had crushed her so easily, had broken her and thrown her aside like she was insignificant.

He could not risk that that thing would not return the moment he closed his eyes. Not when he had no clue what it was, or what it wanted from him. Not until he knew how to fight it.

Or if he even could fight it.

So, he stayed where he was, crouched between the furthest bed and a pillar, watching and waiting and fully prepared to pounce – until the first rays of light pierced through the windows.

Only then did he dare to slink back to his bed.

Harry sat, perched on the corner of the mattress, shoulders curved under the force of his confusion. Just being in this place was making his skin itch with discomfort. It was like

something sacred had been broken. This room was supposed to be safe. It was a place of healing and care and now it felt wrong and tainted.

He hunched forward, eyes trained on his wand, held carefully in both of his hands.

The minutes dragged on. The sky brightened.

His mind drifted, hovering on the edge of consciousness in a dull haze, before he snapped to attention when the doors swung open. His head lifted.

The mediwitch from yesterday came shuffling in, her focus directed at the book in her hands. Her gaze absently darted up to land on him, almost flicking back to return to her reading, before she seemed to process that he was awake.

“Nathan! I wasn’t expecting you to be up.” She hurried over to him, dropping her book on the bedside table and taking his arm gently, holding it up between them.

Harry allowed her manhandling without complaint, though he flinched back when she reached for his face without warning. His hand flew up and grasped hers tightly before he could stop himself, and she gasped in surprise and pain.

Harry dropped his hold on her immediately. “I – sorry. You startled me.” He looked away in guilt.

“No, no, it’s fine.” She bit her lip gently. “I shouldn’t have tried to touch you when you were distracted. I’m sorry. You just had a mark on your face, I wanted to make sure it wasn’t serious.”

Harry looked up sharply at that. “What?”

The woman still looked a little shaken, but she gestured at her own mouth vaguely. “You have a bruise. I must have missed it yesterday.”

Harry stared at her for a moment before conjuring a shimmering mirror in his hand. He held it up to his face, ignoring the features that were both his and not, and focussing on his lower face.

True to her words, there was a faint discolouration around his mouth, four dark points lingered near his cheek, right where that girl’s fingers had dug into his skin. “Oh, bloody hell.” He muttered, poking at the bruises with a scowl.

He had known it had not been a dream, but still, seeing the evidence left behind had him feeling both annoyed and uneasy. He clicked his tongue and vanished the mirror.

The mediwitch stared at him with concern, and though her eyes jumped to the hand that he had used to conjure the mirror, she did not comment on it. “Would you like me to heal it for you, Nathan?” She asked kindly.

Harry, fingers still hovering absently over his mouth, shook his head. “No, it’s alright. It’s nothing you need to worry about.” His hand dropped to his lap. “It’ll be gone in a day. Am I

allowed to go? I want to get ready for my classes.”

The woman frowned, face creasing with uncertainty. “Well, your arms have healed nicely...I suppose there’s no reason to keep you any longer.” She glanced to the side, before her gaze returned to his. “I’ll let you get dressed.”

Harry waited until she was out of his sight, secluded in her little office by the door, before he hopped to his feet and reached for his school uniform that was hanging from the curtain rack by his bed. The house-elves had been kind enough to swap out his clothes yesterday with his pyjamas, and have his uniform cleaned and repaired for today.

He pulled his top off and tugged his white uniform shirt, buttoning it up swiftly. He looped the green and silver tie over his neck, tucking it under his collar, but leaving it to drape loosely. He finished dressing, tightening the knot of his shoelaces and throwing his black robe on.

He reached up to flatten his hair down, only to remember at the last moment that it was not an untameable mess anymore. His hands dropped, clenching once at his sides before he forced them to relax.

Harry took a deep breath, let it out, then made for the small office.

The witch looked up when he tapped his knuckles against the door, a small, fond smile blooming on her lips. “Here, Nathan.” She held out a clipboard for him. “Just sign at the bottom.”

Harry took it from her and let the quill hover over the paper hesitantly. *I don’t know what his signature is*, he thought dully. He certainly could not sign with his own signature, unless he wanted to bear the brunt of some uncomfortable questions.

Harry bit back a sigh, and quickly scratched something vaguely resembling Nathan’s name down in the correct section, hoping that if anyone did bother asking, he could simply pass it off as amnesia. He handed the board back with the quill. “Thanks again.” Harry said, backing out of the office door.

The woman smiled, though it was the same dim, sad one from before. “Take care of yourself out there, Nathan. I don’t like seeing you brought in here.”

Harry gave her a strained smile in response. “I’ll try my best.”

She did not seem to believe him, but she still nodded reluctantly. “Have a good day, and make sure to get plenty of rest tonight.”

Harry’s smile morphed into something more genuine as he slipped out of the hospital wing.

The halls were quiet this early in the morning, and he basked in the silence as he walked; the click of his shoes against the stone floor being the only sound.

Hogwarts was always a beautiful place, but there was something unmistakably otherworldly about it when it was tranquil and still. Like it was holding its breath, suspended in the space

between heartbeats.

He would never grow tired of it.

Harry reached the staircases and almost went to go to the tower, before he shook himself and headed for the dungeons instead. He made his way down steadily, letting his eyes trail over the portraits. Many were still slumbering, or empty. Of the few that were awake, most of them smiled or nodded at him as he went.

The dungeons were far darker than the rest of the castle, but it was the chill in the air that unnerved Harry. It always had, in a way. The knowledge that Slytherin common room was buried so deep in the castle, surrounded by water and cold and darkness, never failed to make his skin itch.

He hurried through the halls as quietly as he could, relieved when he finally came to the entrance. He muttered the password and moved inside, praying for an uninterrupted trip to his room.

There were only a handful of people in the common room when he entered, and only a few bothered to watch his journey to the dorm steps. Their sharp gazes raked over him, and though Harry longed to hunch and bolt for safety, he forced himself to walk calmly with his shoulders drawn and head held high.

The sight of his dorm door had him sighing in relief. He was still off-balance from his – *encounter* last night, and right now the only thing he wanted was to be barricaded in a place saturated in his own personal wards.

His hand curled around the doorknob, when someone called out behind him.

“Oh, Ciro!”

It was the only warning he got before two arms wound around his waist and a body slammed into his back. The force of the collusion sent him smacking into the door, and Harry’s magic swelled at the attack. He almost blasted the person away, but he wrangled himself back under control.

He recognised the voice, and while the sudden hug was as unexpected as it was unwelcome, he did not want to accidentally murder Sirius’ father – especially before his godfather had even been born.

“Orion.” He said, tone one step away from a snarl. “Can you let me go?”

The boy ignored him, snuggling closer, pressing his face into Harry’s back. “I was so worried when Gus told me that you were in the hospital. What happened? Gus said there was a lot of blood.”

The quiet, needling lilt to Orion’s words – the curiosity and biting amusement Harry could practically taste – tore through his mind and sparked his temper.

Orion was more of an annoyance than anything, and while Harry did feel some sympathy for the boy, he was not stupid enough to believe that the other was not a conniving, venomous little snake when he wanted to be. He had to remember that.

Harry's hands dropped to where Orion's wrists were locked around his waist and pulled until he had enough room to wriggle free. He turned around, dropping his hold on one of Orion's arms and facing the boy, his second wrist still pinned in his hand.

Orion stared up at him, seemingly unbothered by the rough treatment. Just a few steps away, Augustus was watching closely, his eyes locked on where Harry was grasping Orion's thin wrist firmly.

Harry waited until he had Orion's undivided attention. "When I ask you to let go of me, I mean it." He told him, eyes narrowed and words like ice.

He released the boy, studying the way he slowly brought his arm to his chest, massaging his wrist carefully. His head tilted down just enough to hide his eyes from Harry's.

But after a few seconds, Orion's looked up at Harry again, his expression moulded into something contemplative. "Huh." He murmured, "That's the first time someone's threatened me in a while."

Harry's jaw clenched, and he knew, even with his lack of experience, that he was dangerously close to breaking some sort of high-society rule. He did not know where the Ciro family sat in the hierarchy in Britain but given that he had never heard of them before, he knew he could not count on Nathan's family name to back him. Not against someone like Orion, who was equivalent to wizarding royalty in many cases.

Just as the eerie gleam in Orion's eyes was beginning to bother him, the boy's entire countenance changed as a pleased grin bled onto his face. The shift was so jarring that Harry wanted to shiver.

"Good. I'm happy you've finally got a real spine. This just makes you even more fun!" The boy exclaimed, clapping his hands in delight. "I won't hug you again, though. Since it scared you so much, and I'm a nice friend." His eyes crinkled merrily.

"...Right." Harry agreed, cautious.

Orion nodded, still satisfied with whatever conclusion he had come to. "I'll see you this afternoon, Ciro. You missed dinner with me yesterday, so we can make up for it tonight. Let's go, Gus."

Harry stayed where he was as the two boys deserted the hall, leaving him alone with adrenaline still roaring through his system.

He knocked his head back against the door and groaned deep in his throat.

He really, really wanted a drink.

OoO

Harry went through the school day in a daze.

He let himself drift between classes, going through the motions each period, taking notes he did not need and listening to the professors drone on about things he already knew. He ignored the other students and their incessant chatter, letting himself fall into his thoughts with a recklessness he had never had the luxury of before.

His mind ran in circles, flying from Orion, to the ghost girl, to Riddle, to the dangerous creature that was apparently stalking him, and back again.

It was enough to give him a headache, and Harry spent the last half of his Charms lesson rubbing his forehead with increasing force and sighing loud enough to get pointed glares from those around him.

Maybe if I press hard enough, I can give myself actual amnesia, he thought morbidly, huffing a soft chuckle.

Harry's eyes followed the professor's movements with detached interest, the hand not currently attempting to burrow into his brain twirled his quill restlessly as he waited for the hour to finally end.

He had lunch next and was planning to spend it holed up in the room he had commandeered the other day. If the attack on him had shown him anything, it was that he could not afford to waste any more time figuring out a way home. He missed his life, he missed Ron and Hermione, he missed his job, he missed his face and body.

But most of all he missed Ginny. Missed her smile and her laugh. Missed the weight of her in his arms. Missed the taste of her and the scent of her hair.

A piece of paper fluttered onto his desk.

Harry stared at it.

It rustled, as if encouraging him to pick it up.

Harry frowned at it, wary.

His hand hovered over it, scanning quickly, finding nothing but the lingering traces of the spell that had landed it on his desk. He picked it up and flipped it open, reading the unfamiliar scrawl with a raised eyebrow.

Wait for me outside after class. We need to talk.

"Well, that's not reassuring at all." He muttered, dropping the note back onto his desk just as the teacher's gaze swung around to him.

“Something to say, Mr. Ciro?” The man asked, mouth twisted snidely. Harry did not recognise him, and he would have disliked the man purely for his lack of teaching skills even if he did not seem to have it in for Nathan.

Harry met the man’s smile with teeth. “Yeah, actually.” He said over the tittering of the students. “You pronounced *aparecium* wrong. And that’s definitely not how you spell it.” He pointed to the board, where the misspelled charm had been burning into his eyes for the last few minutes.

The professor spluttered, face turning a ruddy colour, just as the echoing chimes of the bell rang through the room.

Harry packed up his equipment, and made for the exit, tuning out the annoyed calls of the professor as he opened the door and stepped into the hallway.

He debated following the note’s instructions, but Harry knew his problems easily trumped those of whoever wanted to talk to him. He did not have time to stand around and listen to some kid whine or try and pick a fight with him.

A few students moved passed him, and Harry stepped further away from the doorway, turning to head for his classroom.

Something snagged on his sleeve and stopped him though. Harry twisted around, yanking his arm away from whoever had grabbed him.

He looked up and Simon’s scowling face met him.

“Oh, great,” Harry said, crossing his arms, “what do you want?”

Simon bristled, tightening his grip on his bag’s strap. “I asked you to wait, you idiot. Can’t you read?”

Harry’s lip curled, “I can, I just couldn’t be bothered.”

“You always wait when I tell you to.”

He rolled his eyes at the imperious tone. “Well, I didn’t know it was you. I wouldn’t have hesitated if I did.”

“How could you not recognise my writing?” Simon snapped, leaning close to get into Harry’s face. He looked offended.

Harry stared at him, then, as if speaking to a child, he replied, “I have amnesia. I didn’t recognise your *face*, why on earth would I recognise your *handwriting*?”

The lie was worth seeing the way Simon’s expression twisted unpleasantly. They stood in silence for a moment, Harry’s patience dwindling, Simon’s frustration rising.

Finally, he sighed. “Look, what do you want? I’m kind of busy with something, so if we could just get this over with, that’d be great.”

Simon's frown deepened, but he gestured for Harry to follow him.

The boy led him away from the classroom, the crowds thinning remarkably fast as everyone raced to the Great Hall. Only a few gave them curious looks as they walked, but no one seemed particularly interested.

Simon eventually stepped into an empty hallway, walking only a few feet before he spun around to face Harry.

"What the hell is going on with you?" The boy demanded; shoulders bunched up defensively.

Harry could already tell this conversation was going to be worthless. He cocked an eyebrow, unimpressed. "You mean besides 'everything'?" He asked.

Simon took a step closer, going for intimidation. It might have worked, if Harry were anyone else. "I *mean*," the boy hissed, "what do you think you're doing? Answering questions in class? Picking fights with other students? *Back-chatting professors*? What the hell, Nathan?"

It was Harry's turn to frown. "What, I'm not allowed to be a good student? Am I not allowed to defend myself against a group of uptight brats? Would you prefer I just sat there dumbly and let everyone walk all over me?" Each word tasted like ash on his tongue, and his voice rose as his anger took the reins.

Simon tried to quiet him; hand raised like he fully expected Harry to listen to him. Maybe he did. Maybe he was used to Nathan folding under him like wet paper.

"Nathan –"

"Nathan isn't *here* right now." Harry spat, marching forward, and whatever Simon saw in his eyes must have scared him, because the boy backed up hurriedly.

"I told you before, but apparently you didn't get the memo. Whatever frightened, abused kid you're used to dealing with isn't me. I don't care what you think. I don't *care* what you want. You're literally a stranger to me, I have nothing for you. No love. No hate. *Nothing*."

Simon's back hit the wall, and in some distant part of his mind, Harry knew he should back off. He was not one to go around terrorising children. He was not the type of person to enjoy making people afraid of him. But he just wanted to be left alone for once in this godforsaken place, and Simon was a rotten little boy as far as he was concerned.

"So, I really don't know what you were expecting to get out of this, but you need to get it through your thick skull that I am not your brother right now. And I don't tolerate shit, alright? I've already got a full plate; I don't need you adding to it. So, the next time you think about trying to push me, do us both a favour and *don't*."

"Is everything alright here?"

Harry ignored the interruption, glare fixed firmly on Simon's unsettled expression. The boy's eyes were suspiciously bright, and his mouth was puckered strangely, but Harry was not moved. He had no sympathy for this boy – not after what he had already seen from him.

No one deserved what Simon had put Nathan through.

“Well?”

Harry finally stepped back from where he was crowding Simon against the wall. He looked to the side, and his eyes finding Abraxas’ tense form a few metres away from them.

“Everything’s fine.” He replied, returning his gaze to pin Simon in place. “We were just talking.”

“That’s not what it looked like.” Abraxas did not sound particularly bothered however, his tone was light, curious.

“Then get your eyes fixed, Malfoy.”

Abraxas’ eyes narrowed at the tone. “Ciro, get out of here.”

There was a moment where neither of them moved, then Abraxas continued with a sharp, “Simon.”

Harry watched as Simon scurried away, head ducked and back hunched.

It was only when he was firmly out of sight that Harry faced Abraxas. “Any reason you’re following me?”

The boy snorted, and he looked so much like Draco in that moment that Harry had trouble breathing. “You’re not even worth following, *Ciro*. It’s not my fault you were having a tiff in a public hallway.”

Harry pushed the pain in his chest away. “Yeah, right, I’m supposed to believe that out of all the corridors in Hogwarts, you just happened to be in the one I am when I’m dealing with something personal? Try again. Was it Riddle?”

Abraxas rolled his eyes, but Harry caught the way a muscle in his jaw jumped. *Bingo*.

“For the last time, I wasn’t –”

Harry cut him off, “Look, I don’t care at this point. Riddle is so far down on my list of priorities right now that he’s not even on the page. Tell him that if he wants to stalk me, he can bloody well do it himself, instead of sicking you lot on me.” He adjusted his bag strap and started moving away.

Abraxas made a choked off noise, surprised that someone had dared walk away from him. “*Ciro* –”

“No.” Harry held a hand up over his shoulder, halting the other again. “Don’t care. Have more important things to do.”

OoO

Harry looked down at the pathway leading to the beach, chewing on his bottom lip thoughtfully as his eyes scanned the sand frantically. He only had a short window of time before he was expected at dinner.

But for the life of him he could not bring himself to start walking down the steps.

Even just the thought of going back there, to where he had first seen her, left his stomach churning. He was afraid of what he would find down there. That the ghost of that girl would be there, waiting for him. Or worse – that she would not be there at all.

He cursed under his breath, scrubbing at his face, irritated at his own weakness.

“What are you doing?”

Harry’s shoulders twitched at the sudden voice, his head twisting around to see Orion staring up at him curiously.

“Where did you come from?” He asked instead, looking around to see if Augustus was about, because the two seemed to be joined at the hips most days and the last thing he wanted was both of them bothering him.

Orion smiled, “The castle.” He said brightly.

Harry’s lips pursed at the smart remark, but he pushed his annoyance away and returned his attention back to the path leading down to the beach. “Go away, Orion. I’m busy.”

“Doing what?” Orion stepped closer, practically attaching himself to Harry’s back.

“Stuff.” Harry bit out.

Orion was silent for a long moment, and Harry’s skin prickled at having the unstable boy so close to his unguarded back. His earlier encounter with him was still fresh on his mind, and Harry wanted nothing more than to have the other far away from him in this moment.

He was just glad Orion had not tried to hug him again.

“Look, Orion.” He started, reaching for any scraps of his patience. “I promise I’ll be there in time for dinner, but right now I’m kind of dealing with something important.”

“What is it?” Orion asked, “Maybe I could help?”

I doubt that. Harry’s eyes rose to the sky in a pray. “No thanks. Go back to the castle.” He forced himself to walk down the steps, hands flexing at his sides.

Footsteps followed him.

Harry stopped, turning back to see Orion two steps behind him.

“No.” He said, firmly. “Back.”

Orion raised his eyebrows, “I’m not a dog.” The boy said, a sliver of something annoyed entering his tone. “I can do whatever I want, and what I want is to see what you’re doing.”

“What part of ‘I don’t want you here’ are you missing?” He bit out.

“The part where you think I care about what you want?” It was the first time Orion had really dropped the playful act, and Harry got a glimpse of the real boy lurking behind the smiles and childishness. He clenched his jaw at the stubborn look on the other’s face.

“Fine.” He snapped, hands splaying in defeat. “Fine. You can come. Don’t blame me if something happens to you though.” Harry said, thinking it was only fair the kid had some warning. He had no idea what he was going to find down there. Best that Orion at least be a little cautious.

The boy smiled at him. “Sweet. Let’s go.” He hopped down the steps between them and grabbed Harry’s hand, tugging him along.

They walked in silence, Harry not bothering to try and reclaim his hand. Orion had a grip of iron.

The beach was peaceful, the sand undisturbed, the water lapping gently on the shore.

Harry retraced his path from yesterday, Orion’s presence beside him falling to the back of his mind as he came to where he had been attacked.

He crouched down, feeling the sand with his free hand.

This was the place.

Harry half-turned, casting his eyes around for anything remotely suspicious. He vaguely remembered picking up a wand, but he could not recall if he had brought it to the castle with him. It definitely had not been the one he had gotten with Benedict and Cynthia. The knobs on it did not match.

But know that he thought about it, it had felt familiar in his hand.

His unease grew.

“What are you looking for?” Orion asked, and maybe he felt the heaviness in the air, because his voice was subdued.

“Answers.” Harry muttered, standing and brushing his palm against his trousers. “Do you know if anyone has ever drowned in the lake?” He asked, tilting his head down at the shorter boy. “A girl? In Hufflepuff?”

Orion frowned, "I'm not to sure. I mean, I'm sure the occasional student has, but none that I know about officially. Why?"

Harry made a soft noise, shrugging. He looked out over the surface of the water, contemplating.

His hand drifted to his side, hovering over where the mark sat on his hip. The black figure. The dreams. The ghost. The wand that appeared when he had been in danger. He could feel the pieces falling into place in his head, but Harry's mind shied away from it.

He did not want to acknowledge it.

He did not want to *name* it, because then it would be real.

Orion's fingers tightened around his suddenly. "Ciro?"

Harry blinked, his attention falling onto the other boy. He hummed.

Orion's head was aimed towards the forest edge. There was a tread of nervousness to his expression. "We might want to get out of here. Now."

Harry looked up, and he froze at the sight of several centaurs watching them from the tree line. Their dark eyes were burning into them – *him*. Harry gently pulled his hand free from Orion's, instead grasping the boy's shoulder and tugging him behind him.

He put his hands up, swallowing as two of the centaurs fingered the strings of their bows. "Hello?" Harry called out, trying to keep his voice even and as polite as possible. It had been a long time since he had had to talk to centaurs. "Sorry if we bothered you."

"Why are you talking to them?" Orion hissed at him, already going for his wand. Harry grabbed the boy's wrist to stop him, but the sudden movement startled the centaurs.

Harry threw up a hand. "Wait –"

The *thwip* of the arrows slicing through the air rang in his ears, and Harry reacted on instinct. His hand moved, swiping in front of him and Orion, conjuring a shield that had the arrows splintering on impact. Three more centaurs released their arrows, and Harry, despite knowing he was safe, still flinched as the wood cracked inches from his face.

Orion's hand was like a shackle around his forearm, nails digging into the soft material of his shirt. "What the hell is their problem?" He asked, voice high with panic. "Why are they attacking us?"

"Maybe if you hadn't tried to grab your wand they wouldn't have." Harry snapped back, before raising his voice. "*Enough*. We aren't here to hurt you! We're Hogwarts students – stop shooting!"

They did not listen. But just as Harry was preparing a counter, a horn blast sounded, and the group of centaurs reared back.

Three more centaurs erupted from the depths of the forest, larger than the others by a significant amount. Harry's eyes narrowed. He was not too familiar with the culture of centaurs, but he recognised the chieftain braid running down one of the newcomers' head.

She was the tallest of the three, and one glare from her sent the previous group retreating back into the Forbidden Forest almost instantly.

Harry slowly relaxed, though he did not lower his shield.

The female turned to look at him, and Harry stood straighter as she assessed him critically. She turned and jerked her head at her two companions, who bowed, then followed the rest of their herd back into the dense trees.

Harry watched as the female trotted towards them and dropped his shield when she stopped a few metres away. Orion pulled at his shirt in protest, but he wisely said nothing.

"I apologise on behalf of my herd." The chieftain began, her voice deep and guttural, but smooth and civil. "That group are young. They are easily excited."

"Excited?" Harry replied tersely. "They could have killed us."

The chieftain's tail flicked, her mouth thinning. "They will be punished for this transgression. You have my word."

The anger in him fizzled out. He sighed, "No. That's not necessary. It's partly our fault, anyway." He ignored Orion's whispered outrage.

She cocked her head, curious. "You were here the day before." She said, apropos of nothing.

"I was." Harry confirmed. "Were you who I saw? After...?"

She dipped her head in a slight nod. "I was drawn to the noise. As were the fish." Here, her eyes darted to the water just beyond them, her expression turning derisive for a moment before resettling into her cool politeness. "You come in search of the girl?" She asked.

Harry hesitated, before he nodded. "I wanted to know if she was still here."

"She is not." The chieftain said, "She left with you. Though I see she did not stay with you long."

Harry shivered, remembering the girl's waterlogged face hovering over his, and the words she had spat at him. "No." He breathed out, like a confession.

The centaur's face crease briefly with concern. "You would do well to not tempt fate again, *kýrios*. You are still small. Next time you might not be so lucky. Some things are best left alone."

She straightened then, shaking herself out. Her hooves dug into the sand. "You will not be bothered again, but you must return to your castle before nightfall. My people are not the

only ones that call the forest our home, and many are dangerous.” Her eyes lingered on Harry, like she was cautioning him in particular. “Go.”

Harry wordlessly took Orion’s hand, and began dragging him back the way they had come. He only looked back when he was at the base of the stairs, and the chieftain was already gone.

He shook his head, pushing her words from his mind as they quickly climbed back to the school.

“What did she mean?” Orion asked him as they slipped back into the safety of Hogwarts’ walls. “What was she talking about? What did she call you?”

“I don’t know.” Harry muttered, steps slowing.

Kýrios. It ricocheted through his head.

Kýrios. Kýrios. Kýrios.

He knew what it meant, though he had never heard it before. It slithered through the cracks in his chest, burrowing into his chest like it belonged there.

Kýrios.

Master.

Fuck.

Chapter End Notes

Let me know your thoughts and as always, my [tumblr](#) is open. Thanks!

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Notes

Imma just, drop this and run.

WARNING: there is some pretty cruel taunting in this one, and a bit of non-consensual touching that is shut down immediately. But just be careful if those make you uncomfortable.

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

He's lying.

Orion watched Ciro's back as the older boy guided them through the hallways, hands still linked, steps brisk but short enough so he was not struggling to keep up as they made for the common room. It was unconsciously considerate of Ciro, especially given how desperate he seemed to be to get away from the beach.

Orion's eyes were half-lidded but intent as he stared, confident that the other was preoccupied enough to not notice the scrutiny. He took in the tension carried in those narrow shoulders, the firm set to the other's jaw and the way his fingers flexed around Orion's gently.

He had not been sure before, what with so many contradictory things surrounding the other boy, with this new attitude and the tangible air of predator that now hung around him. But the events down at the beach were not something he could ignore or overlook. It was evident.

Ciro was lying.

About a great deal, apparently, and Orion could not help but think that that was so *rude* of the other boy. Keeping all those delicious, sharp secrets hidden away from him.

He was sure that Ciro knew the meaning of the name that the centaur had bestowed upon him. His reaction alone had given that away, and Ciro's subsequent attempts to mislead him were offensive to the both of them.

The question was though, why even bother? What was it about the name that made Ciro think it necessary to lie? Was it a warning? A slur?

But no, that could not be right. The centaur chieftain had been oddly respectful when speaking to Ciro, deferential in her demeanour, and they were not a breed to needlessly throw around insults.

Perhaps it was a title, then. But why *Ciro*? What about him was deemed worthy of such a thing? It was not like there was anything overly impressive about the other – though that was

not quite true anymore, he supposed.

Ciro had been kicking up all sorts of rumours lately, and Orion had listened with rapture to every recount the others had given him of the lessons they shared with Ciro. Correcting professors, tutoring others, challenging Riddle. All of it was fascinating.

Orion had even seen the displays of wandless magic that Gus had spoken of over the last few days. Small, inconsequential things that swiftly added up into a damning amount of evidence. Evidence of *what*, he was still unsure of, but it was all very suspicious.

Though even with all the whispers, Orion had not heard of Ciro performing something as demanding as a shield without a wand – and one that was powerful enough to deflect physical strikes.

That Ciro had moved so instinctively revealed a level of experience he should not have, showed an innate confidence in his own abilities to successfully block such attacks without faltering. There had been no hesitation or doubt visible.

Ciro even walked with a fluidity that he had never had before, his head thrown up in defiance of everything they knew of him; and from what Orion had both seen and heard, he was perfectly willing to defend himself, violently if needed.

And his *magic*. That alone was enough to make Orion's head spin.

Ciro's magic no longer felt like his own.

Before, it had been calm and placid, coiled tight inside him like it was afraid to stretch. So much like the boy himself. It had not been an insignificant amount, but he had never bothered to hone it into something more than a blunt instrument. Underdeveloped, in every sense of the word.

But now it was like a raging inferno, blazing out of Ciro and burning anyone that brushed against it. His magic was a vicious, spitting beast now, and if Orion's sensitivity was to be trusted, Ciro had enough magic boiling inside him to rival Dumbledore.

Orion looked down at their clasped hands, twisting his wrist slightly to see Ciro's knuckles. His curiosity pressed forward eagerly, leaving him breathless for a moment.

He wanted to *know*.

He wanted to know how this was possible, and where this previously unseen power had come from. He wanted to know what *Kýrios* meant, and why it had made Ciro pale so dramatically.

He wanted to know why the other was so clearly lying about his memories, saying he did not know his fellow students, yet somehow his eyes still flashed with bursts of sharp recognition at the oddest times. Or how he navigated the halls without a pause and seemed to have so much more knowledge about his classes than he should.

Orion wanted to know everything about this boy. To pick at the web of lies that Ciro was spinning so thoughtlessly. He wanted to unravel each secret and crawl his way into the

other's head until there was nothing about him that Orion had not seen.

He flicked his gaze back up to the base of Ciro's neck, thinking of all the fun they were going to have together. It had been a while since Orion had had anything interesting to sink his teeth into.

But before all that –

“Are you alright, Ciro?” He asked softly, squeezing lightly on the other's hand.

The older boy blinked, stopping suddenly and glancing down at him like he had forgotten Orion was there. Unacceptable, but Orion was willing to make allowances. They would work on it, new pets need time to adjust, after all.

“Yeah,” Ciro sighed, rubbing his face with his free hand, “yeah, just rattled.”

Orion hummed, understanding and encouraging. “It's not every day that you get attacked at school by magical creatures,” he said, and watched as Ciro let out a startled bark of laughter.

“Sorry,” Ciro said, still snickering, “sorry, just had a funny thought.” Before Orion could question that, the other carried on, “Are you okay, though? I know I warned you, but that wasn't exactly what I was expecting down there. You didn't get hurt; you're not scared?”

Orion almost rolled his eyes, but refrained because Ciro was watching him intently, his gaze rolling over Orion's body critically, and his magic swelled between them. It wrapped around Orion like a gentle embrace, the heat no longer blistering but warm like sunlight. Scanning him, Orion realised with no small amount of intrigue.

This was a type of rudimentary medical magic, not exactly something they were taught at Hogwarts. In fact, not many besides healers and aurors typically bothered with it, which begged the question of where Ciro had learned it.

Ciro's father was a minor politician in the immigration sector, and his mother managed their estate. Neither of them had a history with medical studies, that Orion knew of.

He supposed Ciro could have learned it during his hospital stay, but even if he had, he should not be able to use it so proficiently.

Orion did not ask any of the questions clawing at his teeth. Instead, he smiled and said, “I'm fine. You shielded me from them. Thank you.”

Ciro returned the smile, just a small quirk of his lips, but it left Orion hungry.

Dangerous and powerful and strangely perceptive he might be, but Ciro was obviously still as soft-hearted as he had been before. So long as Orion catered to that part of him, he would have all the time in the world to figure Ciro out.

“It was really impressive,” Orion said, looking up at Ciro speculatively, “you handled it all really well. I've never seen you move that fast before. I didn't even see the arrow until it hit

the shield.” He injected the right amount of awe into his tone, and it was not even that hard, given that Orion *was* impressed.

“Thanks,” Ciro replied, and then said nothing else. He completely ignored the opening Orion had left him to clarify or boast. Either he was breathtakingly obtuse about social cues, or he was masterfully avoiding the verbal trap.

Orion could not quite tell – and it made him want to *grin*.

OoO

“Do you think we should tell the professors?” Orion asked, bright and eager, like they had not just been attacked and almost killed.

Harry squinted down at the younger boy. His hand was still caught in Orion’s, but he did not bother trying to reclaim it. The other would have to let go eventually. “I don’t know,” Harry said, his mind turning back to the encounter on the beach. “I don’t think the centaurs would attack anymore students. It was just a misunderstanding. And neither of us were hurt. But maybe I’ll mention it to Slughorn when I see him next, just in case.”

Orion nodded easily, “Good idea. And you’re right, I don’t think they would attack again. They just seemed startled by you.”

Harry frowned, acknowledging the severity of that point even if Orion did not have the proper context. It was because of him that they were attacked. The centaurs had...had *sensed* who – *what* – Harry was, and they had been scared. He absently curled his free hand around where the mark sat on his hip, pressing his palm hard over it.

Kýrios.

He had never heard the word before, did not know the language it originated from, but it struck a chord deep in his mind.

Master.

That was what the chieftain had called him, and Harry had a horrible suspicion that he knew exactly what she was alluding to.

He could not deny it, could not ignore this. The mark, the spectre he saw, the strange vanishing wand, the dark shape that stalked him, and now this.

He suddenly wanted to cry. The backs of his eyes prickled in warning, and he started to walk again to try and stave off the tears.

Harry did not *want* to be here. He did not want this title, or the strange things that kept happening around him. He just wanted to be normal for *once* in his life.

He just wanted to be Harry. Why was everyone so set against him having a peaceful life?

Harry led Orion right to the common room, pausing for a moment because he could not remember the password, until Orion slipped in front of him and did it instead.

The room was relatively empty, though there were a few students that Harry recognised as being in Nathan’s year. They were sat off to the side, where they always seemed to reside, and Orion tugged on his hand, dragging Harry behind him as they made their way over.

Harry dug his heels in, spotting the perfectly slicked hair of Riddle at the last second, but Orion was deceptively strong for his size, and their arrival had all of them looking up.

Augustus looked a beat away from leaping from his seat and several of the other boys had their eyebrows raised in interest. Harry looked away; eyes cast longing at the staircase that would lead to his dorm. The second Orion released him, Harry was making a break for it.

“Where have you been?” Augustus asked, tone just shy of a demand.

Orion laughed, loud and jubilant. Harry winced, because he saw the glint in the younger boy’s eyes.

“Orion –” he tried to warn.

“Ciro and I went for a walk on the beach and got attacked by centaurs.” Orion said, cutting right through Harry’s protests. He looked endlessly pleased with himself.

“*What?*” Augustus snapped, gaze slicing through Harry in silent accusation. Harry raised his hands, or attempted to, seeing as Orion had yet to release him.

“He followed me.” Harry objected, “I didn’t ask him to come.”

“It was super fun,” Orion continued on obstinately, “Ciro even deflected their arrows with a shield.” Then, with a sly smile, he added with relish, “*Wandless.*”

“Alright,” Harry muttered, slipping his hand out of Orion’s with some pointed wriggling, “I’m going to my room. Let’s not do this again.”

“Why would centaurs attack you?” Riddle asked, swooping into the conversation like a damn bird of prey.

Harry did not know why he stopped, but he could never quite help himself where Tom Riddle was concerned. “Haven’t a clue. We must have startled them.”

“The chieftain was nice though,” Orion said, gleeful, “she called the herd off and apologised.”

Riddle’s dark eyes swung back to Harry, looking far too interested. “You spoke with a centaur chieftain? They don’t normally interact with humans. Why talk to you?”

It was not asked insultingly, so Harry only felt a small spark of offence. “She just didn’t want to get in trouble with the professors. Killing a student would probably look bad.” His tone was dry, sarcastic, and some of the other boys seemed surprised.

“Now, excuse me,” Harry started walking again, ignoring the whine Orion let out and how the younger boy tried to grab him.

“Why are you leaving? Stay.”

Harry did not turn around, deftly dodging the grasping fingers. “No, I have things to do. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He disappeared into his dorm, and completely missed the weighted glance shared between the boys behind him.

He had to go back to the library.

OoO

The next morning, Harry sat slumped over his plate at breakfast, blinking blearily into his teacup.

He had spent the previous afternoon rereading through the books from the library, blatantly lying to the librarian about why he wanted to check out the books he had chosen, then skipped dinner and returned to the room he had claimed as his own. The hours had slipped by without him noticing, too busy trying to piece together just what was happening to him.

For such a lasting legend, there were surprisingly few accounts and studies into the Deathly Hallows. Even with his own experiences with the pieces, Harry found himself frustrated at the lack of information. There was nothing but speculations and rumours and hearsay surrounding the blasted things, some outright contradicting themselves, others vague enough in description that Harry could only wonder if the author even knew what they were talking about.

He had called it quits well after midnight, closing the tomes and resting against the desk, listening to the absolute silence of the castle.

Harry had dozed, never quite falling over the precipice into unconsciousness. His mind was too cluttered, his senses too heightened to allow him the sweet release.

And now he was paying for it.

Harry yawned, belatedly raising a hand to cover his mouth.

The Great Hall was still filling, students milling in, in groups of two or three, most dressed for the day, ready for classes. Harry watched them through slitted eyes, absently drinking his tea and basking in the scalding heat.

Slytherin's table was still mostly empty, only some of the upper students clustered around the very end of the table. Harry had paid them no mind, even though Carrow had sneered at him when he sat down in the middle of the table.

Harry ate his breakfast mechanically, exhausted and hating every second of it. Being trapped in such a young body was uncomfortable, and he missed being able to pull all-nighters without it throwing everything into chaos.

He looked up when some of the professors entered, scanning over them with detached curiosity, and ended up meeting Dumbledore's gaze for a moment.

The focus in those blue eyes startled him, causing him to blink rapidly, and Harry swiftly glanced away, unnerved at the sudden attention of his old headmaster.

Harry shook his head, scolding himself. A split second of eye contact was nothing to worry about. He was being more paranoid than normal.

He took a breath, then looked back towards the front. Dumbledore was seated and engaged in conversation with Slughorn, and Harry sighed at his own ridiculousness.

Someone dropped onto the bench beside him. Harry tensed, magic twisting, before he recognised Orion and forced it to settle.

“Good morning,” Orion chirped, “you look like shit.”

Harry snorted, lips curling in helpless amusement. “Thanks, I feel like shit.” He then glanced around, “Where’s your shadow?”

“You mean Gus?” Orion smiled, reaching for a slice of toast, “He is still sleeping. We were up late last night finishing some homework. What about you, late night too?” There was a hint of insinuation in his tone and Harry gave the younger boy a baleful look.

“I was doing research.” Harry replied.

Orion chuckled, eyebrows raised, “Is that what we’re calling it these days?”

Harry put down his cup and frowned at the boy. “You’re thirteen, why are you even talking about this?”

The smile on the younger boy’s face was cherubic. “I’m already engaged. I need to know about this stuff, might as well learn it now.”

Harry grimaced, turning away. He had not forgotten how young purebloods tended to marry and have children. But he had not realised that thirteen was a good age to have already started the engagement process. Orion was still a *child*.

“It’s nothing to be embarrassed about,” Orion said, voice dropping low and enticing, teasing. “So, who were you with?”

“No one,” Harry said, voice firm, “now stop talking and eat your toast.”

Orion sat back, humming lightly, “Yes, father.” He simpered, taking a generous bite.

Harry turned back to his own meal, though he was distracted by the arrival of a few owls. He looked up, eyes automatically searching for snow white feathers before he made himself stop. It had been years, but he could never bring himself to not look for her.

One owl swooped towards him, landing expertly on the table, between a platter of bacon and a jug of juice, and hopped closer to extend his leg out towards Harry.

He stayed still for a moment, then reached out to pluck the cream envelope from it, offering some of his bacon with his other hand. The owl, a beautiful grey and mottled white, nipped gratefully at his fingers, then took flight.

Harry stared after the bird, then down at the envelope. He wiped his fingers on his pants then opened it, tugging the folded parchment out and flipping it open.

He barely took the time to read *'My darling Nathan'* written elegantly in black ink before his eyes skipped to the bottom to see who had penned it. The *'Your loving mother'* had him wincing.

Without bothering to read the letter, Harry slipped it back into the envelope and then into his pocket. He did not have the time for Cynthia's well-intentioned messages right now. He felt for her, and for Benedict, but he had more important things on his mind than playing the dutiful son. He would reply to her later.

Blessedly, Orion did not comment on his reaction, though Harry was treated to a surprisingly sharp and searching look when he finished his meal and stood to leave. "Have a fun day," Orion told him softly.

Harry hesitated for a beat, then dipped his head and made for the entrance. He had History of Magic first up and was looking forward to sleeping through Binns' droning. Hopefully he would be in better shape to tackle the rest of the day if he had a nap.

He hit the first floor, heading for the classroom, when he felt a warning buzz through him. Harry twisted around, but he was tired, his reflexes slow, and he was not fast enough to stop the person from grabbing him and slamming him into the stone wall. Harry grunted, pain blooming in the back of his head from where he had knocked it, and he glared up at Carrow's grinning face.

"Hey Nattie," Carrow said, his hands curling tighter into Harry's cloak and bunching it uncomfortably around his throat. "I've been meaning to talk to you."

Harry gripped one of Carrow's wrist with his hand, but he was not strong enough to pry it off. Carrow had both height and weight on him, and pinned as he was, he would need more leverage to be able to get loose. He quickly glanced behind the other, seeing his two friends from the first night looming there with equally smug smiles.

Harry went limp, "Carrow," he greeted blandly, "your nose is looking better."

The boy snarled, lifting Harry away and then shoving him back into the wall. "You're a little shit, Ciro. You think just because you learned some new tricks that suddenly you're better than me?"

Harry slowly opened his eyes, having closed them with the second impact. He stared up at Carrow, unimpressed at the posturing. "I *know* I'm better than you, you twit. Now let me go, or I'll break more than just your face."

Carrow's smile narrowed, turning sour and mean. "You sure about that? I hear you get off on this kind of stuff."

Harry's jaw clenched, his patience disintegrating. He was so sick of this, sick of these children and their taunts. His anger slipped right into frigid. The hallway they were in dropped in temperature as his magic started to spread. Carrow did not seem to notice, but his two companions did, and the nervous glance they shared spoke of their budding fear.

Harry stared at Carrow, refusing to react. Not when Carrow twisted his wrists more, partially cutting off his oxygen. Not even when the boy nudged Harry's knees apart.

Harry carefully moved his other hand, face still blank, and Carrow froze when he registered the press of Harry's wand into the soft flesh of his gut. "Let me go," Harry said, "or you will lose more than your dignity this time."

Carrow sucked in sharply, features twisting. "You –"

"– wouldn't?" Harry finished for him, expression scornful. "Are you really willing to take that chance?"

Wisely, Carrow released him, stepping back stiffly. Harry kept his wand levelled at the boy, making sure he had his attention before speaking. "I'm going to say this *one more time* so that it sinks in. I am *done* with you people. The next person who comes at me, the next one who tries anything like this, I don't care what it is – a joke, a prank, a taunt, whatever – will spend a week in the hospital wing. If anyone tries again after that, their stay there will be *indefinite*. Am I clear?"

Either it was the calm look on his face or the overpowering presence of his magic finally being acknowledged, but Carrow went white. He nodded.

Harry dropped his wand, "Excellent. Do me a favour and spread the word. The last thing we want is someone getting hurt because they didn't hear the new rules." With that, Harry recalled his magic, and the three boys across from him took shaky breaths.

"We're done here." Harry said.

"I think not."

The four of them froze.

Harry closed his eyes.

"P-professor Dumbledore, sir." One of Carrow's friends stuttered. "This isn't –"

"I believe I can read the situation quite clearly, thank you, Mr. Malcom." The professor cut off sternly. "Twenty points from Slytherin for improper conduct, and another five each for fighting."

"We weren't fighting!" Carrow said, his bluster returning now that Harry was staring into the distance, panicking quietly. "We were just..."

"Threatening each other?" Dumbledore offered; tone still full of disapproval. "I will see the three of you in detention tonight, Mr. Carrow. Three days should be sufficient. Now, if you wish to make back those points, I suggest you head to your next class and do well. Mr. Ciro, come with me please."

Harry looked down at his shoes, took a fortifying breath, then turned to follow Dumbledore.

OoO

He should not have been surprised that Dumbledore had a different office in this time, but somehow it still caught Harry off-guard to not be taken to the headmaster's office.

It was uncomfortable, sitting here on a plush seat, holding a cup of tea and making a valiant effort to not meet the old man's eyes.

He had not expected to be reintroduced to Dumbledore one on one so soon, and certainly not after the man had caught him verbally threatening to put three older students into the hospital. Harry blamed his lack of sleep on his predicament. He should have been able to feel someone like Dumbledore coming, but he had been too focussed on Carrow and his lot to keep an eye on his surroundings.

He could feel his instructor from the auror department scolding him from fifty years in the future.

Dumbledore eased himself into the seat across from Harry, his own teacup in his hands. He looked at ease, not at all bothered at the situation. Even in his early sixties, Dumbledore looked remarkably young. Now that Harry was actually taking the time to study the other man – *truly* study him – he was shaken by just how different he was.

The robes had not yet reached the same exuberance that he remembered from his youth, the colours muted and the cut rather standard. His beard was trimmed, not even close to the length it would be when he was headmaster, and his hair was still red, with only streaks of silver dashed through.

Unsettled, Harry kept his gaze lowered to his tea. He knew how these conversations worked at this point and knew he would not be getting out of here until Dumbledore was good and ready.

"Is the tea not to your liking, Mr. Ciro?" Dumbledore asked, a wisp of humour in his voice.

Harry did not look up. "No, Professor. I'm just not very thirsty."

Dumbledore hummed, his cup clinking lightly as he placed it on the table between them. "That's a shame. I've always enjoyed a good cup of earl grey to kick off my day. Well, I suppose we'd best start then." From the edge of his vision, Harry saw Dumbledore uncross his legs and lean forward. "How are you, Mr. Ciro?"

The question was unexpected, the soft tone even more so, and Harry glanced up, pinning his gaze just over the man's shoulder. "I'm fine, Professor."

There was a sad smile on the man's face. "Now, my boy, I think we both know that's not true." The nickname made Harry twitch. It had been a long time since he had been called that by this man. Hearing it brought forth memories of the tower, and the revelation that had ruined Harry's life.

The cup on Dumbledore's table rattled dangerously before Harry squashed his magic down. Dumbledore tilted his head towards the teacup, then looked at Harry.

"There's nothing wrong with not being okay. What you went through was a very traumatic experience, it's natural for you to be upset and angry, Nathan."

Despite the topic, Harry had to hand it to the man. Dumbledore was masterful at this. If Harry were truly an amnesiac fourteen-year-old boy, maybe it would even work.

"I don't even remember it, sir."

The pity on Dumbledore's face became visible for a moment before he wiped it away. "That doesn't mean it can't still hurt you. Just the knowledge that something happened to you can be enough sometimes."

This conversation was not going down a path Harry was comfortable discussing. He knew all these things, but nothing had actually happened to *him*. He was not the victim here, but if he refused to listen, if he pushed back, all it would do was make Dumbledore try harder.

Harry rolled the possibilities around in his head, then decided to just get it over with. He lowered his shoulders, bit his lip, and made his next breath unsteady. "I'm just sick of the way they all treat me." He said, keeping it as close to the truth as possible.

Dumbledore made a soft noise, prompting, so Harry continued. "They think it's a joke. They think it's funny, but they don't understand. They make comments, push me around. So, I get mad. I just want them to stop and leave me alone."

"Isolation is a powerful defence. Many people prefer being alone in times of strife." He sounded like he understood, and Harry supposed in his own way, the man did. After Ariana, Dumbledore would know all too well what retreating into yourself was like. "What the others are doing isn't right, Nathan," the man continued, and Harry had to bite back the accusations he wanted to throw. "But you know why I had to take points from you too."

It was not a question, but an invitation, so subtle Harry would not have caught it if he was not looking for it. He nodded silently, eyes aimed down so Dumbledore would not see the emotions in them. He would not apologise for what he did, but hopefully if Dumbledore thought him properly contrite, he would let him go sooner.

"Good," Dumbledore sighed, leaning back in his chair, "I'm glad, Nathan. You are a very mature young man, and I can see you going far in the future."

"Thank you, sir," Harry said, just barely refraining from rolling his eyes at the patronising compliment.

"Before I let you go, I had one more matter to discuss with you," Dumbledore said, hands resting in his lap, at ease for all that his words made tension creep back into Harry.

Of course you do, he thought angrily, of course you had another reason to seek me out. You always do, don't you?

He kept those thoughts tucked away.

“I’ve noticed that you’ve been spending more time in the library, recently. Madam Argus told me you’ve picked up a new interest.”

Harry’s stomach dropped.

Shit.

“Time magic is rather obscure, even though the book you borrowed barely covers the basics, it caught her attention. She said you mentioned it was for a personal project?”

Oh shit.

Harry cleared his throat, mind whirling. He had not expected the librarian to make note of that book. It was more theory than anything, and not from the restricted section, so he had thought it would be fine. But if she had run to Dumbledore about it, what else had she told him? Had she spoken of the other books he borrowed? There was nothing particularly damning, but with Dumbledore it was hard to tell what might tip him off.

He did what he had been doing since he got here. He lied.

“It was something my mother spoke about while I was still at home. She mentioned the topic and I was...curious. I figured I would look it up when I returned to Hogwarts.” Then, to sell it, he finally met Dumbledore’s eyes, confident his shields were strong enough to withhold the man’s inevitable attempts at reading his mind. “I didn’t know it would cause a problem, sir.”

“No problem,” Dumbledore said lightly, smiling, but his eyes were too sharp. “Just an interesting subject to study. You seem to be branching out, I was going to offer some assistance, if you needed suggestions of which books to look at for your project.”

Not bloody likely, Harry thought, smiling tightly. “That’s okay, Professor. I appreciate it but I’m fine.”

He pointedly glanced at the clock, relief crashing through him. “If it’s okay, may I be excused? My History of Magic class has started, and I need to catch up.”

Dumbledore held his eyes for another moment, then nodded. “That’s fine, Nathan. Let me write you a slip.”

Harry gratefully placed his teacup on the table and stood, slinging his bag over his shoulder. He waited as patiently as he could while Dumbledore wrote out his slip and held it out to him.

“Thanks,” he said, taking it and tucking it into his pocket. He smiled once more at Dumbledore, awkward and desperate to escape. “Have a good day, sir.”

He tried not to run as he went for the door.

Just as he opened it, Dumbledore spoke once more.

“I noticed you also took out a couple of *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*. Brushing up on your bedtime stories?”

“Bedtime stories are for children,” Harry replied before he could stop himself, and he had to quell the urge to bang his head against the doorframe. He had been doing so well, too. “I mean, I couldn’t remember them. My mother said she used to read them to me, and I was curious...”

He could feel Dumbledore’s gaze crawling over his back. “You’re curious about a lot of things, Mr. Ciro.”

In for a penny, Harry thought. “Is there something wrong with being curious, Professor?”

“No.” Dumbledore answered, “So long as it is in moderation.”

Harry gripped the handle of the door to hide how his hand shook. “I’ll keep that in mind. Goodbye, sir.”

He closed the door, making sure to keep his breathing nice and slow.

Harry walked to History in a daze, playing over the conversation in his head and struggling to hold back his sudden panic.

How was it that Dumbledore had gone from not caring about Nathan Ciro, to ambushing him for an interrogation in a matter of days?

Stopping just outside the History classroom, Harry took the chance to rub at his face. Things had gotten so far out of hand, so quickly. Now, on top of all his research, his quite likely accidental mastery of death, and Riddle, he had to watch out for Dumbledore as well.

Harry groaned, muffling the noise in his hand. At this rate, he did not even want to be at Hogwarts anymore. It was not worth the stress.

With a loud sigh, Harry pulled his slip out and pushed open the door to the classroom. He stepped inside, cast his gaze around the room, meeting the eyes of the students that glanced up at his interruption, then looked to Binns.

The ghost, usually too entrenched in his teachings to even notice his students, had paused in his never-ending lecture.

Harry came to a stop just inside the classroom, confused when those milky white eyes seemed to lock onto him immediately. He had never seen Binns so *aware* before.

Then, the professor *shrieked*.

Harry was not the only student to slap his hands over his ears as the ghostly wail echoed torturously around the room.

The noise pitched higher, several students stumbled out of their chairs in their frantic need to get away, and Harry watched as Binns rose from his place behind his podium, then fled the classroom through the blackboard.

The sudden silence was jarring, and Harry had trouble hearing the disturbed chatters that broke out through the constant ringing in his ears.

He slowly straightened from his hunch, lowering his hands and staring at the spot where the ghost had once occupied.

That had not been what he expected.

Harry swallowed thickly, the knot in his chest tightening at yet another piece slotted into place.

There was no other explanation he could think of. The reaction of Binns, of the magical creatures, the spectre of the girl, the shadowed figure haunting him.

He could not deny it.

He was the Master of Death.

Chapter End Notes

So. Yeah. Hope everyone enjoyed. I'm awfully sorry about the long wait, but hope it was worth it. I think we can all agree that Harry is struggling in the "laying low" area, and "avoiding suspicion", but he tries and I love him for it.

Eager to hear what you think. Come scream at me on [tumblr](#) if you want - or if you just want to ask questions or chat! Love you guys!

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the wait, my lovelies. Sincere thank you to everyone who reviewed/left a kudos! I hope you enjoy this update.

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

Tom sat, still and calm, as the rest of the class chattered around him.

The chaos of Binns' departure had died down, and Professor Kelly's assistant, Cara O'Broin, had been left to oversee them while the other professors not currently in class tried to make sense of the situation. Dumbledore and Dippet had been taking small clusters of students off to ask what had happened and attempt to find out what had triggered the infamously unruffled ghost to react in such a way.

Tom was only distantly aware of the proceedings. His attention was wholly absorbed with one person.

Nathan Ciro looked an odd mixture of weary, resigned, and teetering on the edge of catastrophic anger. It was a curious combination that twisted his somewhat pleasant features into something sharper. Wilder.

Tom tilted his head slightly, openly staring at the boy and utterly uncaring if he was caught. The other was seated a few desks away, having claimed it shortly after Kelly had entered, drawn by the commotion their class had made.

He looked restless, his fingers tapping absently on the desk, his grey eyes roaming blindly around the front of the classroom, and Tom could almost taste the thoughts whirling in the other's mind.

Ciro had become increasingly agitated since he had returned from his accident, a type of blatant disregard for everyone and everything that was almost impossible to circumvent. He was blisteringly aggressive, a spine of steel where before it had been wet paper, and the weight of his full attention was suffocating. He prowled these days, unrestrained and unyielding and unintentionally *fascinating*.

Tom, in his weaker moments, wanted to crack that infuriating head open and rip his secrets out.

It was a novel concept in a lot of ways. Ciro should not have secrets; or, more accurately, any secrets that were worth knowing. The only mildly intriguing thing about him had been his family situation, and even that – while scandalous – had barely been enough to drag Tom's focus away from his schoolwork for longer than an afternoon.

Now though, Ciro had gone and made himself interesting. Standing up for himself, picking fights, teaching students, speaking to creatures that usually avoided humans, inexplicably able to use wandless and non-verbal magic...it was all too much when laid out so plainly.

Amnesia would not – could not – justify all of these startling changes. If Tom did not know any better, he would think that Ciro was possessed.

He paused as that thought came to him, and not for the first time either. Tom narrowed his eyes, his frown becoming a touch more pronounced as he rolled that preposterous idea around in his mind. He almost shook his head at the ridiculousness of it, scoffing. And yet, for some reason, something in him could not discard it so easily.

“It’s like you’re a completely different person.”

“Don’t be stupid, Riddle.”

A throwaway comment that had been met with derision and just the right amount of incredulousness to make the suggestion sound foolish. Utterly absurd. *Embarrassing*, even. But there had been something in Ciro’s eyes that day. Something closer to panic than Tom would think the idle remark warranted.

He leaned his chin on his palm, eyes half-lidded as his mind continued to gnaw away at the problem before him.

Everything about Ciro was *off*. Everything that Tom had thought he had known about his pathetic Housemate was now in disarray.

“You’re just annoyed you never saw through the guise.”

There was no way he had miscalculated to such a degree. No one was that capable an actor, not even Tom himself, regardless of what Ciro seemed to believe. There would have been a mistake at some point, some flicker of the now ever-present ferocity slipping through the cracks. They had been in the same House for four years now, and Tom refused to think that he was careless enough to have missed such a blazing, strong personality.

The idea that this Ciro had been lurking underneath the meek character from before was, honestly, laughable. Tom could not imagine *this* boy standing quietly while he was relentlessly tormented for years on end. He could not imagine him tolerating his insipid brother’s spitting jealousy; or see him breaking under the rumours that hounded him – whispers of his parents and status nipping at his heels.

He could not imagine this Ciro ever being subdued and used, nor trying to end his own life.

This Ciro would hunt down the ones that had wronged him and tear them limb from limb. Tom knew it in his bones, because like recognised like, and the more he watched the less he could deny the growing similarities between them.

Months ago, the implication of sharing traits with Ciro would have had him disgusted. Now, the possibility sent warm sparks through his chest.

His lips curved upwards.

As if aware of his thoughts, Ciro's eyes suddenly cleared and leapt over, zeroing in on Tom with unnerving accuracy. He held his breath at the fury he saw burning bright in that gaze.

The door to the classroom opened, the latest group returning from their interview. Ciro turned his head, breaking the stalemate without a care to watch the five students trudge to their seats. One of them paused beside O'Broin to speak with her, where she nodded, then directed them back to their desk.

"Alright, last up is," her eyes scoured the class swiftly, picking out those who had yet to go. "Clarissa and Danielle. Tom. And –" O'Broin's gaze slid further, resting on Ciro. "And Nathan. You four head up to the headmaster's office. You should finish by lunch, if you're quick about it."

The two Ravenclaw girls stood, rushing to the front. Tom moved more leisurely, watching from the corner of his eyes as Ciro scowled in annoyance and followed.

They walked down the aisle together, and Tom noted with amusement how the other students fell silent when they passed, their eyes fixed on Ciro uneasily. A mark of his growing reputation as someone with a vicious and short temper, or because most, if not all of them, had made the connection between Ciro's arrival in the classroom and Binns' extreme reaction.

Tom wondered how many of them had already spoken of that to the headmaster. He stared at Ciro casually, enraptured by the play of emotions on the other's face as they left the classroom and met with the two girls.

Without a word, Ciro turned and began to lead the way to the office, the same puzzling confidence pouring off him. He walked with a careless kind of assurance, the one that came from knowing you were the most dangerous thing around.

Tom trailed after him, hands tucked in his pockets, content to observe for now.

The two Ravenclaws followed, talking amongst themselves. They were intelligent enough to keep their voices lowered but did not seem aware of how their words echoed in the empty hallway without anything to buffer against. Tom listened to their speculations and watched as Ciro's shoulders grew tighter with every hushed comment. Evidently, Tom was not the only one who had working ears.

They made their way to the second floor, then down two corridors before they came upon the gargoyle statue guarding the staircase. Ciro came to a stop, crossing his arms as he waited.

"Aren't you going to open it?" One of the girls – Danielle – asked snidely.

Ciro shot her an acidic look that dropped off far too quickly, replaced with disinterest. "I don't know the password," he said, then, after a pause, "*obviously.*"

The girl flushed and her friend gave Ciro a dirty glare that the other boy easily ignored. Instead, his steel grey eyes moved to Tom and he raised an expectant eyebrow.

Tom smiled sunnily at him, just to watch that pinched expression come to his face. Satisfied, he moved forward. “Enchanter,” Tom told the statue, and it shivered with a groan. After a moment, the steps began to appear as if spun.

Ciro gestured for the girls to go first, either a display of instinctive courteousness or a deliberate attempt to aggravate them. Tom could not quite tell, and that excited him more than he expected.

The four of them climbed the staircase, Tom allowing Ciro to bring up the rear, and by the time they reached the top the office door was already open for them. Tom’s rather affable mood plummeted the moment he saw Dumbledore standing in the doorway, staring down at them.

The deputy’s blue eyes were warm when he welcomed the two girls inside, but that kindness died a swift death when his gaze landed on Tom.

He was far too used to that reaction to bother pretending to care – knew from the moment the man had left him in the orphanage that fateful day that there would never be anything but distrust and suspicion between them. But his interest was piqued when he saw the peculiar expression that rested on the older wizard’s face when his attention finally drifted to Ciro, a flicker of the same wariness, but somehow heightened. It was more severe than anything he had ever looked at Tom with.

Ciro’s face was similarly cautious, his eyes fixed somewhere over Dumbledore’s shoulder with a determined jut to his jaw.

“Tom. Nathan,” the professor greeted after a loaded pause. He waved towards the small collection of seats that had been set up in front of Dippet’s desk. Clarissa and Danielle were already in place. “Please sit, the headmaster and I merely wish to ask some questions about the...incident with Professor Binns.”

Again, those blue eyes slid to Ciro before darting away.

Tom glanced at the other boy, half-surprised to find Ciro already looking at him. “Of course, Professor,” Tom said, moving to take a seat. Ciro followed, skirting around Dumbledore awkwardly, and claimed the remaining chair on Tom’s left.

Dippet gave them a distracted smile. A thin layer of sweat was shining on his balding forehead, and the man absently dabbed a handkerchief there. “Thank you all for cooperating,” he began, straightening in his ostentatious leather chair. “As Professor Dumbledore mentioned, we only wish to understand why Professor Binns acted in such a manner.”

The headmaster looked between them all, expression growing strained when his eyes brushed over Ciro. “So, if you could please tell us what you saw.”

Tom settled back, tilting his head attentively. This, he knew, was going to be an entertaining conversation.

The silence stretched for a short moment, before Clarissa broke. “Well, sir,” she started, flushing as the room’s focus locked onto her, “there was nothing really strange about the lesson. Professor Binns appeared as he always did and began his lecture on the most prominent goblin rebellion leaders. He was speaking for perhaps twenty minutes when he stopped and...well, screamed at us?” Her voice wavered at the end, sounding utterly baffled as she recounted the event. “After that he vanished through the blackboard and Professor Kelly found us.”

Dippet nodded slowly, buzzing with anxiety, and frowning thoughtfully as he wrote something on the parchment before him. Dumbledore, in comparison, was rigid – fixated on Ciri with a remarkable amount of intensity.

“And the rest of you?” The headmaster asked, looking up quizzically.

Tom spoke then, “It is as Clarissa said, Headmaster. It seemed to come out of nowhere.”

Dumbledore sat forward, leaping into the discussion, “And you saw nothing that might have caused such a reaction?”

Tom’s lips pressed closed, watching the professor curiously. Dumbledore was normally more refined than this, but his eyes were aglow with something fierce.

It was Danielle that answered him. She wrung her hands uncomfortably, appropriately subdued now that they were before teachers, but there was still a trace of anger in the curl of her mouth. “Not nowhere,” she muttered, “he took one look at Ciri and freaked out. Not that I can blame him.” The last words were barely above a whisper.

Tom was too controlled to scowl, and in front of the professors there was little he could do, but displeasure stuck hard in his ribs at the girl’s comment. More so when both men turned to look at Ciri.

The boy appeared unaware of the sudden scrutiny he was subjected to. His eyes were fastened to the far wall, distant and oddly flat, as if his mind were completely detached from his surroundings.

“Yes,” Dippet said slowly, apparently unnerved at Ciri’s lack of response. “We had several students mention that Professor Binns seemed...adverse to Mr. Ciri’s late attendance. Is there a reason for that?”

Tom thought the man might have to repeat his question with how *separated* Ciri appeared to be from the conversation; but no sooner had the words left Dippet’s mouth, did Ciri reply. “I was in a meeting with Professor Dumbledore, sir. Did he not tell you that? I have the slip if you would like to see it.”

Dippet blinked in surprise and Tom had to pinch his tongue between his teeth to strangle the urge to laugh at how swiftly Ciri had found and struck at that weak point. It was a well-

guarded secret that Dumbledore and Dippet, while an effective team, also had vastly differing opinions and often got into disagreements on all manner of topics.

That Ciro had not only identified that, but had no issue aiming for it, was a delightful surprise – made better when Dippet frowned at his deputy in clear frustration. “What was that meeting about?”

Dumbledore went to answer, but Ciro cut in, still looking off to the side. His air of apathy was impeccable, yet Tom knew that the other was incredibly attuned to the play happening before him. “My reading choices, sir. I’ve been spending more time in the library lately.”

It was a perfectly vague answer, and Dippet drew his own conclusions. “The boy has just returned from the hospital, Albus, for Merlin’s sake. Is it that strange that he would want to put in a little extra study to catch up? You’re not even his Head of House. If you were concerned you should have told Horace.” The headmaster shook his head, dismissing his deputy before the man could respond.

Tom lightly bit his bottom lip and told himself that smiling now would be inappropriate. He could not help but wonder what had prompted Dumbledore to reach out to Ciro, however. The transfiguration professor was not known for his care for Slytherins, and Tom knew from experience that a *talk* with Dumbledore – more often than not – actually meant an *interrogation*.

He tapped his fingers against his thigh before forcibly stilling them.

Yet another secret he would have to pry out of the other boy.

Dippet let out a sigh, waving his hand at the door, which opened under his direction. “You four may go, thank you for your input.”

Tom stood, eager to leave and have his own little discussion with Ciro – but they made it no more than a few steps before Dumbledore spoke again.

“Mr. Ciro, are you sure you did not see or do anything that might have caused such a reaction from Professor Binns?”

His tone heavily implied his thoughts on the matter, the accusation obvious to all of them. Ciro stopped, then spun in a precise and tight movement that was ingrained with grace. He stared at Dumbledore.

Ciro’s face was creased with the beginnings of spite – so at odds with his personality, new and old – that Tom could not help but raise an eyebrow. Ciro was an angry individual, that was true, but this was something darker and to see it so plainly on display was somewhat startling.

Tom had not realised the two had interacted enough to form any animosity between them. In fact, he knew that they had not, which was what made this so much more intriguing.

Ciro almost looked *betrayed*.

Why was he so affected by the opinion of a man that had never shown him a spark of concern in the past? Ciro should have no memories of Dumbledore, yet this level of rancour was not something that developed overnight. It was the type of slow-burning rage that grew, festering, for years without control.

Tom's fingers began to tingle, his need to uncover the truth bubbling forth with a desperation that caught him off-guard.

"I'm sorry, Professor," Tom interrupted, stepping forward to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Ciro. The other boy's gaze did not so much as flicker in his direction, but this close Tom could feel the incessant pressure of Ciro's magic against his skin, making him flush cold then hot. "Are you trying to suggest that Nathan somehow...*scared* Professor Binns away?"

He made sure to inject the right amount of polite disbelief into his tone, with an undercurrent of scepticism so barbed it even made Dippet grimace.

"Of course not, Mr. Riddle," the headmaster assured him rapidly, shooting Dumbledore another quelling look that made Tom want to bare his teeth in satisfaction. "That is absurd. Professor Binns would never run from a student. Really, Albus?" He sounded both embarrassed and infuriated at his deputy's question.

With both men looking away, Ciro's eyes finally crawled over Tom, rife with suspicion and annoyance – which was just rude. He was *helping*.

Tom studied the other as well, taking in the severe frown and the bags under his eyes. Ciro was so dour all of the time, always had been, but where in the past Tom had never cared, now he was seized with the sudden and irrational desire to see Ciro smile.

"Excuse me, sir?" Clarissa asked, putting a stop to the silent battle the professors were engaged in. Dippet looked at her, harried and still brimming with agitation. The girl wisely hurried on, "I was just wondering what will happen if Professor Binns can't be found?" She sounded uncertain, as if she did not even know what she was asking.

Dippet made a noncommittal noise in the back of his throat. "A substitute professor will be assigned to the classes, at least while Professor Binns is...unreachable. But you should not worry, we have the other ghosts searching for him and I'm sure it's only a matter of – ah, Baron!"

Tom turned, watching as the Slytherin House ghost lingered in the doorway of the office. As always, the shimmering silver blood staining the front of his robes caught the light. The ghost hovered outside the office for a moment, his gaunt face rippling with discomfort as he carefully entered the room.

His white visage shuddered oddly, his features becoming indiscernible, before he returned to his normal state. The change was eye-watering for all it had been brief, and the air in the office felt chilled.

The baron's white eyes skipped over all of them, even Tom, who the ghost had always acknowledged with a nod, and landed on Ciro. Again, his entire being seemed to churn, a

shiver that was barely perceivable, before it settled almost immediately.

The two of them stared at each other for less than a second, the strange connection broken when Ciro blinked. The baron turned to address the headmaster, seemingly content to ignore whatever that interaction had been.

Tom frowned at Ciro, taking in the tremor to his hands and the sickly pallor of his skin, as the headmaster dismissed them once more.

He had never seen anyone have a physical reaction to a ghost before, nor had he seen a human have such an effect on the ghosts. This was the second to have acted oddly around Ciro though, and Tom could not help but ponder what that meant.

He looked down at his hands as the four of them moved for the exit and thought back to the last time he had seen the ghosts roaming the hallways.

“It’s like you’re a completely different person.”

OoO

Harry burst into the Slytherin common room, struggling to rip his bag from his shoulders as he went. The few students that had not yet headed to the Great Hall for lunch looked up, startled at the scene he made.

Harry ignored them, his chest uncomfortably tight.

He could still feel the deep cold that had sunk into his bones when the Bloody Baron had looked at him. Those sightless eyes staring, piercing into his soul. Harry had felt *seen* in a way he had not since waking up in this time, felt *known* – and that terrified him.

He tossed his bag onto the first unoccupied lounge he saw and stopped next to it. He rubbed one hand over his mouth, thoughts spiralling; the other rested against his breast, palm pressing down in a futile attempt to calm his racing heart.

What the hell is happening to me?

A hand gripped his bicep, neither firm nor gentle, and Harry twisted away. He snatched the thin wrist and pulled out of their hold.

Riddle stared at him, eyes like silk knives slipping under his skin.

The air between them was still.

“Leave.”

Harry blinked, the rustling of dozens causing his focus to stray from the boy in front of him. He watched, bewildered, as the other Slytherins moved for the main door, their heads turned away as they abandoned whatever they were doing all at the word of one fourth year. The display left him incredulous at the power Riddle held as two seventh years walked past them.

Gaze returning to Riddle, Harry quietly marvelled at how easy it must have been for him. He had always known that Riddle had been respected and feared in his House, but he had not realised how iron-like his grip was even now.

Did he even know his heritage at this point? Did he know that he was descendant from Salazar Slytherin himself?

Harry squinted, dredging up all he knew about this part of Riddle’s past. The boy’s father and grandparents, they were killed in the summer of 1943, if his memory served. That was over a year from now, which meant that Riddle could not know everything about his family – about the Gaunt’s and his mother’s obsession with his father.

Not yet.

“Where do you go?”

Harry came back to himself, realising that he had been standing like a fool in the middle of the common room, clutching the other's wrist. He wanted to hiss at his own stupidity for letting his guard down around this boy. "What?" He asked briskly, releasing Riddle.

The boy cocked his head like a bird. "Where do you go? You get so entrenched in thought sometimes that I can't help but wonder." Riddle stepped closer to him, and Harry obstinately held his ground. "What goes on inside that head of yours, Ciro?"

Harry crinkled his nose at the edge of burning interest to Riddle's expression. He did not like that look at all. "None of your business, Riddle," he replied, leaning back slightly, hating that the other was taller than him and could loom so effortlessly. "Mind backing off?"

"What did Dumbledore want with you?" Riddle demanded, bulldozing right over Harry's request like it was not even there. The straightforward approach blindsided him for a moment, leaving him off-balance.

"What?" Harry asked again, frowning.

"Dumbledore. What did you two talk about – it couldn't have been just about your reading material." He sounded so sure of himself.

Harry's eyes narrowed. "It was," he bit out.

Riddle rolled his eyes, but there was no irritation behind the gesture. Instead, he looked excited. "It's never that simple with Dumbledore. He would never reach out to *you*, a *Slytherin*, unless he thought you were doing something particularly –" the corner of Riddle's mouth twisted in sharp amusement, "*–dangerous.*"

He leaned in, expression alive and bright. "So, tell me, Nathan. What did you do to catch his attention?"

"Apparently fairytales are on the watch-list," Harry intoned blandly, watching the rapid flash of questions shoot through the other's eyes.

"There must be more," Riddle said, discarding his answer almost immediately. "Were you in the restricted section?"

Harry met Riddle's eyes, his temper beginning to stir. "None. Of. Your. Business." He said, clearly and slowly. Harry stepped to the side, slipping out of the suffocating presence Riddle emitted. He moved to where he had thrown his bag, intent on getting the hell out of here.

"Fine," Riddle said casually, instantly raising Harry's hackles. "Tell me what you did to Binns then, and the baron too."

Harry twitched, the tightness creeping back into his chest at the words.

Riddle, predator down to his core, pounced on the topic as Harry faltered. "We both know it was you that set Binns off, and in the office just now something about you caused the baron to waver."

Harry could feel the other's approach, the whisper of shoes on the lush carpet. He clenched his jaw, "I didn't do anything."

Laughter danced along the back of his neck, and Riddle's smile was audible when he playfully murmured, "*Liar.*"

This was not something Harry wanted to deal with. He shifted around, glaring at the other. "Go stick your nose in someone else's business, before I break it."

"No," Riddle said, gleeful in the way children who had just learned the meaning of the word were. "This is the most fun I have had all year. This is interesting, *Ciro*. And –"

Harry's breath hissed out from behind his teeth at the purposeful pause Riddle made, his magic rolling under his skin.

"What I find absolutely fascinating," Riddle said, stalking closer, "is you." He marched forward, backing Harry up until he was pinned to the cool wall of the common room. "Do you know why?"

"No. And I'll be honest here, Riddle, I don't particularly care."

The taller boy grinned at him, small yet infinitely pleased. "That. Right there." One hand rose and brushed some of Harry's fringe from his face. "Nathan *Ciro* was a spineless little boy too afraid of his own shadow to dare even glance in my direction. But you..."

He leaned closer, "You look at me like you want to stab me."

"Then I suggest you back off before I give into the temptation," Harry whispered, body tensed in preparation to attack. This entire confrontation was unsettling; not just because it was surprisingly candid for a Slytherin to outright ask instead of twisting the answers out of someone, but because there was honest delight in Riddle's eyes at his threat.

Riddle's smile grew, but he did not move away. A shade of harsh wonderment bled into his expression. His silence lasted only a moment before he spoke once more.

"Who are you *really*?"

The question ripped the air from Harry's lungs.

"You are obviously not *Ciro*," Riddle continued mercilessly in the face of Harry's inability to respond. "Memories or not, it doesn't explain your new abilities – wandless and non-verbal magic?" The boy clicked his tongue in light admonishment, "Not very common, and certainly well out of *his reach before the attack. Your magic is different, it practically leaks off of you, and anyone that takes the time to look can tell that you are far more powerful than even some of our esteemed professors.*"

Riddle's eyes darted over his face, voracious.

*"Your entire personality is the antithesis of everything Nathan *Ciro* once was. You aren't afraid of angering people and you certainly aren't afraid of retaliation."* Riddle's voice

dropped lower, enticing but brutal as he continued to throw his observations in Harry's face. "You look at us all like we're fumbling children in your eyes – amusing, yes, but ultimately not a threat. And now you have the school ghosts either running from you in terror or quivering before you. You're not him." The certainty in that declaration was rattling.

"So," Riddle drawled, leaning back on his heels, eyes scorching, "I ask again. Who are you really?"

The tension in him snapped.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Harry said, the rush of adrenaline leaving the edges of his vision dark. All he could see was the building fascination on Riddle's face. His mind shook, and his every instinct screamed for him to run but he was frozen.

"I think you do," the other denied, victory strong in his smile. The glimpse of that razor-sharp fervour fading beneath a mask of civility. A fake retreat.

"But that's fine. I suppose it would be boring if you spilled all your secrets here and now." Then, as if nothing had happened, Riddle asked, "Have you made any progress on our defence project?"

The change was jarring and Harry, still reeling from everything that had happened this morning – Dumbledore, Binns, the baron, Riddle's words – had to turn away. His hands curled into fists as frustration burst through him. He needed to leave before he did something he would regret, like acknowledge Riddle's too-accurate guesses, or lashed out and hurt someone.

Ignoring the other, Harry grabbed his bag and moved for the staircase, determined to shut himself in his room and figure out his next move.

"Running makes you look guilty," Riddle called after him helpfully, and Harry gnashed his teeth together, walking faster.

OoO

The wand sat inert in his palm.

Idly, he tilted his wrist, fingers laid flat, and let it roll into his other hand.

There was nothing – no spark of warmth, no pull, no hint of the sheer power that it was capable of wielding. The wood was cold to touch, unnaturally so, and not even the heat of his skin was being absorbed into it.

Gellert tapped the Elder wand against his palm in thought.

He had sensed no external force attempting to influence it, nothing that might explain how the wand disappeared from his grip several days ago, only to return unannounced minutes later, covered in grains of white sand.

It was certainly curious – and more than a little concerning. As was the strange hesitance he felt when casting with the wand. In all the years he had possessed it, never had he experienced trouble using it.

He frowned to himself, gaze distant.

“My Lord?”

Gellert hummed, tilting his head to show he was listening, but not bothering to look at the man who had entered. There was something on the edge of his awareness, a shadowed figure that threatened to disappear whenever he turned his attention to it.

“What is it?” He asked absently, waiting to see if this vision would take form.

“Benat has reported progress with his assignment.”

Gellert blinked, connecting the name with the assignment in question, then smiled. “Truly? Our friend in the immigration sector is finally...seeing the light, then?”

“I believe so, my Lord. Benat did say that he has provided sufficient motivation.”

Pleased, Gellert nodded. “Excellent. Be sure to keep me informed. Benat can be overeager.” He laughed to himself, then waved a hand, “You may leave now.”

The man shuffled, backing out of the room swiftly and closing the door behind him.

Gellert breathed deeply in the ensuing quiet, eyes fluttering.

In the corner of his vision, the shadowed silhouette vanished.

Chapter End Notes

So Tom's caught a clue or eight, and immediately lobbed them at Harry - and Gellert is now in play. How exciting~

As always, my [tumblr](#) is open. Come along if you want to discover theories, or scream at me, or discuss my new snippets! Thanks guys!

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Notes

Lucky early update because I felt like being cruel.

Thank you to everyone that has commented or given a kudos so far! really appreciate it, darlings! Hope you enjoy this one - we learn quite a bit in this one ;)

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

Harry closed the door to his room and locked it. The privacy wards rose into place, biting in their viciousness; mirroring the steady pulse of frantic panic that was beating away in his chest.

He pressed a palm to his forehead and forced himself to breathe. Riddle's words were still ringing in his ears, taunting, mocking, *knowing*.

"Who are you really?"

Harry swallowed, frowning in mounting frustration.

"Running makes you look guilty."

That entire conversation had been a reminder he could do without – that even at fourteen, Riddle was too smart and too tenacious for his own good.

Harry had, for the most part, been trying to ignore the boy. The fear of what he might do if he allowed himself to think too long on Riddle – on the consequences of doing nothing, of doing *something* – played in the back of his mind whenever he saw the other.

He had spoken to him, traded insults, even bore his scrutiny with more patience than he normally exhibited; but it was never too much. Harry had tried to maintain that line between them, a carefully crafted distance that stopped him from imagining what it would be like to wrap his hands around that thin, pale neck and *squeeze*. Paying attention to Riddle made it too hard to forget how easy it would be to kill him, and with that knowledge always came the temptation; a black toxic urge that pushed hard against his ribs until he could suffocate on it.

He did not allow himself to think of it, because he knew his temper and how often he skirted the edge; how often he was standing at the precipice that loomed large in his mind – and the idea of falling into that abyss terrified him. Harry knew, unequivocally, what he was capable of and that losing the little restraint he had would turn him into something monstrous.

Harry was *dangerous*. Everyone around him knew it – Ron, Hermione, Ginny, his colleagues, and Ministry officials. Once the glimmer of post-war relief had begun to wane, he had been

hounded by whispers and suspicions and speculations. His every move picked apart by the world, all of them looking for a hint of dark intent.

It had lessened once he and Ginny had taken their relationship public, but Harry had known it was never far from people's minds, especially when he did something that reminded those around him of who and what he was.

Voldemort's equal.

A burst of hysterical laughter stuck hard in his throat.

He closed his eyes, shaking his head.

He already knew that killing Riddle was not an option here, not when the ramifications and uncertainty far outweighed the potential benefits. But if the boy was going to keep digging into things, then Harry would have to do something eventually to dissuade him.

If their encounter in the common room had shown anything, it was that leaving Riddle unattended was not viable.

Harry opened his eyes, shifting away from the door. He tossed his bookbag somewhere off to the side, the need to claw out of his skin rising like a tidal wave. He ripped his black outercoat off and pulled his tie loose from his neck. His shirt was almost torn in his haste to escape from it, and fell to the floor forgotten, as Harry's breathing began to finally slow.

He stood in the middle of his room, his hand unconsciously dropping down to curl over where the mark of the Deathly Hallows was still hidden by his pants' waist. It had been inert these last few days, no random spikes of pain, nor rushes of heat; but the sudden lack of anything made him more wary than not.

Sighing heavily, he drew his composure back around himself, smothering the unease. He rubbed at the back of his neck, fingers working at the base of his skull where the tension was gathering. "This cannot get any worse," he muttered.

"Harry."

"Fuck!" Harry leapt forward, spinning as he went. His hands raised as his magic swelled inside him.

Floating across from him, the Bloody Baron winced, the edges of his form quivering tumultuously.

The air was knocked out of him. "Baron," he greeted cautiously, lowering his hands, and wrangling his magic back. It still thrashed under his skin, protective and untrusting, because his track record with ghosts lately was not particularly good.

Harry blinked then, realising what the other had said, his eyes widening. "You know –" he cut himself off, biting his lip as a glimmer of hope bloomed in his heart. "You know who I am."

The baron dipped his head respectfully, “I do, and I came here immediately after debriefing the Headmaster. I wished to apologise for my behaviour in the office. My appearance made you uncomfortable and brought unwanted attention to you.”

The genuine remorse in his words was startling. Harry glanced to the side, unsure what to do with that. “It’s fine,” he assured, “I’m honestly more concerned with how you know my name.”

The ghost looked at him, straightening from his bow and hovering there. He folded his hands behind his back and answered the unspoken question. “Any being that bothered to look would know that you are not the boy whose body you inhabit. Your true identity – your name – is stamped across your soul.”

Harry shivered lightly, both from the chill encroaching on the room and the ominous undertone to those words. “What do you mean by that, exactly?”

The baron’s expression turned quizzical, but he replied, nonetheless. “You have been touched by Death,” he said plainly, and at the words, Harry closed his eyes. “Your true nature permeates the air around you, surrounding you like a glow. You mastered it, you carry its mark – though how this came to be, I do not know.”

Harry’s hand fluttered down to his hip.

He looked at his feet, lips pressed tight. He remembered a forest and a ring of people in dark clothes and a blinding pulse of green light. He remembered a dream and being pinned by something his eyes could not discern, a hand with too many fingers digging into his flesh and the whisper of his name by a voice that sunk under his skin and hooked into his mind.

“Your appearance here has,” the baron paused, his discomfort evident in the way his eyes skittered away from Harry’s. When Harry gave no sign of anger or impatience, he continued. “You have unbalanced the order here,” his pale hands moved nebulously, trying to convey the words he struggled to give life. “We knew the moment that you arrived at Hogwarts, and many are...unsettled by the shift in energies. The others have elected to remain secluded – to reduce the chances of crossing you.”

Harry frowned, disturbed at the implications. “Why are you here then?”

The baron finally met his eyes, though again Harry was overwhelmed with the sensation of being laid bare under that white gaze. “I realised that you were not malevolent. That you seemed,” the ghost tilted his head, “*unaware* of your status.” The way he spoke was reminiscent of the way Harry used to speak to his Aunt and Uncle when he was younger. Tentative, hesitant, fearful of retaliation. “I wanted to discuss the matter with you.”

Harry narrowed his eyes, more in confusion than frustration.

Shifting energies and toppling balances – it sounded far more dangerous than he was prepared for. And, if the baron was correct, he had done it without knowing he was. Coming to Hogwarts might not have been the best idea.

He looked up at the ghost, “So, I definitely am?” He asked, fists clenching. “I am the Master of Death.”

At the baron’s quiet nod, Harry had to turn away.

He had known, but to have someone else confirm it was infinitely worse. The acquiescence felt like releasing a weight he had not known he was carrying, only to pick up a heavier one. His shoulders dropped as the knowledge gripped him tight. “What does this even mean?” He whispered, running a hand through his hair.

Annoyingly, tears stung at his eyes.

Harry gritted his teeth, silently cursing this whole situation. He did not *want* to be the Master of Death. He just wanted to be *Harry*. He wanted to be back in his body and time, with his friends and loved ones. He wanted to marry Ginny and start a family with her; to be an auror and try and enjoy the peace that he had fought and bled and died for.

He wanted to go *home*.

“I apologise,” the baron murmured, drifting closer to the wall. “I can see that this has upset you.”

Harry wanted to laugh, but nothing about this was funny. He squeezed his eyes shut, shaking his head lightly. “It’s fine,” he lied, shoving back the anxiety that was threatening to crush him. “What did you mean about unbalancing things?”

He needed information, something that he could distract himself with.

The baron still stayed towards the edges of the room as he replied. “Exactly that. You tip the balance of the world. Your connection, your presence, your soul – they all disrupt the natural order of things. You agitate those that reside here, the magical creatures and entities. And you call forth things that should not be in this plane.”

At that, Harry’s skin broke out in goose bumps. He twisted slowly until he was facing the ghost fully, his mouth parting in understanding. “The girl,” he breathed out, “the girl at the lake – she wasn’t a normal ghost, was she?”

Intense sorrow filled the baron’s face as he nodded once more. “She was a shade.”

“What the hell is a ‘shade’?” Harry asked, his arms crossing defensively over his bare chest. He could still feel the press of the girl’s cold palm to his mouth and the sight of her hanging limply from that *thing’s* hand.

“The imprint of a life that ended tragically,” the baron answered solemnly, his lips pursed.

“But,” Harry gestured at the baron nervously, “isn’t that what you are? And the other ghosts?”

It was clear from the way the baron floated from one corner of the room to the other that he was bothered by this topic, but he did not try to stop their conversation. “No, shades are not

ghosts. They are lesser, in a way. Oblivious to their surroundings, the terror and pain of their death was powerful enough to leave a mark on the place they died, but they do not interact with the world. They are trapped in a continuous loop, either reliving their death or the moments leading up to it.”

The baron came to a stop, his attention on the far wall. The deep sadness returned to him, “They are usually weak, invisible to humans. They do not exist in this world, not as ghosts do.”

Harry licked his lips, “When I first saw her, she was walking back and forth across the beach. Over and over. I reached out, I wanted to help. But I – I *touched her*.” He looked up at the baron, “She snapped out of whatever it was and screamed at me. She attacked, cut up my arms, and that night she tried to suffocate me in the hospital wing.”

The baron was silent.

Harry hunched a little under that unfathomable gaze, “This...thing came and ripped her off me. It was big. Shadowed. It *killed* her. And it looked at me and laughed, then said my name and disappeared.” Even recounting that night made him feel sick. He absently rubbed his arms to try and chase away the cold.

He did not want to ask, but he needed to know. “Was that –”

“Death.”

The baron’s rasp was terrified, and Harry felt phantom fingers caress his throat. He shuddered at the teasing touch.

“It walks in your shadow,” the baron continued, merciless and afraid. “You are bound together. Your soul is aglow with Its claim.”

“How do I break it?” Harry asked, arms dropping as he stepped forward. “I don’t want this, I didn’t ask for this to happen to me. I was taken from my rightful time and place and shoved into this body. There has to be a way to reverse this.”

But the baron was shaking his head, backing away from Harry’s advance. “I cannot,” he denied, a hunted look overtaking his features.

Harry pushed the waist of his pants down enough that half the symbol branded on his hip was visible. “Do you know why this burns?” He demanded, tone biting and desperate. “Do you know why it hurts?”

The ghost shook his head again, “There has never been a Master before. Death is not meant to be chained or controlled. It is a wild force, beyond our grasp. Its power is untold, and something like that – I doubt It is pleased with your situation.”

“That makes two of us,” Harry hissed, his temper careening higher. “If It’s the reason I’m here then It has some things to answer for.”

The baron looked scandalised, one hand actually flying to his chest with the strength of his horror. “Death is not something to be commanded,” he protested, flustered.

“Maybe not,” Harry agreed, because he had no idea of what mastering Death even entailed. “But if I’m stuck with this thing, I want to have a damned explanation.”

The baron swooped forward, incensed. “You cannot do such a thing – and certainly not *here*. Hogwarts is a nexus of magical energy, consolidated over nine centuries. The longer you are here, surrounded by such potent magic – do you have the vaguest comprehension of how dangerous this all is? You cannot tempt such a force, not in a place filled with *children*.”

The ferocity behind the words had Harry stepping back, the baron’s snarl befitting a feral beast. Whatever fears he had held regarding Harry were washed away in the wake of his desire to protect the castle’s occupants.

And faced with such candour, Harry could only lower his head in compliance. He had spoken in haste, his own fear stealing his reason from him, and he regretted the suggestion of his thoughtless words.

“No,” he said softly, “no, not at Hogwarts. You’re right. This – whatever is happening with me – it’s too dangerous to continue here. I came to Hogwarts to find a solution, to see if there was a way to return to my home. But my answers clearly lie elsewhere.” He sighed, exhaustion emerging once more, dragging at him after such an intense day. “Maybe I should leave.”

It would not even be hard. A disillusionment charm, up to the One-Eyed Witch’s passage, through to Honeydukes and then out of Hogsmeade. He could be gone in a night, with no one the wiser. Without the Trace on him, Harry could be halfway across Britain before anyone even realised that he was missing.

And that was without effort. If he purposefully tried to mislead the staff and students, if he used his knowledge of aurors’ techniques and methodology, he could lay a false trail, sending them scurrying in a completely different direction. Disappearing into the muggle world was his best bet, slipping between the cracks that the war had opened up. International travel would be more challenging, but Harry knew that if he really wanted to, he could find a way out of the British Isles all together.

He had been chafing under the constraints of being Nathan Ciro ever since he had woken up in the hospital. Trying to contain himself – not completely, never completely; but enough that he would come across as weird rather than deadly – and it had done nothing more than draw attention and add to the mess he was attempting to fix.

One thing he knew – he would never get back home if he stayed like this. He was not cut out for pretending, nor playing whatever twisted games Riddle and Dumbledore were so eager to.

He needed to act; needed to do something to remedy this problem.

“Whatever you decide,” the baron said, “know that nothing will coax Cuthbert back to his class while you remain within the school.”

Harry inclined his head in acknowledgement, his thoughts barely pausing as he continued to ruminate over the possibilities. Over everything he had been told.

Likely sensing the end of the discussion, or just eager to escape, the ghost rose a few feet. “I take my leave,” the baron told him, bowing stiffly before shooting up through the roof, resembling a spooked animal in his swift retreat.

Harry stared at where the ghost had disappeared. After almost a minute, he made his way to sit down on his bed, then looked down at his hands.

He did not move for hours.

OoO

Simon was numb.

His hands moved blindly, picking up a book from his desk and sliding it into his bag. The lunch break would be coming to an end soon, and he wanted to avoid the mad rush of students trying to get to their afternoon classes.

He fiddled with his bag, fingers twitching uselessly over the strap as his eyes grew troubled.

Nathan had not been at the Great Hall.

It was half-habit at this point for his gaze to skim along the Slytherin table, trying to find those familiar features in the sea of faces – and each time he failed to see the other, the knot in his heart grew impossibly tighter.

Simon pressed a hand to his chest, kneading the heel of his palm into his sternum as if that might elevate the pain emanating from there.

He could not recall a time when he had been as confused as he was now. The uncertainty and apprehension had been hounding him since that meeting in the hallway the other day.

Simon could still see the fury in Nathan's eyes, the disinterest and disregard that had morphed into a forest fire within a blink, turning the blank grey slates into gleaming steel.

"Nathan isn't here right now."

Simon swallowed, one hand nervously fluttering to brush his hair back.

Admitting it, even to himself, made him ashamed – but in that moment, faced with Nathan's ire, Simon had felt nothing but pure, unfiltered fear. Being the sole focus of such potent rage had had him shaking, and even now his arms and legs were racked with tremors.

He closed his eyes, hands winding around his bag's strap.

It had finally dawned on him that he no longer knew Nathan – that this façade he had put on was not a façade at all. Simon could not recognise anything in the other anymore. Where before he had only needed to *look* to know, Nathan was a closed book to him now; with thoughts and mysteries that he could not untangle.

It was disquieting, and disturbing in so many ways, to look at a face he knew intimately and see a stranger staring back at him.

Simon shook himself, frowning fiercely. He reached down and grabbed his journal – the one his mother had gifted him for his birthday – intending to put it in his trunk for safe-keeping.

As he stepped away, a piece of parchment fluttered to the floor. Simon stared down at it, puzzled. He plucked it from the ground and opened it, only to release it almost immediately when he recognised what it was.

It dropped back to his bed, the neatly written words on display for him.

He...he thought he had gotten rid of it.

The sight of it made his stomach lurch, bile crawling swiftly up to his throat. Simon's hand hovered in front of his mouth, as he read it once more for the first time in months.

A deal is a deal. A favour for a favour. I will be in touch.

He wanted to be sick.

OoO

Harry eventually came back to himself slowly, sitting back and sighing.

He had likely missed afternoon classes, but at this point maintaining his guise as a diligent student was the least of his concerns. He stood, patting down his pants to remove the creases, and freezing when something crinkled.

He slipped a hand into his pocket and pulled out an envelope, blinking at it stupidly until he remembered it was from Cynthia. He had received it just this morning – and Harry marvelled at how long this day seemed to drag on for.

Delicately, he pulled the letter out once more, driven by curiosity and a need to be distracted from his chaotic thoughts.

Harry read through the contents with care.

The letter was, in a word, warm. Cynthia's love for her son practically shone from the page, and though Harry had found her presence overbearing and frustrating while he was exposed to it, he really could not fault the woman.

Cynthia reminded him distantly of Molly – the attentiveness, the protectiveness, the adoration for her children – and several times while reading her words he found himself smiling.

It was a relatively short letter, but it was still refreshing to immerse himself in someone else's idle problems for a time. The gossip of the high society circles, the stress over which style of dress to buy, a disagreement between herself and Benedict over where to spend their next holiday. Trivial things, issues he would never have paid a mind to back in his own time, and yet it was strangely soothing.

An escape from the madhouse his own life was these days. His conversation with the baron still plagued him, but Harry forcibly pushed it to the side.

Cynthia's probing over his own experience at Hogwarts was softer too, less abrasive than he had initially found her. Her suggestion to visit Hogsmeade on the weekend was a good one, though her recommendation to go with Simon was not. Harry did not care much for Nathan's twin, and certainly did not want to subject himself to the other's company.

But he could admit that a part of him missed the quiet charm of Hogsmeade. It would be nice to see it again, as it had been before the effect of Voldemort's brief reign had taken its toll on the village.

Harry tapped the parchment against his palm, gazing off to the side. It would be strange visiting without Ron or Hermione there with him. This whole disaster was difficult without his friends, without Ginny, but Harry did not let himself dwell on the void inside his chest for long.

He looked back at the letter, debating. He knew he would have to reply to her, but he needed to consider what he wrote carefully. The last thing he wanted was to set the woman off, or cause any distress –

Harry stopped, his lips parting as an idea formed in his mind.

He wanted to leave Hogwarts, had already planned a possible route out of the castle, but what if he did not have to run at all?

Cynthia had said plainly that he could return to their home should school prove too much for him, and she did not strike him as the type that would rescind her word on such matters. If he wrote to her – if he mentioned the bullying and snide comments and dark looks, the deliberate inattention from the staff – surely, she would pull him out.

It would be more reliable than going on the run, and the relative safety of having a home and resources and connections at his disposal would be better than having to barter or steal his way across the country. The fussing he would have to endure from Benedict and Cynthia was a small price to pay for the security they would provide.

And, a smaller part of him whispered, it would feel less like he was kidnapping their son from them. They had almost lost him once, and Harry would like to spare them the tragedy of him vanishing without a trace if he could.

He could handle some coddling if it meant he could get out of this place, away from Riddle and Orion and Dumbledore, from the ghosts and shades and creatures. He doubted there was anything more that he could learn about his predicament here – it would be best to cut his losses before getting in any deeper.

Eager, Harry moved to his desk, stepping too fast. He clicked his tongue when his hip clipped the corner of the desk and a glass ornament toppled over the edge. It clattered to the floor before he could grab it.

Harry frowned; one hand braced on the surface of the desk. He dropped the letter and took a step to the side, watching as the bauble – unbroken thanks to a simple protection charm – rolled away, then turned his eyes to the floorboard that it had landed on.

The one that had sounded distinctly hollow.

Eyes narrowing, Harry quickly knelt and felt along the wooden boards, rapping his knuckles between the two and listening to the difference. He huffed, lips curling upwards, “Oh, you clever kid.”

He was not even surprised. Harry already knew that Nathan was the type to squirrel secrets away, so finding something in his dorm room was expected. He was more disappointed in himself for not thinking of checking properly for hidden compartments.

Harry grabbed his wand and ran a diagnostic spell over the floorboard; other than some mild defensive charms there did not appear to be anything dangerous. He set to unravelling the net of protections, and then dug his fingers under the crease of the board, lifting it up smoothly.

He peeked inside the rather deep space, instantly spotting the folded slip of paper resting there innocently. Again, he sensed nothing that was a threat, so Harry picked it up. Using his thumb, he flipped it open and began to read.

He almost dropped the floorboard in shock, his interest roaring to life.

It was the cipher.

Harry shot to his feet, fingers creasing the paper from how tightly he was gripping it. In the chaos of the past few days he had completely forgotten about Nathan's journal; the lack of the key making it far too taxing to try and decode.

But with this...

Harry held out his hand, a nonverbal *accio* bringing the red leather-bound book soaring into his grasp. He turned to the desk, tugging his chair out with his foot, and dropping into it. He opened the journal to its first page.

The jumble of letters was still mildly disorientating to look at, but the renewed energy burning in his gut made it easy to ignore.

Harry laid the single sheet of paper down beside the journal, then grabbed one of his unused books.

His hands were steady, and his brewing excitement crushed any lingering thought of his troubles beneath it.

Harry looked over the cipher circle – a simple shift one – and found where the alphabet began in the outer ring, then looked down to the inner ring for the translation.

He smiled to himself and began to decrypt the first line, just to ensure it matched up.

It took only a handful of minutes, but once he was satisfied, he moved the cipher and the journal beside each other. Harry levelled his wand at the pages, "*Transferendum*."

With a shimmer of gold, a copy of the cipher rose from the page and moved to hover above the journal. Harry sat with bated breath, watching as the cipher sections began to flash rapidly, each flicker of light corresponding with a letter on the page changing, until words began to unveil before him.

Harry did not get a chance to read the first page as the journal automatically flipped to the next one, continuing relentlessly with its task.

He rubbed his hand over his mouth, lounging back in his chair as he thought. It would be best to allow the spell to run its course before trying to read anything. He had all night, after all.

He sighed, settling in for the wait.

Even with the translation spell going at such a speed, it still took well over an hour for the full journal to be decoded.

When the golden cipher dispersed in a shower of harmless sparks, Harry sat forward and turned back to the first page. He ran a hand over it, half-reverent, half-cautious.

He took a breath then began to read, losing track of himself within minutes.

Most of the entries were daily records of Nathan's life, starting from what seemed to be midway through second year, and painted a very different picture than Harry had been expecting.

...Damian made it onto the reserves for Hufflepuff. He was so excited...

...and even though I told him not to, Simon still bought it for me...

...Jasmine is rather pretty, and she said she thought I had nice eyes yesterday...

...nice to go out together, I am still surprised Father let so many come to the manor...

Harry frowned, mouthing along to what was written, trying to understand how Nathan seemingly went from having an abundance of friends to being an outcast in his school.

The entries showed him to be a normal boy, smart and driven, though perhaps a touch shy. It made no sense to Harry, who had experienced firsthand the disdain and outright disgust so many held towards the boy he was pretending to be.

"What the hell happened?" He murmured, finger curling under the corner of the paper in preparation to turn. He finished the last paragraph – detailing Nathan's last day at Hogwarts before the annual break – and flipped the page.

His frown became more pronounced when he saw the stark jump in dates, from the end of June to halfway through August. But what was worse was the single line written on the page; every alarm in Harry's mind beginning to blare.

They lied to me.

He traced his finger over the line, his gut clenching in confusion and concern. "What is this about?" Harry whispered, flicking to the next page, and skimming the words there – noting the date as being October, *months* passing without another entry, Nathan's third year well underway. He only read long enough to figure out that the attitude towards Nathan had deteriorated already, before going back to the previous entry.

He stared down at those sinister four words for a long moment, mind buzzing intently.

Harry jolted when someone knocked loudly on his door. He gasped, blinking as his head rose sharply. Annoyed at the interruption, he pinched the bridge of his nose. The knocking continued, and Harry bundled the loose pages into the journal and shoved it in the drawer of his desk.

He cast a swift look around before darting to the door and yanking it open.

Orion smiled up at him pleasantly. “You really need to stop skipping lessons,” the younger boy said in lieu of greeting, “you might have the professors’ sympathies for now, but if you keep doing things like this that will change.”

Those curious grey eyes raked over him, seeing far too much and yet nothing at all. “I came to get you for dinner,” he said after he finished his perusal.

Harry squinted at the other, then all at once, he felt the sharp pang of hunger rise. He had not eaten anything since breakfast, he remembered.

“I don’t need a minder,” Harry said without heat, feeling drained and far too perturbed to bother maintain his irritation. He was, in truth, grateful that Orion had come to collect him even though he suspected there was an ulterior motive. If there was one thing he had figured out, it was that Orion was not a naturally thoughtful person. For all he looked sweet, there was a wide streak of maliciousness in him, coupled neatly with his cunning and sly personality.

Though, knowing that he would be gone from Hogwarts soon made Harry feel more charitable towards the other.

“You sort of do,” Orion commented lightly, stepping back as Harry exited his room and locked the door. “It feels like every time I turn my back you are off doing something interesting.” The boy paused meaningfully, then asked, “What were you doing? Riddle said to give you space – were you upset about something?”

Safely facing his door, Harry allowed his face to scrunch in displeasure. He did not want to go through another interrogation. Two with Dumbledore and one with Riddle had already stretched him thin.

“No. I was reading a book,” he offered, hoping it would be enough to stall anymore questions.

Orion’s nose crinkled at his answer, “All day? That sounds like a lie.” He shook his head, tugging on Harry’s arm, “Let’s go.” Unlike usual, the boy did not latch onto Harry, instead keeping his hands tucked behind his back. He looked remarkably settled and mature.

Harry eyed him suspiciously, thrown by the change. He knew that Orion was mercurial, but this seemed different somehow.

Though what the other had said brought his thoughts spiralling back to Nathan’s journal, and the last passages he had read.

They lied to me.

He bit his lip again, the flesh beginning to feel tender, and came to a standstill. Orion stopped next to him; head cocked.

Harry slowly let his bottom lip slide free of his teeth; his eyes seeking the ceiling briefly before he turned to the other boy. “Orion,” he began, waiting until he was sure he had his full

attention. “What did you think of – me? Before.”

Orion appeared surprised, though the expression quickly fell into something of polite interest. His eyes were bright with intrigue, however. “Boring,” the Black heir answered succinctly, unbothered by the ruthlessness of the statement. “Weak, plain, and he cried too easily. Smart, but too soft to use it. Incapable of standing up for himself.”

“Why?” Harry asked quiet but firm. When Orion raised an enquiring eyebrow, Harry made a vague gesture. “Why was he – I – bullied? Why does everyone hate me?”

Orion hummed, leaning back an inch, and fixing him with a curious, assessing look. “It is mostly a compilation of many things, but I suppose it started because of the rumours,” he replied evenly.

“What rumours?” Harry’s tone edged towards impatience. He just wanted to know.

Orion’s expression grew callously amused, his lips quirked.

“The rumours that you are illegitimate,” the boy’s eyes seared into him. “The rumours that you are a bastard.”

Chapter End Notes

Haha, oh man. I love when I get to reveal foreshadowed things. Hope no one is too freaked out, but we're starting to get the bigger picture now. Trust me, it'll make sense eventually.

As always, my [tumblr](#) is open. Come along if you want to discover theories, scream at me, discuss my new snippets or get some behind the scenes commentary! Thanks guys, have a great day / night!

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Notes

Firstly, thank you all so much for your patience. It's been a weird couple of months, writing-wise for me. The juices haven't quite been flowing. I know I left you all on a pretty big cliffhanger, so I doubly appreciate your kindness.

This chapter was literally rewritten minutes before posting, and while I tried my best with editing, there might be one or two mistakes I missed (it's like, 3AM, but I made a promise on my tumblr so I gotta). Regardless, I hope you all enjoy!

Again, I'm putting up a warning for the end sections of the chapter. This story does deal with some heavy topics, and it becomes *very* relevant in this chapter. Please heed the tags and proceed with caution if you know these topics are triggering for you.

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

Orion stared as Ciro's face twisted through a myriad of expressions, each jagged and fierce, cutting in their intensity, before finally falling into something blank and unmoving.

Excitement beat away in his chest like a bird trapped beneath his rib cage, fluttering and panicked and desperate to burst free. His tongue darted out to trace his bottom lip, and for a moment Orion wondered just how he had gotten so lucky.

He had known from the first day that Ciro was walking blind, lacking some very crucial pieces of information. It was obvious each time the older boy reacted to the insinuations and taunts of the other students – explosive and dangerous, but without truly *understanding*.

That glaring unawareness never failed to amuse him, but until now he had not known the *extent* of Ciro's obliviousness.

With just one question Orion felt like he had been handed a fistful of gold.

Honestly, he had no idea what Lord and Lady Ciro were thinking when they let their family's dirty little secret return to Hogwarts without telling him the truth. It was just asking for trouble.

Though, he amended with a curling grin, he might also have to thank them for the unintended gift. There was nothing more fun then winding someone up and watching them go – and judging from what he had seen of this new Ciro so far, his reaction would be well worth it.

"I'm going to need you to say that again," Ciro stated after over a minute of stony silence. His tone was level, placid, not even a waver to suggest what he was feeling.

His control was as impeccable as it was jarring. For someone who had been raised in high society, Ciro had always been annoyingly transparent; never quite able to hide his true thoughts or emotions fast enough. It had been a weakness, a target painted on his back, and his composure had only grown more abysmal after everything had come to light.

Now that he had returned though, Orion found it a challenge to know what went through the other's head. The only thing that was *easy* about Ciro now was his emotions, which he wore on his sleeve with a careless disregard – and even *that* was a lie.

It was not a matter of *capability*. Ciro just did not *care enough* in normal circumstances to bother.

Rather than feel frustrated at the duplicity, Orion wanted to smile. No one since Riddle had ever tickled his interest in such a way.

“Which part is confusing you?” He asked, tilting his head; some of his hair fell into his eyes, but he paid it no mind. “You are a bastard. The product of an illicit and shameful affair. *Allegedly.*” He tacked on with a thin thread of mirth seeping into his tone.

Orion scoured Ciro for anything he might be able to exploit, but there was nothing. No confusion, none of the boiling anger that was becoming synonymous with his new temperament. Nothing.

Ciro stared down at him, grey eyes like steel.

“What about Simon?” Ciro asked flatly. “Aren't they twins?”

Orion lowered his eyes, studying the wrinkles in the older boy's shirt as he made a note of the phrasing.

Ciro did that sometimes – referred to himself in that disconnected way, seemingly without realising it. He spoke as if he did not view himself as Nathan Ciro at all, as if he had no claim to his own brother or family.

And that was so very interesting.

“Are they?” He asked, playing on Ciro's wording. He linked his hands behind his back and wondered if the other would catch it.

Ciro's stoicism broke then. He frowned, the expression darkening his narrow, delicate features and making him look far older. “They said –” he stopped himself before he could finish, biting his bottom lip in thought. There was doubt creeping over his face when he continued in a mutter, “They said they were the same age. I just...”

“Assumed,” Orion concluded, and a thrill rushed through him when the full weight of Ciro's attention landed on him. The intensity of that regard was dangerous and intoxicating, and Orion delighted in it. “No one corrected you,” he added, softening his voice and features.

The other boy narrowed his eyes. “If they aren't twins, then what the hell are they?” He demanded, the first bite of frustration in his tone.

Orion shrugged, acting dismissive even as his heart began to hum with tension. “According to the rumours, they’re half-brothers. *Apparently*, Lord Ciro got lonely while he was overseas and decided to...find some company outside of his wife. Nine months later, out you popped – only Lady Ciro was *also* pregnant with her own child, and she gave birth around the same time. Very messy, and very scandalous.”

He paused then to observe the other, rocking back on his heels.

Ciro met his gaze with a mixture of uncertainty and annoyance, his lips pursed as if he was biting back a comment; but instead of voicing it, he released a tumultuous breath.

“Seriously?” He asked, closing his eyes, and pressing his knuckles to his forehead.

He was upset, but not nearly as distraught as Orion would have thought.

“Are you honestly telling me that *this* is the reason that everyone hates this kid?” The incredulity it was said with made Orion cock his head.

Ciro gestured vaguely to the side, the move stiff. “They blame him for something that he had no say in – like it’s his fault his father had an affair.” He stopped, breathing in sharply and shaking his head. “Bloody hell – are you *kidding me*? So he’s illegitimate, *so what*? He was lied to his entire life about it, and even if he wasn’t that still doesn’t mean he deserved to be treated like a villain.”

Running a hand down his face, Ciro let out a noise that might have been a laugh if it had been allowed enough air. “Bloody hell,” he repeated, gritting the curse out.

Orion pressed his lips together and watched raptly as outrage crawled through Ciro’s body. He still held himself stiffly, but his eyes were flaring now. The other’s magic spiked the air with a sour tang, leaving Orion’s tongue tingling and his teeth aching.

This had been what he was waiting for. Anger. Sorrow. Disbelief. But there was still that curious disconnection to everything. Ciro acted like an affronted bystander rather than a victim. Offended but not *hurt*. Impersonal.

“Blood does hold a lot of weight in our world, and you are in Slytherin,” Orion replied after a beat, stating the obvious as his eyes devoured each flicker of emotion he could spot. He absently reached up and tugged on his own tie, winding his finger around the silk fabric.

“Perhaps if you had been sorted into Hufflepuff you could have avoided the worst of the fallout. But you were put here, and Slytherin is not kind to outsiders.” Orion smiled, a dark and sardonic quirk of his lips as he thought of another outcast. “You went from being a pureblooded but otherwise average boy to, at best, a halfblood bastard that had, intentionally or not, lied to everyone for years.”

It had not been a gracious fall. Overnight, Nathan Ciro’s life had been destroyed – and the one responsible for it, the one that had stuck the knife in the boy’s back had been the person closest to him.

Ironic, if sad. Betrayal never did come from one’s enemies, after all.

Orion wished that he had paid more attention to the brothers in those first few days because their confrontation would have been *beautiful*.

Ciro's jaw clenched, the air around them growing cold in response to his anger. "And this is all true? It's not just some lie that someone made up?" He asked, eyes piercing, daring Orion to try and trick him.

Orion would not, if only because the truth was far more fun. "It wasn't dismissed," he hedged, looking up at the other from under his eyelashes, "not by you and not by...anyone else."

The older boy had not even tried to defend himself from the accusation – had only blinked with wide, wet eyes and asked with a stuttering voice, "*How did you –*"

Confirmation, implied if not outright stated. All because of a half-aborted question.

Orion saw the poisonous realisation steal through Ciro's eyes when he caught the hint and had to swallow the crackling giggle that he wanted to let out.

Without another word, the older boy turned and began to walk, his steps long and purposeful as he cut through the common room.

Orion licked his lips and followed, humming to himself.

OoO

Harry marched into the Great Hall, barely acknowledging the various eyes that turned his way in surprise. He scanned the Ravenclaw table, finding his target towards the middle. He headed towards him without hesitation.

The rage in his chest tightened and his mind continued to spiral with the new information. So many things began to slot into place for him, so many small, inconsequential moments that he had overlooked in his ignorance.

Beyond the buzzing in his ears he could still hear that muffled conversation between Cynthia and Benedict the night they had been speaking in their study.

“As we always do, Cynthia. He is our son.”

“Is he?”

“Cynthia... You know the answer to that.”

“Y-yes. I know. I know. It just becomes so hard sometimes. I love Nathan, I truly do. He is my son, but... I just...”

“I know. You are the most wonderful mother, to both of them. And an even more generous wife, my dear.”

He had thought that they were merely talking about the differences between Harry and Nathan, but now he understood the truth behind it – and it made him want to hit something.

Other, smaller instances began to pile up in his mind and his magic started to swell around him once more like a threatening cloud foretelling the oncoming storm.

The people he passed fell silent at his approach, some of them reflexively glared until they felt the force of his agitation and flinched away.

Simon was bent over a book, completely removed from the world as he read. He looked tired and stressed, and some part of Harry distantly noted that the boy was about to have a whole new reason to be worried.

Harry came to a stop behind him, gaze boring into the back of his skull.

It only took a few seconds for Simon to realise that something was wrong – either the suffocating pressure of Harry’s magic or the sudden drop in ambient noise catching his attention – because he looked up with the perplexed frown.

He paled when his eyes met Harry’s.

“We need to talk,” Harry said, keeping his voice low despite how he wanted to shout.

“I don’t –”

“It wasn’t a suggestion. Get up.” Harry did not reach out and haul the boy to his feet; had to clench his hands into fists to resist the temptation because he did not trust himself not to *hurt*.

“Now.”

Simon stood at the demand, his knuckles whitening from how tightly he was gripping his book. They had the attention of the entire hall at this point – even some of the professors were looking on with concerned frowns. Their hypocrisy only made Harry want to snarl.

He just counted himself lucky that Dumbledore was not here yet. The last thing he wanted to deal with was that man’s scrutiny.

“Let’s go,” he said, spinning on his heels, and making for the doors. As he drew closer, he caught Orion’s eyes from where the boy stood close to Slytherin’s table and saw the satisfaction glimmering there.

He knew that the other had a purpose for revealing what he did, but Harry could not care less what game the boy was playing right now. He had more important things to worry about than the motives of a thirteen year old boy.

Simon’s footsteps were barely a whisper as he followed, almost drowned out by the voices that erupted as they left the cavernous room.

Harry led them down several hallways, not stopping until they were well enough away from the Great Hall and the more common routes. This was not a conversation he wanted interrupted.

Harry opened the first door he saw and jerked his chin in a silent order. With a grimace, Simon entered the abandoned room. He walked tentatively, eyes scanning the rather small space nervously, darting over the dusty shelves.

The door closed behind them with a dull thud. Harry pressed his hand against the cold wood and cast a muffling charm, ensuring their privacy.

He took a breath to calm himself, strangling his anger until he felt reasonably controlled.

When he turned around, Simon stood against the furthest wall. His shoulders were hunched cautiously, his arms wrapping around his book and pressing it against his chest like a barrier. Skittishly, he avoided looking at Harry for long.

“Is it true?” Harry asked, not in the mood for dancing around.

Simon frowned, confusion creasing his features.

Harry sighed, and ran his tongue over the front of his teeth. “The rumours. The illegitimacy. Is it true?”

At that, Simon's head snapped up fully, shock swiftly giving way to an uglier emotion. "How – who told you?" He asked, and Harry closed his eyes in resignation.

"That's a 'yes' if I've ever heard one," he murmured, racking his fingers through his hair. He shook his head, then stared fixedly at the corner of the room as he grappled with the rising tide in his heart.

It was moments like this when Harry struggled to love the Wizarding World.

No society was perfect, he knew that better than most. He had spent his entire life being trampled and torn down – first by muggles, and then by this world and its people. He had been scorned and criticized, crushed under expectations and agendas, pulled in every direction by so many people over the years.

He was no longer a naïve little boy, not after the things he had seen and done. But it always hurt *so much* whenever he saw another crack in the shining façade that he had become enamoured with when he was eleven.

He had become an auror to try and fix things, to be an active force of good and repair the damage the war had caused to countless people. But each layer of grime that was uncovered landed like a physical blow, the enticing veneer peeling away like old paint. And each time it happened, he felt another part of him blacken and shrivel.

Harry was sick of being disappointed in people.

"Who told you?" Simon asked again, solemn.

Harry blinked, eyes sliding back to the boy. "Orion," he said honestly, "but I thought it best to double-check." His mouth pinched, "I don't know what I was expecting, really."

"You're not as upset as I thought you would be," Simon observed, though Harry heard the unspoken meaning. He was not as upset as Nathan had been.

"I'm pissed," Harry assured him, not wanting to let the other think differently. "At everything. The students, the teachers, Cynthia and Benedict. *You*." He barked a short laugh, disbelieving, "I mean, it seems that every time I turn around these days I find something else to be angry about."

Simon's gaze finally seemed to settle on him, and Harry could see the apprehension burning in the other's eyes.

"It never fails to amaze me," he said softly, "just how *stupid* people can be."

That got a reaction. Simon's shoulders shot up to his ears, posture defensive as he snapped, "There's nothing stupid about this!"

"Really?" Harry asked, derision congealing around the word. "There's nothing stupid about tormenting someone else just because of the circumstances of their birth? You think blaming a child for something their parent did is perfectly normal?" His voice rose as memories of the

cupboard under the stairs burst forth, “You think a kid deserves to be punished for something he *had no control over*?”

“I – that’s not,” Simon stuttered, an aggressive flush beginning to make its home on his cheeks. “You don’t understand –”

“That’s not a sentence you want to finish,” Harry snapped, the objects in the room rattling with his anger.

Simon wisely fell silent, eyeing the bookshelves with naked fear.

Harry bit down on his tongue, reeling his magic back in before things started exploding. He forced himself to breath deeply, waiting until he was steady.

“You’re going to explain the situation to me,” he said quietly. “You’ll tell me just how all this,” he pointed between them, “came to be.”

The tension grew thick, condensing around them until it was like a physical presence. A minute dragged by before Simon finally caved.

“What’s there to explain?” He hissed, clutching his book. “Father strayed from *my* mother and fucked some German woman while he was on a business trip and when he found out she was pregnant, instead of paying her off or *fixing* his blunder, he continued to visit her and provide for her.”

The bitterness on his face was an open wound.

“Mother found out about his little mistress, but she was close to giving birth herself and couldn’t leave. She was stuck with an unfaithful husband and *you* on the way.” Simon began to tremble, his distress rising.

Harry did not soften, not for this boy, not if what he suspected was true.

The words continued to pour forth, rushing out like a geyser. “Something went wrong though and *your* mother went into labour too early, so not only were you a bastard, but you were older too. And then, as if she hadn’t ruined things enough, she had the nerve to up and *die*.”

Harry did not react to the harsh, accusatory words. They meant little to him, but he could easily imagine someone else in his place, someone gentler, someone who *would* have cared deeply and been broken to hear such venom sprayed at them.

“Because father was too honourable to do otherwise, he decided to keep you. He pushed mother into it, and when I was born days afterwards, they lied and said we were twins.” Tears filled the boy’s eyes, resentment and betrayal clear on his face.

“They said we were twins but we *aren’t*.” Simon choked out. “You’re nothing more than a *mistake*.” A sob slipped free, his composure wavering. “You’re a mistake. You shouldn’t even exist *and I hate that you do*.”

The boy let out a reedy whine, tears cutting down his cheeks as he scrunched his face up in pain.

Harry watched as Simon shook in front of him. He hated seeing children cry, even ones like Simon, and his natural urge to comfort battled against his anger on Nathan's behalf.

"They told you eventually," he said, talking over the hitched breathing with deliberate carelessness. "They told you the truth sometime between your second and third year; though something tells me that your parents wouldn't have wanted that information spread. Which begs the question – where did those rumours come from, Simon?"

The boy froze, his eyes large and watery as he stared at Harry.

"I doubt Nathan would have said anything, so that only leaves one option in my eyes. You told people the truth. You knew it would hurt Nathan to have it out in the open, so you whispered a hint here or there, just enough to get the ball rolling, and then you sat back and watched the whole school turn against your brother."

Harry saw the flicker of guilt and shook his head.

"You're a spiteful child," he told him, heart aching for the boy he had replaced. "Did you ever think that maybe your brother was already hurting? That he felt just as betrayed?"

They lied to me.

Simon's next breath was audible and wet, but his voice was firm when he said, "Not my brother."

Harry had to look away. He felt hollow, unable to even summon the energy to be angry in the wake of Simon's admission.

"I guess it doesn't really matter anymore," Harry said eventually, shoulders bowing with the weight of his sudden exhaustion. "It's not something you have to worry about again."

"What – what do you mean?"

I'm pretty sure your brother is dead, Harry thought.

"I'm going to ask your parents to take me out of Hogwarts," he said. "It's – this place isn't for me. I don't belong here anymore. You should be happy. We both get what we want this way."

Simon's shock was palpable. He did not seem to know how to respond beyond the involuntary, "You don't know what I want."

Harry laughed without any humour. "You want me gone," he said, spreading his hands and letting his mouth curl with a shade of cruelty. "Well, congratulations, Simon. You get your wish. You get to be what you've wanted for a while now – *brotherless*."

Simon flinched back at the word, but Harry no longer cared. As far as he was concerned, Simon had no right to sympathy – not when his own actions had started this whole mess in the first place.

“You. You can’t just,” Simon gripped his hair with one hand, mind racing to understand the reasons and ramifications of Harry’s decision. “You can’t just *leave*. ”

Strangely enough, he seemed dismayed at the very idea.

“Don’t act upset now,” Harry told him, taking a pointed step back and breaking the muffling spell. “This is all because of you. If you didn’t want your brother – half or not – running away, then you shouldn’t have been the one to push him in the first place. The way I see it, he ended up on that rooftop because of you.”

At that, Simon went rigid, his skin ashen.

It was cruel in a way, but Harry was all out of kindness.

He took a moment to just study the other, then he scoffed and pulled the door open. He left Simon in the empty room without a backwards glance.

OoO

The morning air was crisp and tasted of frost as Tom made his way down the winding path towards Hogsmeade.

It had snowed late last night, covering the ground in a soft coat of white, making each step crunch lightly. Judging by the clouds overhead, Tom suspected that another layer would fall soon.

He pulled his scarf up around his nose.

This early in the day there were only a few others heading down to the village, but in an hour or so the path would be flooded with students. Tom preferred to avoid the crowds and enjoyed the brief snatch of solitude before he was inevitably found by his housemates.

It gave him plenty of time to think. As it often did these days, his mind immediately turned to Ciro.

He had not seen the boy since he had absconded with his brother at dinner, because while Simon had trudged back in almost an hour later, face downturned and eyes red-rimmed, there had been no sign of the other for the rest of the night.

His bedroom door had been sealed shut when they had returned to the common room, with no change when Tom had woken this morning, and he had not been at breakfast.

It was both amusing and infuriating how someone as bold and assertive as Ciro was so skilled at vanishing.

The constant disappearances probably should concern him, but Tom was surprisingly content to let Ciro run for now. Hogwarts was only so big, and with their classes it was not like the other could avoid him forever.

Plus, he mused with a smirk, it made the challenge of discovering his secrets more interesting.

As he walked, he took the time to pull on his gloves, flexing his fingers to get them into place. The warming charms instantly banished the chill, and Tom quietly marvelled at how wonderful magic was.

He looked up, eyes casting around the path idly until they landed on a solitary figure that just came into view in front of him.

Delight sparked through him, along with a flush of childish mischief.

Tom leaned down and gathered a handful of snow, carefully moulding it into a sphere as he judged the distance. He narrowed his eyes, lifted his arm, and whipped it forward.

The snowball smacked into the back of their head.

Chuckling at his hit, Tom eagerly moved forward. Ciro's shoulders tightened at his approach, and the other twisted to skewer him with a truly impressive glare.

Tom raised his eyebrows, smile widening when he saw the clumps of snow still clinging to the other's hair. He could sense the displeasure radiating off the boy and revelled in it.

"Good morning," he greeted.

Ciro's scowl lessened, but only because he seemed more bewildered than angry. "What do you want?"

"That's not how you greet people," Tom chided, his gaze gliding to the side and down towards Hogsmeade. "Are you heading to the village? Perhaps we can go together."

"No," Ciro replied immediately, expression flitting between discomfort and annoyance, likely remembering their last encounter.

"Why not? Isn't it normal for friends to spend time together?"

Ciro snorted, the sound startling them both. He gave Tom a strange look as he said with complete honesty, "You don't know how to have friends."

The frankness of the statement made Tom blink, unsure if he should be offended or not.

"And why would I want to spend time with you anyway? We have nothing to say to each other."

"Well, that's not entirely true, is it?" He answered, taking the opening provided. "We didn't get the chance to finish our previous discussion. I would greatly like to resume it."

"That makes one of us," Ciro muttered under his breath, beginning to walk again. Tom followed, keeping his gaze pinned to the side of Ciro's head.

"I was hoping to get your real name," Tom started, light and airy. "'Nathan' is not an option, and seems inappropriate, but 'Ciro' is so distant. Surely you have another name I can call you."

Ciro did not answer him, the only sign of his irritation a slight narrowing of his eyes. That alone spoke volumes.

Tom continued to push.

"Unless you don't. Were you even a human before this?" He quickly looked over the other, mind flicking through the list of potential magical creatures, before shaking his head. "No, you must have been. You're too familiar with the intricacies of humanity to be something else."

Tom knew that this was not Nathan Ciro walking beside him, but the questions surrounding their true identity were too numerous to count – but that was half the fun. He could not wait to unravel it all.

“It must be strange to have to pretend to be someone else,” he commented as they reached the edge of Hogsmeade. “Tiring, I’d imagine. Frustrating as well. Tell me, was it intentional –”

A hand flattened against his chest, shoving him back into the stone wall of the village. Ciro stepped into his space, expression serious and tinged with a darkness that made Tom’s stomach clench. “Stop asking me questions,” he ordered.

“Why? Do they make you uncomfortable?”

“Obviously,” Ciro replied, tone biting.

“Because it’s too close to the truth?” He guessed, curling a hand around that bird-like wrist.

“Riddle. I can and will *put you through a wall* if you don’t drop this.”

Oh.

Tom could not quite hold back his sudden inhale at the threat. He stared into those grey eyes – steady, strong, unflinching – and dipped his head in a gentle nod. “I believe you,” he said.

Ciro kept him there for another moment, judging his sincerity, before stepping back. “Good,” he said, turning back to the village and walking through the gate.

Tom leaned his head back against the stone for a brief second, then pushed himself up and fell into step with the other boy.

He received a suspicious side-eye, but no other complaint.

They walked in silence for a few minutes, slowly wandering between the stores, directionless. Tom waited until Ciro was sufficiently distracted a store’s display before broaching another topic.

“What was your argument with Simon about?”

“Who said it was an argument?” Ciro’s reply was whip-fast, completely at odds with the bored look on his face.

Tom raised an eyebrow. “He came back, very clearly having been crying, and you didn’t come back at all.”

Ciro hummed, tilting his head as he thought. “It was nothing. Family business.”

“*Family* business?” Tom echoed. “Even though he’s not actually your family?”

His question drew a quick glance, the inherent warning in it tempered by the surprising glow of amusement. “Pick another topic,” Ciro advised dryly.

“Fine,” Tom sighed, though he noted that that had not been a denial. “Let’s talk about our assignment then. We need to select a spell and begin researching it. You mentioned different defences for protecting information?”

Schoolwork was apparently deemed safe enough, because after one more searching look, Ciro launched into a lecture. “I did. It depends on the nature of the information itself. Physical things like documents, messages and books all have different levels of protection charms that can be placed on the item or object. Most are benign but some can be pretty volatile.”

“What about non-physical information?”

Secrets, Ciro had said. Tom wanted to know about those.

The other boy relaxed, falling into a detailed explanation. The lilt of his voice was practiced and soothing, carrying a rhythm that made him easy to listen to. He was clearly well-versed in the subject, able to turn complex concepts into something even a first year would be able to understand without coming across as patronising.

It was better than some professors.

Tom, for all that he was inexperienced in this area, found that he could keep pace.

They drifted between the different shops, neither paying much attention to their surroundings, immersed as they were in their discussion. The streets were growing more crowded, so they moved to stand to the side of a small bookstore.

Just as Ciro started outlining the faults to one of his spells, they were interrupted.

Two people split from the crowd and joined them. One immediately latched onto Ciro, twining their arms together and pressing against the boy’s side.

“Hi,” Orion chirped up at Ciro, fluttering his eyes coltishly. “I missed you at dinner, and at breakfast. I’m beginning to think you don’t need food, Ciro.”

An intriguing notion, one Tom filed away as Ciro answered.

“I went to the kitchen. I didn’t feel like being stared at the whole morning.”

“You did cause a stir last night,” Orion agreed with a hum. He squeezed Ciro’s arm, “Did you get the answers you were looking for?” He asked, genuinely curious, though Tom could see the keen glint in his eyes.

He shifted, and Orion’s gaze finally slid to him. “Oh, sorry, Riddle,” the younger boy said, smiling sunnily, “I didn’t see you there. Having a nice day?”

Brat, he thought, grinning back with his teeth. “Absolutely. Ciro and I were having such a good time.”

Orion’s smiled stretched wider.

“Good morning, Augustus,” Ciro said, blatantly ignoring the rest of them. Tom was rather annoyed that Augustus warranted a greeting and not him.

The taller boy stared at Ciro for a long moment before inclining his head politely. “Ciro, Riddle. Are you shopping for anything in particular today?”

“No,” Ciro said, “just wanted to get out for a few hours. This week has been...stressful.”

Augustus’ lips twitched at the sullen words.

Orion tugged on his arm sharply, pulling Ciro’s attention back to him. With surprising strength, Orion tugged the other boy into walking. “Gus and I were going to go to the Three Broomsticks for a drink. You should join us.”

“Ah –”

“We’re busy, unfortunately,” Riddle cut Ciro off. “We were in the middle of something, and we really need to come to a decision.”

Ciro glanced at him, then down at Orion whose smile was entreating. Tom sneered at the slight softening of Ciro’s expression.

“I’m sure we can –”

The ground in front of them exploded.

OoO

Harry twisted on instinct, his arm looping around Orion's smaller form and forcing them both to the ground.

Screams erupted around them, high-pitched and saturated with fear as another round of explosions went off.

Harry's mind went smooth.

He pushed himself up from where he was crouched over Orion and pulled his wand free. His eyes slipped over the pandemonium, adrenaline slamming into him between one breath and the next.

People were running in every direction as the street descended into chaos. Their uncoordinated scrambling added to the panic, but between their bodies Harry could make out the group of darkly dressed, masked individuals standing in a loose formation.

A woman, face covered in blood, stumbled passed him with heaving sobs.

A cluster of third years were cowering in the space between two buildings, cheeks tear-stained as they peered out.

Two men fell to the ground like puppets whose strings had been cut, limbs splayed awkwardly, eyes dull.

Harry *breathed*.

He kept his eyes on the attackers, watching as they split off into pairs. His mind was dragged back months and years to a different time and place. Memories of blood and pain drowned out the noise of the sudden battlefield, leaving only a quiet buzzing in his ears.

He could taste ash on his tongue.

Harry was moving before he was consciously aware of it. He stalked forward, weaving between the river of people, wholly absorbed in his intent.

He deflected a stray curse, stopping it before it could collide with someone's back, and sent it hurtling back to its caster faster than the eye could track. The purple flash slammed into the man and threw him to the ground with a scream.

His partner stepped up when he fell, shooting a curse into the dispersing crowd.

He stepped in front of a girl that tripped, conjuring a shield over them. He reached down and pulled her to her feet, "Get up to the castle and behind the wards!" He pushed her in that direction, covering her retreat.

The window of the shop next to him shattered, sending shards flying outwards. They peppered the dome, turning sections of the shield bright white before fading back into a shimmer.

Harry gritted his teeth, finding the masked attacker across the street. The woman was moving towards where he could see Orion, Augustus and Riddle were hiding. "I don't think so," he whispered, dropping his shield and pointing his wand at her.

"Fulgur."

White lightning shot from the tip and struck her, blowing her back into the side of a store. She convulsed on the ground even after Harry turned away from her.

The street was almost empty at this point, nearly everyone rushing towards Hogwarts. It was easy to catch Augustus' eyes. "Get up to the school!" He yelled, pointing down the road.

The boy nodded, pale and shaken but determined. He had a grip on both Orion and Riddle, and it was only because he was facing them that Harry saw the way their eyes widened.

He ducked instinctively.

A jet of yellow light missed him by inches.

Harry rolled to his feet, putting his back to the others, and facing the new threat. He raised another shield just as a curse cracked against it. It dissipated, but his shield shattered from the force.

Harry panted lightly as he studied the deep scorch marks left on the ground around him.

"Impressive," a heavily accented voice called, "not many could withstand that spell."

Another pair of masked wizards stood before him. The one that had cast the curse held a loose stance, his wand aimed vaguely in Harry's direction.

He tensed, preparing for another attack.

Only it did not come. The man had twitched when Harry stood fully, his head cocking to the side like a bird. "Well now, this *is* interesting," he drawled. "A surprise, but such a pleasant one. I did not expect to see *you* ever again."

The second man chuckled lowly, the sound raising the hairs on the back of Harry's neck.

He frowned, rolling his wand in his palm. "Am I supposed to know you?"

"You do not remember us?" The man asked, one hand tapping the metal cheek of his mask. "Was that night truly that forgettable? *I* certainly remember it. I might not have partaken, but one does not easily forget a sight like the one you made."

Harry stopped.

The second man spoke then, cruel laughter filling his words. “I did. Mediocre but enjoyable enough, I suppose.”

The leer was visceral, and Harry’s chest grew painfully tight. He had never heard this man’s voice before – he *knew* he had not – but some primal part of him could not help but seize up at it.

“Look,” the second one said, “the poor mouse is petrified. Do you think he will cry again?”

The first man remained quiet, the weight of his gaze was suffocating. *Considering.*

His hip started burning.

Harry raised his wand.

The second masked man scoffed, shoulders falling back in arrogance.

“*Decrusto,*” he murmured.

Quicker than a striking snake, the red curse shot forward and hit the man directly in the chest.

He did not even have time to scream.

Instantly, his body began to disintegrate, bursting into thousands of pieces and leaving nothing more than a smear of blood behind.

His partner stepped to the side, wand snapping up in response but not returning fire just yet, caution replacing the previous confidence.

The silence was deafening.

Harry stared at the red staining the snow, shuddering lightly as the aftereffects of the curse washed through him. He licked his chapped lips, tightened his grip on his wand and looked to the wizard across from him.

The roaring in his ears had died down, but the apocalyptic *rage* churning in his chest only increased.

“I stand corrected,” the man said, rather mild given the circumstances. “*That* was impressive. I was not aware that Hogwarts taught such spells to their students.”

Harry did not respond. His mind was whirring to piece everything together.

Whoever these men were, whatever their reasons for attacking Hogsmeade had just become secondary. They – they had been the ones to – they were responsible for what happened to Nathan.

He pointed his wand at the man.

“Now, *Mäuschen,*” the wizard began, “are you sure this is a fight you want to pick?”

OoO

Tom stared at Ciro, enraptured, as all of a sudden, the boy *moved*.

He jerked, watching in disbelief as Ciro shot forward, green flames leaping from the tip of his wand and towards the masked man. It arched through the air only to be redirected to the ground at the last second by the wizard.

Ciro, undeterred, continued his assault.

He dropped into a roll, avoiding a cutting curse that sliced through a signpost, and sprung to his feet. Golden rings appeared around him, hovered for a moment, then sped towards the man, spinning so rapidly that the hum they gave off was audible.

Those too were batted away, and whatever they hit was covered in golden sap that quickly hardened.

A hand gripped Tom's forearm tightly but he hardly noticed, far too enthralled with the display in front of him.

He had known that this new Ciro was talented, but *this* was beyond anything he could have expected. He was using spells that Tom had never even heard of before – had *killed* someone without hesitation – and with an ingenuity so many lacked. He countered curses thrown at him, smoothly transitioning between offensive and defensive, a constant siege of perfectly balanced brutality.

It, *he*, was beautiful.

This was the most impressive thing that Tom had ever seen, and it was made even better by the fact that *Ciro was winning*.

He was pushing the older wizard back, steadily gaining ground on the other, forcing him into a corner.

They had inched out from their cover as the fight had moved further away, helplessly drawn to the spectacle playing out before them.

Ciro was in his element here.

He was not even trying to mask himself now. No half-hearted act or deliberate ineptitude. No hesitation or censoring of abilities.

He wielded his magic with fluidity. It was breathtaking, and awful, and sobering in a way, to finally see what lay behind the veil.

This, Tom thought with relish, was the *truth*. Whoever it was pretending to be Nathan Ciro, *this* was who they were at their core.

A fighter. A protector. A survivor.

It was exhilarating to witness, to have more evidence trickle into his grasp.

Stunning. Dangerous. *Distracting*.

Tom hardly reacted in time to block the curse the man tossed their way. The three of them were blown back from the force of it, and Orion cried out when he landed on his shoulder.

He looked up just as Ciro glanced their way, concerned.

It was a split second, an unconscious need to protect, but it was enough.

Tom's eyes widened when a streak of pink shot through the air and slashed Ciro in the neck.

The pale skin parted cleanly, and all Tom could see was a wave of crimson as the other clutched desperately at the wound. Blood spurted through Ciro's fingers as he sunk to his knees, and then collapsed forward entirely, the snow underneath him blooming hot red.

OoO

Harry woke to darkness, gasping.

His hand flew to his neck, fingers scrabbling over the unmarred skin desperately. He cupped his throat, bowing over his legs and drawing in ragged, heavy breaths.

He shuddered, swallowing just to feel the muscles working beneath his palm, and looked up.

There was nothing.

The world was blotted out, a canvas of blackness stretched out around him with no distinguishing shapes that he could perceive. His eyes watered, hurting from the sheer emptiness of this place.

But as he stared, slowly things began to blur into existence. The edges of a wall, the panels of a window, the lines of the floorboards.

A room took form around him, but it was like an impression more than a physical element. Everything remained draped in shadows.

“I was wondering when you would make your way here,” a voice commented.

Harry twisted, clambering to his knees as surprise jolted through him. His eyes widened when he took in the figure before him.

“Mum?”

Lily Potter’s face smiled at him.

“Not quite.”

Chapter End Notes

We getting into the real exciting stuff now!

As always, my [tumblr](#) is open. Come along if you want to discover theories, scream at me, discuss my new snippets or get some behind the scenes commentary! Thanks guys, have a great day / night!

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! Thank you so much for all your lovely comments the previous chapter. I know I kind of left you all on a big cliffhanger, and I apologise! I lost a lot of motivation for writing the last couple of months, and with my work schedule it can be hard to just have the energy to write chapters. I wanted to thank everyone that was patient with me, and that was understanding and kind enough to wait for me to get back with this update. It really means a lot to have that kind of support.

One thing before you go on. If you haven't been on my tumblr you might not be aware, but I made some edits to the structure of the first chapter. I recommend having a quick reread of at least that one. It's nothing super significant, I just changed the sequence of some events around, but it works better for what I was intending.

Thank you, and I hope you all enjoy!

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

Harry shifted his weight, his attention fixated on the figure across from him.

He slowly rose to a crouch, reaching out absently to balance himself – though he stopped when he caught sight of his arms.

Shock and relief immediately flooded him, driving his thoughts off the rails, when he realised that they were *his*.

The skin was a warm brown, and his forearms were firm and toned. A jagged white scar stretched from his wrist almost to his elbow, the remnants of the worst night of his life, never fading due to the ritual magic; and another sat on the back of his hand, the faint letters forever carved into his flesh.

I must not tell lies.

Staring down at his hands – *his*, familiar yet foreign, no longer thin and pale, or damningly small – Harry became aware of the comfortable press of his glasses sliding down the bridge of his nose. He tipped his head forward, relishing in the old sensation; and dark, messy hair fell into his field of vision.

Harry's breath, when he let it out, was a stuttering thing. His eyes burned.

He was in his body. Against all logic, Harry was somehow in his own body.

With slight tremors, Harry traced along his skin in silent marvel. He half-expected it to be a trick, a cruel mirage, but he could feel the callouses and the ridges of his scars against the rough pads of his fingers.

He clenched his hands experimentally, watching the gradual curl of digits, before finally looking back up. He moved with caution, pushing himself upright and not daring to let his eyes stray from the figure standing before him.

In this strange, grey-washed world, they were the only other source of colour.

Harry frowned, his chest tightening with distrust.

It certainly looked like Lily Potter; an image taken right from the old photo albums in his bedroom. Red hair, green eyes, a smattering of freckles across soft cheeks. The faded blue jeans and oversized cream jumper with sleeves so long only the tips of her pale fingers peeked out completed the homely image.

It gave Harry the impression of warmth and love, and a part of his soul rattled with a longing sigh. But there was also something lurking behind that mild smile that perverted the whole picturesque veneer. Something secret and ancient that was tucked into the corner of those lips.

It was otherworldly. *Wrong.*

Harry's skin prickled with warning, little sparks of lightning dancing along his veins. Something akin to adrenaline flushed through him.

Under that gaze he felt small. Harry had always been shorter and thinner than others his age, but with those dispassionate eyes fixed on him, he felt insignificant. It rose in his chest, inflating like a balloon behind his ribs until he thought he might burst open.

The air was heavy with hushed anticipation, and a soft buzzing echoed in Harry's ears like a thousand insects lurking just on the edge of his hearing.

That feeling, coupled with the words that had already been spoken –

He knew what this was. The knowledge scraped up from his marrow, crystalising before him, and the name tumbled off his numb lips in a whisper.

“Death.”

The figure tilted its head, sending long strands of hair sliding over a slim shoulder like a river of fire. Its smile twisted, becoming sharp and mocking.

“Harry.”

Panic flared in the back of his mind and his muscles locked up in response. A primal fear that tasted of frost and darkness bloomed in the base of his throat, and for a single moment his vision wavered as he was overwhelmed by nausea.

Frantically, he reached inside himself, searching for the pool of magic that rested just underneath his skin – only to find a ringing emptiness instead. The hollow expanse where his magic should have been had his focus sharpening, his alarm and dread falling back as a hunted kind of wariness took root.

Those green eyes watched him, deep and endless and filled with impossible things. They drank in his reactions with quiet amusement and burning scorn. Those emotions sat strangely on his mother's face, and Harry seized his anger like a lifeline.

“Stop it,” he gritted out, fists forming by his sides, “*stop looking like her.*”

Death hummed, the low sound shaking Harry's bones. “I did not choose this shape,” It told him plainly. “I merely take the form you most associate with me.”

It raised Its hand, the jumper sliding down to reveal more of a pale arm. Death scrutinised Its skin idly, twisting the limb around, but despite the pretence Harry could still feel the burden of Its attention.

“I don't –”

“You do,” Death interrupted, green eyes darting back to him. Piercing. “Lily Jane Potter sacrificed her life for yours. Her choice, for better or worse, defined you and your life going forward. Hers was the first death you ever witnessed – the first time my presence touched you.”

Death stared at him, cutting him down to his core. “Some part of you will always think of her when you think of me.”

Harry shook in place, upset and angry at the blunt declaration. Denial crawled through him, and his shoulders tensed as he spoke. “I don't care. *Change.* You don't get to wear her face,” he said, voice hoarse but steady.

Death tilted Its head, regarding him silently, and the itching sensation of *small insignificant child* crept along the edges of his thoughts. After a moment, the biting humour returned to Death's expression, again perverting the memory of Harry's mother, and It nodded agreeably. “And what would you prefer?”

As It asked, Its features turned cold and grey, leached of all vibrance. Its skin began to ripple, inky shadows spilling from Its mouth and the corners of Its eyes. The spread was fast, tongues of it writhing as if alive, until Its entire form was smothered in shadows.

Harry scrambled back, gasping in shock at the disturbing sight. He watched in horrified fascination as the shape before him convulsed, distorting and coiling into a large mass of pure black.

It elongated, broadening into something more recognisable. Limbs formed, then a head peeled back. Shoulders and a torso followed, and a figure swiftly condensed.

The shadows parted as suddenly as they had appeared, revealing a hauntingly familiar face. Its voice was higher this time, pulled right from his nightmares.

“Perhaps this?”

Bone white skin. Blazing red eyes. Black robes cascading down to the floor.

Harry’s hands came up automatically, half-curved protectively in front of his chest. He rose to the balls of his feet, body falling into a defensive stance. His magic was still beyond his reach, refusing to answer his call, so Harry’s lips twisted into a snarl.

The phantom before him smiled, a ghastly expression that he remembered all too well; but before Harry could open his mouth – to curse, to hiss, to scream – the being morphed again.

The shadows engulfed Voldemort’s visage, the change coming on quicker this time. The mass began to shrink, that imposing height dwindling as a new face emerged; this one with tousled brown hair, grey eyes, and a Hogwarts’ uniform on a thin frame.

Nathan Ciro stared up at him, and Harry’s breath was knocked out of him. He felt blindsided by the appearance, blinking rapidly as if to dispel the illusion.

“Is this better?” Death asked, Its voice soft now, and hearing someone else speak with it was disorientating. But the cadence was off, that placid tone foreign, and Harry shuddered. “You certainly have been having fun in this form.”

“Stop,” Harry croaked, sorrow rising in his throat.

“Does it bother you?” The faux kindness in that question barely masked the maliciousness beneath. “I can take the shape of anyone that I have consumed. I could be a stranger; someone you have never met – or I could be someone you *treasured*.” Death dragged the last word out, a gentle taunt.

Harry was silent, unable to put his thoughts into words.

Death smiled with Its teeth. “Personally, I can admit to having a fondness for this one,” It said lightly, reaching up with one hand to cup Its jaw. Fingers traced the arch of a cheek, dancing over the delicate nose, and then up to smoothly rake through the hair.

Harry tracked the path of that hand, his insides quivering with untold levels of rage at the sheer violation he felt. Watching someone – something else – play with Nathan like this, using his form with such cruel familiarity, was sickening.

“Enough,” he snapped, jaw clenched so hard he had to force the word out. “Stop playing whatever game you are and start explaining what the fuck is going on.”

“Why rush?” Death asked, hands tucking behind Its back. “We have all of the time in the world.” Its lips twitched, and Harry was almost glad that his magic was beyond his reach. Something would have broken by now from the force of his emotions.

“You owe me some explanations,” he spat, gesturing angrily.

Death slowly cocked Its head, expression becoming so eerily blank in the wake of Harry's statement. "I. Owe. You." It repeated, drawing the words out, teeth clinking around each one. "*I owe you?*"

The being let out a laugh, crackling out of Its throat like broken glass, but still Its face remained void. "There is such *arrogance* in you, Harry Potter." Death told him, eyes as cold as slate. "I owe you *nothing*, and do not presume otherwise, *boy*."

Harry's anger had always been stronger than his common sense.

"Well why did you bring me here, then?" He barked out, bristling. He swept a hand at their surroundings, at the decrepit, half-formed room they were in, and glared. "What is going on? Where are we? You've been tormenting me for weeks, so why *grk* –"

Harry was seized by his throat, his head snapping back as he was slammed into the wall behind him.

He had not even seen It *move*.

Death sneered at him, the young face twisting wildly. Fingertips dug into the soft flesh, thumb pressing down on the rapid flutter of his artery until Harry's vision began to blur. It dragged him higher, scraping him against the rough surface so that he was left dangling in Its brutal grip.

He squinted through the pained tears, distantly wondering how someone shorter than him could hold him so far off the ground.

"You think you know what torment is?" It whispered, voice slithering through the deafening rush of blood in Harry's ears.

He scrabbled at Its wrist, nails raking down the skin, and his knee shot up to drive into the being's side – but Death showed no sign of having felt anything.

"You think to stand before me and *dare* to claim that I tormented you?"

He was yanked forward, lifted clear off the wall, held up only by that frigid hand. Their faces were millimetres apart, and this close Harry could only see the seething hatred that stormed Death's eyes.

He froze, pinned beneath the sheer magnitude of animosity being aimed at him.

"You think you are the victim in this? You think that you have been suffering?" It bared Its teeth. "You know nothing of torment, Harry. *But you will.*"

The hand around his throat loosened and Harry dropped to the floor in a heap. He coughed, hunching over, and pressed his own hand protectively to his abused neck. Tears slipped free and trailed down his cheeks, but Harry still forced himself to gaze up at the figure towering over him.

Death stared down at him, condemnation burning bright in Nathan's eyes.

The silence between them stretched, fraught with a tension Harry could not fully comprehend but one he could feel crawling over his skin like parasites. He shivered.

Death shifted back. Whatever had been brewing behind Its stare vanished with the distance.

“Get up,” It ordered.

Harry sluggishly obeyed. Once on his feet, he carefully inched backwards, wanting some more space. He kept one hand against his throat, chin tucked down, and remained silent; unwilling to trigger another attack.

“Make no mistake, Harry,” Death told him, “my decision to reach out to you was not borne out of obligation or sympathy. You are here only because I wished to speak with you. Because this conversation is long overdue, and because I know that the answers you receive here, from me, will break something in you.”

Death took a single step forward, dashing Harry’s attempt at creating a barrier. “And *that*, ” Death murmured, staring at Harry with intent, “is the only thing I desire anymore.”

Harry’s breath hitched.

Death met and held his gaze, assessing, then inclined Its head in mocking capitulation. “Now, you may ask your questions.”

Harry swallowed around the ache in his throat, wetting his dry lips with his tongue. His thoughts were in a tailspin, uncertainty and fear mingling into a toxic presence in his gut – but he rallied himself.

He needed information. He had been stumbling around blind for too long, and despite Death’s ominous words, Harry would not squander this opportunity.

No matter how much he might break as a result.

“You said this meeting was overdue. Why haven’t you tried to speak to me before?”

“I have,” Death answered, “but you are as stubborn as you are obtuse. I could only call out to you in moments when you were close to death. When the line between living and dead was blurred enough that you could feel me.”

Harry thought of a cold hand latched over his mouth and a growing pain in his lungs. “When I was attacked,” he summarised grimly.

“And in your dreams,” Death said. “In sleep, humans drift close to the border. It is...easier to reach them.”

Harry’s lips twisted when he recalled being hunted in that warped, strange manor with its unnatural paintings. His hand drifted to his side, curling over his hip where those claws had sunk into his skin.

Death caught the move and Its smile returned. “To solidify our connection,” It explained, unprompted. “Your soul had burrowed into that body like a tick. Bringing you here without the mark to ground you would have been too difficult. You have a...destabilising effect on things. The mark also allowed me to keep track of you and gives us a rudimentary way of communicating.”

Harry’s eyes widened, “When it burns –”

“Those are my attempts to gain your attention. To pull you here.”

Biting his lip, Harry cast his eyes around the room they were in. The faint impressions of furniture looked unstable, and tendrils of smoke wound sinuously from every surface; like black embers flicking up into the air before disappearing. When he glanced out the window to his right, behind the glass he could see nothing but a blanket of darkness.

“And where is ‘here’?” He asked quietly, hands skimming over his stomach before dropping to his sides.

“The ether,” Death’s gaze was unwavering, no glimmer of the earlier aggression visible. Its face was utterly blank, and the absence of anything human in that expression was disturbing.

“This is the shroud that stands between life and death. Only we two may exist here – all other souls pass through immediately. They cannot linger here.”

Harry frowned, mulling that over. “Only us?”

The being nodded.

“Because you’re Death, and I’m your Master?” Harry asked, just to be sure. It was one thing to have others tell him so, but Harry needed to hear it from the entity Itself.

Death blinked at him, “In a way, yes.”

Harry’s eyes squeezed shut, his face creasing with distress as he kept a tenuous hold on his composure. His hands came up to press against his face, slipping under his glasses to rub harshly at his eyes. “Shit,” he muttered, gritting his teeth, and sighing through his nose.

He felt lightheaded from the mess of emotions warring inside him. The depth and strength of them were staggering, but after a long moment Harry managed to push them aside.

When he opened his eyes, Death was watching him closely. The edge of satisfaction on the being’s face – on *Nathan’s* face – made his skin itch.

Torment, It had promised him. *Suffering*.

The intense and contrary desire to deny It what It wanted rose inside Harry, giving him the push he needed.

“And?” He asked. “What does it mean to be the Master of Death? Can I...” he hesitated, wary of angering It again, “can I control you? Order you to do something?”

Death's vaguely pleased expression cooled, falling back into that neutral mask. Harry tensed in alarm.

"No."

He frowned, but before he could speak the other continued.

"Being the Master of Death does not make you insomuch *my* master. It merely means that you have mastered death. Though," It mused, looking almost coy, "'mastered' is a relative term."

More riddles.

"What do you mean?"

Death shrugged, hands clasped loosely behind Its back once more. "You have no power over me. The title is a paltry thing. All it means is that I cannot consume your soul. Every living thing has one in some form or another. From the smallest bacteria to the most distant suns, they all have one. And I take them all. Except yours."

Its eyes flashed, hardening. "So, in simple terms, you can never truly die. Your soul is... unclaimable."

"That –" Harry stopped, leaning back in confusion. His mind rushed to pick apart that revelation, uncomfortable at what he had heard. "That doesn't make any sense. I – the Hallows. I thought that –" he stopped again, frustrated at his lack of understanding.

"Ah yes, the Hallows," Death scoffed, eyes straying to the side. "Such overrated trinkets."

Harry ran his hands through his hair, fingers gripping the strands tightly and tugging. "I don't believe this," he mumbled, turning away. His eyes flew frantically over the room, unseeing.

He almost wanted to laugh at this entire situation – or scream until his lungs burst.

It was not fair.

Harry clenched his jaw, and suddenly he was furious. He whipped back to face Death, hardly noticing the renewed stinging in his eyes. "How can I have no power? What's the *point* of it if it means nothing?"

This time, he was the one to bridge the gap between them, stepping into Death's space. He glared, jabbing a finger at It.

"You're lying. You're trying to trick me. I don't *fucking* believe you."

Death stared at his finger, considering it, and listening to Harry's frantic breathing. Those grey eyes dragged over his hand, down his arm, along his chest and then up to meet his own.

It let out a sigh that turned into a chuckle, and smiled.

The being wearing Nathan Ciro's face leaned in close.

"I eat *stars*, Harry Potter. What makes you think that a mere *human* would ever be able to command me?"

OoO

Benat lowered his wand, eyes still a touch wide as he stared at the slumped body across the street, blood blooming a large halo around it.

His arms trembled from the adrenaline flooding him – his senses still sparking like a live-wire.

The weight of the boy's magic lingered, prickling along his scalp in warning. Even diminished, dissipating into the air in the wake of his death, the taste of it was terrifying.

If Benat had been even a little less skilled, if he had been more tired, if he had not struck out at those other students in desperation...

He swallowed his fear.

He was still panting, struggling to draw in enough oxygen to recover. Benat flexed his fingers around his wand, the sweat on his palm making his grip slippery.

The realisation of what he had just done hit him like a fist. "Fuck," he murmured, pressing a trembling hand to his mask, reassuring himself that it was still in place.

Killing the boy had never been a part of the plan. Hurting, yes, but it was difficult to use a dead person as leverage. Someone as stubborn as Benedict Ciro would not fall into line after this. All of their work, all the unsavoury jobs, the threats and intimidation – all of it undone because Benat had had to kill the boy to save himself.

This was a mess.

Benat finally dropped out of his stance as the seconds passed and Nathan Ciro showed no signs of movement – and was that not a testament to how unnatural the duel had been, that Benat was half-expecting the boy to leap back to his feet like his throat had not been slit.

Given what he had just witnessed though, the caution seemed necessary.

His impression of the boy from that night had been of a shy, weak-willed child that was long-accustomed to being the victim; and the description provided by his brother had certainly matched reality. Nathan Ciro had trembled like a little lamb when they had grabbed him, and he had cried easily.

Soft and fragile, Benat had thought.

Only that was clearly not the case anymore.

Ciro's bastard had changed in a way Benat could not understand. The boy should have shattered after that night, growing more subdued and submissive. He should not have become

tempered steel, and his eyes should not have burned with such ferocity. His magic should not have grown teeth, nor should he have been capable of such Dark spells.

He should not have been capable of killing.

The difference between the two versions of the boy were so stark, they might as well have been different people.

Movement caught his eye, drawing his focus away from the body and towards the three other children huddled together.

He grimaced beneath his mask, distaste building on his tongue.

He knew he had to leave. It would only be a matter of time until word reached the British Ministry and aurors were unleashed on Hogsmeade.

He took a breath, then raised his wand.

OoO

Harry stepped back, his hand dropping away from Death's face. He was panting, the rush of his anger fading, leaving him weightless and bereft.

It meant nothing.

The thought was relentless, ringing in his mind like bells.

All of it...it means nothing.

He closed his eyes, grappling with the implications.

"Why...why even make the Hallows then?" He asked quietly, head low.

"I didn't," Death told him simply, tearing apart a legend without a care. "I wasn't an active force back then. I was passive, unaware even of the passage of time. I consumed souls and...drifted. The Hallows were created by Anitoch, Cadmus and Ignatus. Human tools for human desires." Death's eyes became hooded.

"But they were greedy, they wanted more power. They wanted items that could do impossible things." Death raised a hand, slim and delicate. "A wand that could not be beaten," a silhouette of the Elder wand appeared above Its palm.

"A stone that could recall the souls of the departed," next, the stone replaced the wand.

"And a cloak that could hide its user from all detection," finally, the outline of the invisibility cloak appeared.

Death clenched Its fist, and the image vanished. "But how to achieve such grand aspirations? How to create these pieces that could accomplish such things? It would take a force more powerful than any they had. To have a wand that could kill any opponent, a stone that summoned souls back, and a cloak that made one as untraceable as death? A conundrum indeed."

Harry was, against his better judgement, enthralled.

"It was Cadmus that found their answer. Clever Cadmus, reckless and desperate, willing to cross any line to see his lost love." Death smiled bitterly, Nathan's features seeming to age in that moment. "A ritual of his own design – one that would link these pieces to the greatest force in the universe. An unending force, something that would never deplete."

"You," Harry whispered.

"Me," Death agreed, dipping Its head. "Their silly little ritual succeeded, at great cost to each of them. A connection was formed between myself and the wand, stone and cloak. They had

their power source, and I continued on, oblivious to what they had done. It is not like I had thoughts back then, after all.”

Harry rubbed at his mouth, mind reeling. “Then the story –”

“Human propaganda,” Death interrupted. “Items like that gather attention, and with the brothers refusing to elaborate on their origins – on what they had done to create them – the rumours grew on their own. Over time, the Deathly Hallows became their legacy, and the Master of Death became a title in the minds of those that learned of their power. A goal none of them could ever hope to obtain.”

“Why’s that?” Harry asked, grimacing in preparation for whatever the answer would be.

“Because little Ignotus was smarter than both of his brother’s combined, and he knew what would happen when word got out about their creations. He respected the power that the pieces held individually, but he feared what they could do together. He had a clause added to the ritual, something to prevent the Hallows from ever being wielded by the same person at the same time.”

Death looked at Harry, scanning him intensely. “A blood clause. Only a descendant from one of their lines would ever be able to safely own all three Hallows at once, because only one of their descendants would understand the significance of the pieces.” The ironic twist of Its mouth said everything. “He wasn’t smart enough, though. If he had been, he would have never made that exception.”

“What do you mean by that?”

The being clicked Its tongue. “In a moment, Harry. The clause made it so that anyone not of their lineage would be plagued with misfortune if they used one of the Hallows. That misfortune would double if they held two. And death would fall upon anyone who had all three. A simple enough curse, and one that proved very effective in the decades that followed. Ignotus thought he was doing a good thing by locking the Hallows to a bloodline, but he miscalculated.”

Harry shifted back a step, unsettled by the sudden spark of amusement on Death’s face.

“The Hallows had been siphoning power off of me for centuries. They were storing that energy, building it up each year that passed, until they were beacons. You received the cloak when you were a child, soaking yourself in that energy as you grew. Then, you collected the stone and the wand – unintentional though it might have been. A descendant of Ignotus owning all three Hallows at once. You had done the impossible.”

Harry felt sick, though he could not pinpoint why. Death continued to speak.

“Your soul changed with each Hallow you got, unnoticeable to anyone but myself. And when you died in that forest, your soul was no longer that of a human. You did not register in my senses. I told you that your soul was unclaimable, and that is why. Ignotus thought he was protecting people, but in reality, he was sentencing someone of his own flesh and blood to a

cursed existence. I can never consume you because the Hallows mark you as a part of me – and I cannot consume myself, Harry.”

His throat felt too tight to breathe.

Harry swayed, his hands gripping his knees as he hunched over. He shook violently, cold to his bones. “How do you know all of this?” He gasped out, staring at the floor. “You said you were unaware – how do you know all of this if you weren’t there? If you weren’t...if you didn’t plan this.”

“I know everything. Every soul that comes to me, every secret they hold, every scrap of knowledge they amass in their time – I assimilate it all when I consume them.”

Harry clamped his eyes shut and covered his face with his hands. He was in shock, he thought dimly. He had to be in shock. This was – this was *too much* but he could not stop.

“Consume, consuming,” he said, “what the hell does that even mean?” His hands dug into his hair, nails scratching hard against his scalp.

“Exactly what it sounds like,” Death answered him, tone tripping into gleeful. “I eat souls. They give me strength. Some slip through the cracks and become ghosts – but they all find their way to me eventually.”

Harry thought to the shade of that Hufflepuff girl. Death had not eaten her –

“Shades are different,” the being said, and Harry almost wanted to cry. “They are slivers, remnants of a soul already devoured. They’re incomplete, trapped in their loops and unseen by most.” It smirked darkly, “They’re like the leftovers. The crumbs.”

“Shut up,” Harry hissed, “shut up, shut up, shut up.”

“No,” Death said, merciless. “You wanted to know. You wanted answers – *so you can have them.*”

“I just want to go *home!*” Harry screamed, hands curling around the back of his neck. “That’s all I want! I want to go home.”

“Oh, Harry.” Death cooed. “You can’t go home. Not anymore.”

Harry froze.

Slowly, he looked up, hands dropping to his side. “What do you mean?” He croaked.

“You died, and your time has long since passed,” Death said unkindly.

Harry frowned, shaking his head. “*This* is the past,” he said, though his tone wavered.

Death tilted Its head. “Is it?”

OoO

Aaron stared at the form in front of him until the words on the paper began to blur and blend.

He closed his eyes hard, shaking his head slowly to try and banish the strain. The growing pounding in his temples from his badgering headache made it next to impossible to concentrate for longer than a few minutes at a time.

An argument started up in the bullpen across the floor, and Aaron winced at the noise. He reached for his cup of water, pressing the cool glass against his forehead in an attempt to starve off what felt like a knot of pain under his skull.

A folder dropped down on his desk, the *slap* of it landing loud enough to make him flinch.

“Sorry, Deaken,” his partner, Rogers, said with a grimace. “Headache again?”

“Don’t you know it,” Aaron muttered, taking a measured sip.

“You should go home then, mate,” Rogers told him, picking up his seat and swinging it around so that he could sit backwards, straddling it with his arms folded on the backrest. “Ain’t gonna be much help if your head ain’t working properly.”

Aaron grunted, one of his hands cupped over his eyes. He gestured to the stack of papers still littering his desk, “Can’t. Got a backlog. Keelan is on my arse to get through these cases. Plus, I have a meeting with Benedict Ciro coming up tomorrow. I need to get my notes in order before that.”

Rogers made a noise in the back of his throat. “Ciro again? You haven’t had any leads in that case since it got dumped on you. Why’s he coming back again?”

“Didn’t you hear?” Aaron asked drily, looking up long enough to squint at his partner. “Nathan woke up a few weeks ago. He’s back at Hogwarts now, trying to catch up.”

“You’re shitting me,” Rogers said, his eyebrows shooting up. “He’s up? Have you interviewed him yet?”

“Nope,” Aaron said, popping the last bit.

“Why the hell not?”

“Because he can’t remember anything,” Aaron told him, and that fact had *burned* when he had been told. It was still bitter for him to swallow – but he supposed it was worse for the family, and for Nathan.

Having something like that happen to you would be awful, but knowing and not being able to remember? Aaron was not sure if that was more damaging.

“Fuck me,” Rogers muttered, and Aaron snorted.

“His mother refused to let me see him, but they’re still chasing me for answers...it’s a nightmare.”

And it was. The Ciro’s were a relatively small family, and compared to behemoth Houses like the Blacks and Malfoys, they were almost nonentities. But they were still wealthy and respectable, and the expectations to solve Nathan’s case was beginning to drag on him.

He rubbed at his face, sighing heavily. His eyes found Nathan’s file easily in the stacks before him, and the memories of that night came back like a muggle motion picture.

Nathan had looked so small on the pavement.

Aaron dug the heels of his palms into his eyes.

“Hey,” Rogers said, nudging him with his boot, “are you sure you don’t wanna go home? You look like –”

A shrill noise blared through the floor.

Aaron cringed, his hands flying to his ears as his headache spiked. Rogers shot to his feet, as did most of the other aurors in the bullpens. People were sprinting passed the open doorway in groups, their wands already drawn.

“What the bloody hell is going on?” Someone – Thompson, it sounded like – shouted over the alarm.

One body amongst many skidded to a stop in the entrance, his face flushed and eyes wide with panic.

“It’s all hands on deck - there’s been an attack at Hogsmeade! The apparition points aren’t working – we’ve got to go through Hogwarts!”

“Fucking hell!” Rogers cursed, and Aaron leapt up as well, knocking into his desk in his hurry to get around towards the door.

Hogsmeade. *Hogwarts*.

“Are you sure you should –” Rogers began to say, and Aaron skewered him with a glare. “Right, let’s go then.”

Aaron turned back around, satisfied. They rushed to the floo network, a bottleneck occurring as they all were forced to wait their turn. His hand tapped against his thigh in an agitated beat, eyes staring unseeingly at the line in front of him.

He could not even begin to imagine what scene they would come across. No one had ever been so bold as to attack so close to the school before.

His gut was laden with fear. It was a weekend, which meant there could be droves of students in the village; and if the apparition points were tampered with, if there was such a delay to get the word out, then the casualties could be enormous.

Aaron's fists clenched, his mind filled with bloodstained cobblestone and a too small, too pale body.

He was sick of seeing children being hurt.

OoO

“What does that even mean?” Harry asked, strained, feeling close to the end of his rope.

“Time can only go forward,” Death explained, tone reminiscent of a teacher. “There is a reason that time turners are contained to a twenty-four hour period. Anything beyond that is set.” It gestured vaguely, “Not even I can rewind the clock, Harry.”

“That doesn’t explain anything!” Harry snapped, “How can you say it’s not the past when it’s 1942 and Albus Dumbledore and *Tom Riddle* are walking around Hogwarts?” He threw his arms wide, trying to express the depth of his confusion and anger. He felt wound tight, one twist away from cracking open.

“*Think*, Harry.” Death said, “Time can only go forward.”

“It’s the past,” Harry insisted, trembling from the force of his conviction.

“It’s not though. Even in your limited exposure you’ve surely noticed things aren’t quite the same. You never knew of the *Ciro* family in your previous life, and poor Orion doesn’t quite match up to Sirius’ stories, does he? If you looked wider, out beyond Hogwarts, I’ve no doubt you’d notice more things that don’t add up with your understanding of history. For instance, Hogsmeade was never attacked last time, was it?”

The wording was too deliberate, sticking in his mind like a thorn. “Last time?” Harry repeated, breathing harshly.

“Come on, Harry,” Death chided, “you have all the pieces. Put them together.”

But Harry did not want to. He stumbled back, away from Death and away from the truth It wanted him to see. “I don’t. I don’t know.”

“Ask me how long you were asleep, then.” It suddenly demanded, stalking after him like a predator. “Ask me how long I held your soul against me, how long it sat with me, unable to be consumed. *Ask me!*” Death shot forward, pinning Harry against the wall again and driving Its fist close to his head.

“Do you know what that did to me? What *you* did to me?” It spat, mask splintering and allowing something ugly to shine through. “I pressed you close when you fell off that fucking rooftop because I couldn’t do anything else with you. You were just *there*, an extra limb I didn’t need or want. I kept you close, and you infected me like a virus. I started to change, becoming something new. Something *wrong*. Suddenly I was *aware* of things, having thoughts and experiencing emotions and acknowledging *time*. Do you know what that was like, Harry Potter? To so abruptly be constrained to a human’s understanding of time – to feel every second and minute trickle through me?”

Harry pressed himself closer to the wall, trying to avoid the accusations. Nathan’s face sneered up at him.

“Do you know what gaining autonomy *did to me?*”

A freezing hand landed on his chest, pushing down until his ribs screamed in protest and he was left gasping for air. Death dragged Its hand higher, the pressure increasing as it came to rest on Harry’s sternum. The anger on Its face was inhuman, something that could only be built up over an eternity. Over Death’s shoulder, Harry could see their surroundings begin to flicker, warping around the edges and darkening.

“I was never meant to be like this. You did this, you ruined me.” Death whispered to him. Its eyes were focussed and unchained.

“Time continued to pass, decades and centuries and eras *crawling* by me. Humans evolved, left for the stars. Civilisations fell and worlds ended. Stars collapsed and suns died. Galaxies folded in on themselves. The end came and went.” Death told him, words spilling out faster than Harry could process. “Our souls had become so entwined I couldn’t tell us apart – but by the time I realised what I had to do, that I needed to separate us, everything was already gone. It was too late. You became so deeply interwoven with me.”

It sighed against him, cold air blowing over his bare neck. “The universe had ended. I was growing weaker without anything in the void to consume. Trapped with your parasitic presence. I drifted like I had in the beginning, but this time I could feel every second of it.” Death’s head dipped forward, tousled brown hair falling over Its face.

“But just as I began to lose myself – it started.”

“What started?” Harry breathed.

Death peeked up at him, eyes glowing with something reverent. “*Everything*. The universe had begun again. It was so dark and cold and alone, Harry, and then it was filled with light and colour. Life returned, and with life came strength.”

Harry swallowed, staring down at Death with sick fascination.

“I knew I had to bide my time,” It continued softly. “I had to consume so much energy, so many souls, to gather enough power to tear you from me. But I also needed humans to advance. Souls are so incredibly fickle about their containers, after all. I needed a body that your soul wouldn’t rebel against – and when the time finally came, when I had stored enough power to separate us, I found the first conveniently empty body to put you in.”

Harry released a tumultuous breath. Horror began to take root in him as he finally realised the consequences of what Death was telling him. “You’re a monster,” he rasped.

Death laughed, hoarse and broken. “I’m as human as you are, Harry.”

He shook his head, desperate to reject that, but Death shoved him back against the wall again. “I’m not a monster. I could have been far crueller. I could have put you in an unsuitable body a million years ago, or left you stranded in the Holocene epoch with your underdeveloped ancestors. But then you would have died so quickly, and I’d have to do it again and again and again. I wanted you *away*, not falling back into my hold every three years.”

Harry tried to push It back. “So what, I’m supposed to be *grateful*?”

It leaned into his face, snarling. “I could have found you a body in another country, or a muggle with no capacity to carry your magic – but instead I found you a young, healthy container that will last you years. I waited to put you in a time you’d find familiar, with toys to keep you entertained. I even gave you a family, like you always so desperately wanted.”

“That’s not – you’re twisting things,” Harry hissed, turning his head away.

Death’s hand shot up and grabbed his chin, forcing him to look at It. “Yes, I am. But I don’t care. It’s the thought that counts, right?”

Finally, It released him. Harry slumped back against the wall, his face screwed up in devastation.

Don’t think about it, don’t think about it.

“What now then?” He asked, voice thick. “You stuff me in another person’s body. Out of sight and out of mind?”

“You’re never out of my mind, Harry,” Death said. “But no, not another person. That’s for when you use this one up. When it’s old and brittle and gives out on you.”

“But...I died,” Harry said, confused.

“Not exactly. Your body is dying, but the tether linking you to it has not broken yet. There’s still time.”

“All the time in the world,” Harry said, numbly echoing what Death had said to him earlier.

The silence between them stretched.

“Time to go back, Harry,” It told him quietly. When Harry pulled his eyes to Death, Its expression was calm once more. “If you want to avoid coming back here again so soon, I recommend that you prepare a healing spell.”

“What are you –” Harry began to ask, blinking the tears from his eyes.

Death pressed two fingers to his forehead and *pushed*. “See you around, Master.”

Harry fell backwards, the ground disappearing beneath his feet. He might have screamed, but the sound was ripped away before he could hear it.

He tumbled through the air, twisting over and over, and the grey world shattered.

Harry came to a sharp stop, eyes flying open to see a blend of white and red. His hand flexed automatically around his throat, and fear roared to life in his chest when he felt the gapping slash under his palm.

His magic slammed into him, billowing out. A torrent of it flowed instinctually down his arm, and heat encircled his neck as Harry unloaded a healing spell into the shredded tissue.

His mouth fell open in a silent cry, his eyes screwing shut as he writhed on the ground. The snow around him began to hiss and melt from the sheer power emitting from him, and he could feel the muscles and flesh closing, like a zipper being done up.

It was excruciating.

Harry curled into a ball, back arched and shoulders hunched defensively. His magic stuttered and slowed, before stopping completely.

He remained in place, shuddering uncontrollably, and staring wide-eyed at the blood pooled below him. His fingers dug into his throat, and it took almost a minute of terror before he dared to pull his hand away.

The skin of his palm was blistered and bubbled from the overdone spell, and his entire front was stained with red, soaking through his clothes and making them cling to him.

Carefully, Harry unfurled from his position, his gaze dragging over the macabre mess covering him.

His thoughts were too jumbled, spilling over themselves without order. His entire worldview was still reeling from what had happened to him. All he could hear was the thin, whistling breaths he squeezed out, and the taste of iron was overpowering.

Ginny.

The thought burst to the front of his mind, and Harry whined. Sorrow welled up, too strong for him to combat.

He would never see her again.

Ron. Hermione.

He...he had lost *everything*. Everyone he had ever known was dead. His time, his life, had passed eons ago – so long now that the universe had ended and *begun again*.

Harry gripped his hair, a reedy keen slipping out of him as the realisation threatened to ruin him once more.

He could not breathe. His neck was brutalised, every inhalation sending sparks of agony ricocheting through him – and his restraint was balancing on a tightrope.

And then –

“C–cero?”

Chapter End Notes

So. Not gonna lie. I'm a bit apprehensive of the response this chapter will get. We had a pretty big reveal, and some new characters introduced, but I just hope that people liked it, and are looking forward to where I'm taking this story going forward.

Thoughts, comments, and incoherent screaming are all welcome. If anyone wants to stop by for a visit, my [tumblr](#) is here! Thanks guys!

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Notes

Me, watching the absolute chaos the last chapter generated: ah yes, good, validation.

But in all seriousness, I was blown away by the response to the last chapter. You guys stunned me, completely. I'm so, so glad that the reveal went over well. I was so nervous about it, since it was something I hadn't seen done before (or very much) in media before - both the time travel and the personification of Death.

So, thank you all so much for turning me into a puddle of goo and making me feel like a good writer lmao.

Enjoy the new chapter!

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

Orion knew death.

The first time he had seen a dead body he had been six years old.

His great uncle's funeral had been a sombre affair; torturously long and yet entirely too fast at the same time. The bottom floor of his family's house had been filled with people he did not know – allied families, business associates, politicians and dignitaries forming a sea of bodies crammed into every corner.

Even to his younger self the condolences that had dripped from their honeyed lips had rung false. Pity had carefully concealed the voracious desires beneath their sad smiles, and softly crooned words hid their greed and glee and their desperate attempts to curry favour with any member of House Black.

Most of that dreary day was lost to the haze of his memories, but the one thing Orion could recall with stark clarity was the sight of Corvus Black's pallid corpse on display.

He could still see the ashy flesh that contrasted sharply with the dark fabrics of his suit, and how the firelight had glinted against his rings. Could see wrinkled hands – hands that Orion had watched skin rabbits and break chicken bones for rituals – folded atop his chest.

He even remembered how cold Corvus had been to touch, how strange the lack of warmth had been, before his mother had yanked him away with a hissed warning about respect and a firm slap to drive the point home. The scar from her ring still marred his cheek, a slim and short line, invisible unless one knew where to look.

The intricacies of death had eluded him back then, despite his father's attempts to explain; but as the years took more family from him and the bodies of House Black began to pile up, Orion *learned*.

By the time he had lost all but one of his cousins Orion had grown familiar with the idea of his own mortality. Unshackled by the burden so many others seemed to carry.

So yes, Orion knew death well by this point, but it was still a shock to witness it.

Ciro had been vicious in his assault. His magic had sung in the air around him as he had beaten his opponent back, relentless and ferocious – and Orion had been breathless. The sheer power *Ciro* exhibited had enraptured him.

He had felt safe with *Ciro* standing so fearlessly in front of him, cocooned beneath that ocean of strength. But that warmth, that sense of security he had never quite felt before had been ripped away when the curse had knocked them back.

The pain that radiated from his shoulder had been blinding and the rush of blood through his ears deafened him for a moment. When Orion had finally managed to sit up it was in time to watch *Ciro* collapse in the snow, his neck torn and drenched in his own blood.

The world whitened out, static humming in his mind as he stared, uncomprehending, at the scene before him.

“*Shit*,” he heard Augustus whisper, shock making his voice low and rough, though in the abrupt silence it was painfully loud. Without the sounds of spells shooting through the air there was nothing to distract from how secluded this part of the village was.

Without the domineering presence of *Ciro* filling the area the sudden void was crushing.

Orion reached up to grasp his stinging shoulder, distantly acknowledging the sticky warmth of blood soaking through his jacket. His vision blurred, smearing like an oil painting.

Ciro was not moving.

Face down on the ground, red snow surrounding him, unnatural stillness encroaching on that thin frame.

Ciro was not moving.

Orion knew death, recognised it as the only constant in his life, and his chest hollowed out with the realisation that the other boy was *gone*.

He blinked, but the image did not fade. If anything, it became sharper, clearer, burning into his retinas with vengeance. The scent of blood mingled with the crispness of the snow and the heavy, tainted traces of smoke, condensing in the back of his throat.

He should have – he should have fought. He should have helped rather than cowered like a small child, relying on another to shield him.

Look, a voice too close to his mother's hissed in his mind, look at what your own weakness caused. Pathetic, useless boy.

Orion shifted, slowly drawing his legs in as he clambered upright, and the strangest sensation began to seep into his gut. He got one foot under himself and leaned his elbow on his knee, listing to the side as pain flared and dark spots invaded his vision.

He felt dazed, his thoughts set adrift in a tempest of emotions he could not name.

Across the street their attacker was nothing more than a hazy shape to Orion's senses. A vague impression of a person that was slowly inching closer.

Orion could not take his eyes off Ciro's body.

It was wrong. An antithesis to everything Orion had begun to understand about the other boy.

Ciro could not be *dead*, not when he had just started to be interesting. It was not fair to lose when he had only just begun to scratch at the mystery, to appreciate the sullen and gruff new personality Ciro had.

To have that potential snatched away by a stranger –

There was a new, foreign emotion clawing at his heart now, howling with the force of a hurricane. Something feral and angry. Something he had not felt in years.

Grief.

Orion's hand slipped away from his wound, reaching out despite the distance still between them. He had...he had to touch. To feel and know.

Augustus seized him by the collar of his jacket, bunching the thick fabric and pulling him back, instinctively protective. "Orion –" he said, quiet and strained, but choked off when a horrible weight descended on them, stealing the air from their lungs, and almost driving them to the ground.

Orion barely kept himself upright under the overwhelming pressure, his arms shaking from the effort. The fine hair along his body rose as icy, primal fear gripped him.

Get away get away getaway.

He craned his neck, gasping and heaving for air, his attention fixated on Ciro. His eyes itched, feeling enflamed, but the pain was secondary to the dread.

Black mist began to form around Ciro, curling like living shadows around his slack figure. It slid sinuously over him, snaking through his hair and over his clothing – and Ciro jolted like he had been electrocuted.

The black wisps froze, quivered, then sunk into the boy. They pierced through his clothes and burrowed under his skin.

Ciro began to writhe.

His legs twitched erratically, kicking out without control or grace. Magic, thick and aggressive and indignant, swelled around them. It ballooned out of Ciro, crashing over the street like a tidal wave. The taste of it was sickly sweet on Orion's tongue and the overpowering scent had him gagging.

It was pungent. Like rotting fruit.

The magic compressed in the next second, warping into something else entirely, and through his tears Orion watched a blue light erupt close to Ciro's head.

Ciro shuddered violently, the light vanishing as the magic and the weight strangling them finally began to ebb. Orion sucked in harshly, the fresh air excruciating after that experience.

He forced himself up, his joints aching, and watched as Ciro curled his legs up under his chest until he was hunched in a small ball. Tremors raked through the other's body, obvious even from where they sat.

One minute stretched into two, and none of them moved. It felt as if the world was suspended, trapped at the apex of a jump and just waiting for gravity to reclaim them.

Then, Ciro sat up.

He unfurled like a bloodied flower, his entire front splattered, staining through his shirt. The side of his face that had been pressed into the ground was coated with blood and his hair was matted; the normal brown of it tinged red and sticking to his chalk-white skin.

With his head tilted down, Orion could not make out the damage to Ciro's neck, but the angle was enough that he could read the expression on the other's face.

Confusion. Incredulity. Terror.

The moment that final emotion congealed on his face, smothering everything else under its hold, Orion stiffened.

Ciro's hands dug into his hair as the panic took him. His magic reared up once more, throbbing from the stress, frantic in the way an animal on its last legs snapped and snarled at a threat.

Steam rose from the snow around Ciro as the air began to heat. It melted, a swiftly growing circle forming around him to reveal the cobblestone path beneath. The first wave of heat rolled over them, sweltering, until it felt like they were stuck in a furnace.

Ciro's head rose and there was something unhinged in those grey eyes. A glow of madness and anguish that shone fever bright.

Orion knew insanity even better than death, and his breath caught at the sight of it painted plainly on that blood-covered face. They were losing him, and with the amount of magic Ciro

was pumping into the air, like a bloody powder keg, all it would take was one spark to unleash devastation.

He unstuck his tongue from where the fear had fused it to the roof of his mouth.

“C—ciro?”

Everything stopped for a second time at his stuttered call. Even the magic stilled, waiting with insidious patience.

Orion swallowed the stone in his throat and tried again, “Ciro?”

Sluggishly, those grey eyes moved up from the ground, finding Orion with difficulty. They were unfocussed, devoid of anything as they peered right through Orion like he was not there. The lack of fire, of familiar belligerence or repressed amusement, was disturbing.

Ciro blinked, lashes fluttering weakly. Recognition finally flared in his eyes, enough to pierce the impenetrable wall inside him, though what confused Orion was the painful glimmer of longing that cracked over Ciro’s face.

The other boy’s mouth parted, his lips forming a name not Orion’s, but no sound escaped him.

Tears flooded his eyes and a pale hand gripped weakly at his throat.

Ciro looked at Orion in despair.

“It’s okay,” Orion rushed to say, the words catching awkwardly on his teeth. He raised his hands placatingly, trying to keep that paper-thin control in place. If Ciro lost it right now there was no guarantee they would survive the outburst.

“Ciro?”

It was Riddle that spoke, his voice steadier than Orion’s had been. “Ciro, are you alright?”

Grey eyes unhooked their tethers from Orion and slid to Riddle. The recognition was faster this time but there was no softness to accompany it. Hatred poisoned Ciro’s expression, so sudden it was hard to believe, and his magic twisted in preparation.

Shit, Orion thought, tensing. He reached out for Riddle, latching onto the older boy’s arm – but whatever he intended to do was interrupted by a harsh, hoarse voice.

“What are you?”

The question cut through the building tension, carrying through the quiet and brimming with horror and sick fascination.

Ciro twitched, his chest freezing its rapid movements as his head cocked to the side.

Orion dared to look over at the only other person on the street with them.

Their masked attacker knelt across from them, his arms limp at his sides and his wand held loosely in his fingers. Even with his features hidden, Orion could feel the intensity of the man's attention on Ciro.

"I killed you," the man insisted, louder but with a telling tremble in his voice. "I know I did. How –" he could not finish his question, stunned.

Next to him, Orion heard a hair-rising hiss spill from Riddle's mouth. He barely had a chance to glance at his Housemate – saw the scalding look on his face, eyes dark and unending and *awed*– when his focus snapped back to the front.

Ciro's arms dropped, and he turned as if in a trance. His eyes found his would-be murderer with unerring accuracy and whatever fog had been plaguing him was gone, replaced with something all too aware. There was a single breath of anticipation, and then Ciro's eyes narrowed. His upper lip peeled back, and he raised one hand out towards his target.

The swarm of power hanging around him spiked. A curse shot from Ciro's palm, vivid green in colour and Dark enough that it made Orion's stomach clench with need.

It erupted into a wide wave, exploding the ground and stones as it hurtled towards the man.

He let out an aborted yelp, leaping up and twisting on his heel. The *crack* of his apparition sounded just before the curse slammed into where he had been. The wall of the shop it collided with blasted apart, splintering the ceiling, and collapsing the rest of the structure.

Orion stared. He had never heard of that curse before.

His next breath was uneven, hitching with terrible curiosity, and his grip on Riddle's arm tightened.

Ciro stayed upright, body pulled taut as his gaze flickered around the street. He scanned the area critically, hunting with a single-minded intent, but when it became apparent that the attacker had truly fled all the fight drained from him.

Ciro drooped, swaying forward. He caught himself with one hand, the other flying back to cradle his throat.

"He's going to –" Augustus began, but Orion was already moving. He sprinted over and slid to a stop beside Ciro, dropping down and wrapping an arm around his chest. The embers of the other's magic vanished completely, and with it went all Ciro's strength.

Ciro sagged against Orion with a wheeze, shuddering hard. His hair was wet with sweat and blood, but his skin was frigid when he pressed his face into Orion's uninjured shoulder. With one last grunt, Ciro crumpled fully into Orion's hold.

He grimaced at the sudden weight and awkwardly shuffled so that he was sitting on the ground with the other slumped across his lap.

"Ciro?" Orion called, rolling the other boy so that he could see his face.

Ciro's eyes were slitted, his cheeks grey beneath the layers of blood, and his pupils were rolling madly under his lids.

He did not react to his name.

Footsteps crunched close beside him. Orion glanced up to see Riddle and Augustus approaching them cautiously.

"Is...he alright?" Augustus asked with great reluctance. He clearly did not know which answer he wanted, and his mouth twisted regretfully at Orion's sharp look, silently acknowledging how foolish the question had been.

"He looks awake, but he's not responding," Orion told them, studying the boy leaning against him. He brushed Ciro's hair back from his face to see better, his fingertips dragging through the blood-soaked strands.

Riddle knelt next to him; gaze fixed on Ciro but empty of anything that might hint at his true thoughts. Chips of wood clung to his hair and soot marked his cheeks and the bridge of his nose. Orion watched him suspiciously, his arms curling firmer around Ciro.

"What just happened?" Augustus murmured, standing to their left. He surveyed the street with wide eyes, his hands flexing at his sides as he continued, "That was insane. I've never seen anyone...and his *neck*..."

Orion listened to the stupefied muttering and watched Riddle as the other reached for Ciro.

With great care, Riddle tilted the other's head back, his hands barely touching Ciro's jaw to prompt the movement.

All three of them stared at the jagged scar stretching across his neck. It was thick and puckered, the skin stitched together haphazardly and shining a glossy red. Under the mess, Orion could see the bruises forming in the soft flesh.

He swallowed, his own neck aching in phantom pain, and tucked his chin down.

"What do we do now?" Augustus asked, squatting down, using one hand to balance himself.

Orion felt the urge to cover Ciro up when his old friend's gaze skimmed over the other's neck.

"The aurors will be here soon," Riddle commented, quiet and mild. "The fighting likely spread up towards the castle, following the crowd, but I doubt any of these attackers had the means to break through Hogwarts' protections. They must have set up a perimeter ward around Hogsmeade that stopped people from apparating directly in, which means any aid would have to go through the castle and then make their way down here."

His eyes found Orion's, "Given how long it would have taken word to get out, and then to muster a force, we likely have a few minutes before they get to us."

Orion grimaced, already knowing what would happen after the aurors arrived. He took a breath and nodded.

“Our story?” he prompted, trusting the other in this at least.

Riddle sat back on his heels, hands dropping away from Ciro. “Give me your wands,” he ordered.

Augustus bristled, a reflexive reaction he normally never would have allowed, but he was obviously rattled. Orion could hardly blame him, though. What they had seen...it was beyond words.

Still, he obediently handed his wand over, and Augustus had no choice but to follow his lead.

Riddle wasted no time in casting a rapid set of spells with each wand. Most were defensive in nature, and at any other time Orion might have been impressed at how easily Riddle could bend their wands to his whim, but all he could currently feel was a steadily rising wave of impatience.

Tossing their wands back to them, Riddle then plucked Ciro’s up from where it had fallen. He held it for a moment, running his fingers along it curiously, before doing the same and erasing the last several spells Ciro had used.

Once done, he tucked it into his robes.

“We were out shopping,” Riddle began, his voice soft and calm. “The attack happened, and we were pinned while the rest evacuated. Two masked assailants confronted us, and for the most part we managed to hold them off.”

He gestured to the ruined street, “All of this was caused by the curses they used against us – and unfortunately, Ciro’s shield shattered under the assault. He was hit in the throat.”

Riddle paused then, his eyes darkening as he stared at Ciro thoughtfully. He held up his own wand as the tip began to glow a gentle blue. “In a fit of accidental magic Ciro managed to heal most of his injury. I stepped in to finish the job, resulting in the scar.”

He cancelled the healing spell. “The attackers then fled while we were distracted, and we waited here for the aurors.”

Orion frowned, mind swiftly picking at the pieces. It was crude, and simple, but it would suit their needs for now. They did not have enough time for anything more sophisticated than that.

“Fine,” Orion agreed, slipping his arm behind Ciro’s shoulders to heave him up into a sitting position. The other boy was still out of it.

Augustus scoffed, running a hand through his hair. His eyes were wild as he said, “Are you kidding me? The aurors aren’t going to believe it! Shouldn’t we tell them about *that*?”

He pointed angrily at Ciro, looking between Riddle and Orion. “He was *dead* and then he just stood back up! You both saw those black tendrils, same as I did. We need to tell the fucking

Unspeakables!”

Riddle’s eyes narrowed, everything about him seeming to sharpen.

“No,” Orion said, cutting in before an argument could start, “we keep quiet until we know exactly what we’re dealing with here.” He stared down his oldest friend and saw how Augustus’ eyes widened.

“If we tell them the truth, if we say what Ciro did, what do you think will happen?” he asked, words clipped. “They’ll take him. They’ll put him in the deepest hole they can find and poke and prod at him until they figure out *whatever* that was – and I won’t let that happen.”

Orion turned to Riddle, seeing his own determination shining back at him.

“Besides,” Riddle said, his lips curling in a disparaging way, “what is more believable? That a student widely considered quite average killed one grown wizard and fought another, and came back to life from a mortal wound? Or that four students, three of whom are topping their classes, were able to hold off two attackers? They will believe what we tell them because it makes sense and it’s easy to write off as *luck*. ”

Riddle smiled then, a tight and dangerous expression, and met Augustus’ eyes with a dare.

“Ciro’s injury actually works in our favour. If we had all come out unscathed it would have raised eyebrows.”

Augustus stared at them, searching for any sign that they were willing to change their minds, and found nothing.

After a long minute, he looked down.

“Good,” Riddle praised.

OoO

There was so much noise.

Hands gripped him, pushing and pulling him in a thousand different directions.

The world around him was shifting, the ground underneath him bleeding from white to tan stone, his surroundings melting into blues and greens.

Everything tilted, something soft appearing beneath him as a gentle weight found itself draped over his shoulders.

Harry had never felt so cold.

Voices bounced around him, tinny and high-pitched and impossible for him to decipher, rolling into an all-encompassing hum. The sound pressed in like collapsing walls, but it was not enough to drown out the echoing taunts.

You can't go home.

He shivered, hands curling into the coarse blanket.

Time can only go forward.

This time the swell of sorrow burned in his breast. Pressure built up near his eyes, and the familiar sting of tears rushed over him.

Your soul is...unclaimable.

Fingers brushed against him, scorching palms resting on his frozen cheeks. Harry could barely feel the touch.

You ruined me.

Shapes moved in front of him, their edges smudged into a mess of colours and brightness. Another voice spoke to him, closer than before, but he could make no sense of what they were saying.

Within the chaos a single face stood out, features like polished glass.

It was grinning at him, delight and hate twisting together in Its eyes. Thin lips parted, words spilling out, clear as bells –

"I'm as human as you are."

Harry opened his mouth to scream.

OoO

It was so much worse than he had anticipated.

Aaron tried to listen to the statement Rogers was taking from their three witnesses – just boys, Merlin he hated his job sometimes – but he was too preoccupied watching Nathan to hear much of what was said.

The kid looked like a nightmare, patches of red mapping out a horror story on his body.

He was seated on one of the few available hospital beds, surrounded by the other wounded, but it was the stillness that set him apart. Nathan was not crying out in pain like so many others were. He barely looked to be breathing, and his gaze was pinned unseeingly on the opposite wall, detached and unmoved as the chaos spun around him.

He looked incredibly small.

Mediwitches and healers were running back and forth tending to their patients, the number dwindling now that they had started the transfers to St Mungo's, but everywhere Aaron looked he saw someone new in need of help.

Two healers hovered beside Nathan, trying to assess his condition, but the kid had not spoken since they found him huddled with his friends in the middle of a decimated street.

This entire thing was a mess.

Aaron closed his eyes, crushing down his rage and sadness.

Hogsmeade was a disaster zone, and the trail leading up to Hogwarts was filled with carnage. The attackers had already vanished by the time they had arrived, but the length of the assault meant little right now. Not when the number of dead would only rise in the coming days.

And Aaron felt like a wretched man, because even with all the death and pain of those around him, a part of him was just overwhelmingly glad that Nathan was still alive.

Stumbling across the boys down in Hogsmeade had been brutal, but seeing Nathan bloodied and limp had nearly driven him to his knees. Aaron could admit that he had almost cried hearing that the kid was still with them.

Nathan was alive. He was alive, but gods, he was not okay. Aaron had only caught a glimpse of the wound on his neck when they had rushed them here, but what he had seen was ugly. Worry gnawed at his gut as he took in the bandages wrapped carefully around Nathan's neck.

He honestly had no idea how the kid had survived, and that frightened him.

It was hard to look at Nathan, and yet Aaron somehow could not bring himself to turn away. But his scrutiny meant he noticed immediately when something finally splintered through the

blank mask the kid had been wearing since they found him.

Nathan's chest hitched, his grey eyes turning big and wet, and Aaron's heart broke.

He started forward before he even registered moving, pushing through the stream of people, and knelt in front of the boy. "Hey, hey," he said kindly, hands hanging uselessly in the air. "It's okay, you're okay. Nathan, kid, can you hear me?"

Nathan stared right through him, trapped in memories that Aaron could not shield him from.

"Bloody hell," one of the healers muttered, dropping down next to Aaron and firmly nudging him out of the way. The man's hands came up to frame Nathan's face, moving his head slightly in search of something.

Aaron hurriedly stepped back though not fast enough to miss the rasping whine Nathan released, a high and weak keen that was filled with animal panic.

"He's coming around," the healer announced grimly. "Melinda, get a level three calming draught."

The mediwitch rushed off.

The jars on the table beside them began to rattle ominously and Aaron watched them in shock. A crack appeared in one of the windowpanes and then the metal bars on the bedframe started to shake.

A faint odour, sickly sweet, spread through the air.

"Damn," the healer hissed, pulling his wand free while keeping one hand cradling Nathan's face. "How strong is this kid? Melinda!"

"Here!" the woman called, ducking around Aaron to reach her colleague. She uncorked the bottle and tipped Nathan's head back. He struggled feebly, moaning low in his throat in protest, but he could not stop her as she upended the liquid into his slack mouth and gently held his jaw closed.

The shaking in their little corner of the hospital slowly died off. Nathan sagged into the healer's waiting arms as the draught worked through him.

The mediwitch, Melinda, and the healer both breathed out in relief. Together they moved Nathan down to lay on his side, tucking his arms and legs in neatly.

"What the hell was that?" Aaron dared to ask, his gaze jumping from them to Nathan and back again. The boy was still awake, broken out of his strange trance, but his eyes were bleary and unfocussed.

The healer shot him a tired, if irritated, glance as he pushed his hair back from his face and sighed. "When someone experiences a lot of emotional stress, they can go catatonic. They stop reacting to stimuli, and just...close off. Think of it like a defence mechanism," the man

explained swiftly. “Coming out of it can be hard, and sometimes our magic lashes out when we do because it takes time to accurately categorise threats again.”

His hands came to rest on his hips as he turned to Nathan. “Given the nature of his injury, his last clear memories would have been in the midst of a battle and severely injured. The calming draught will help ease him out of it gradually and let him process things without panicking. It’ll give us time to get him to St Mungo’s.”

“You’re transferring him?” a young voice interrupted, startling them both.

Aaron half-turned to see the Black heir standing to his right. The boy’s shirt was missing, his bandaged shoulder on display, but he was not looking at either of them. His unnerving eyes were on his Housemate.

“Wasn’t Rogers getting your statement?” Aaron asked, searching for his partner with a pointed glare. Rogers, still speaking with the other two students, completely missed it.

“We’re transferring all the wounded, including you, Mr. Black,” the healer informed them stiffly. “His wound is in such a delicate area and he will need proper monitoring and care to make sure there is no lasting damage.”

“When?” Black asked, sounding every inch the heir of an ancient family.

“As soon as possible,” the healer replied curtly, peering down at the kid quizzically. “Melinda – make sure everything is ready to get him out of here. Mr. Black, you should be resting. You’ll be brought over later on.”

“Wait,” Aaron said, reaching out to grip the healer’s forearm before the man could walk off. “I want to go with Nathan.”

The other frowned, annoyance cleanly visible on his face before he smothered it. “Fine, I don’t particularly care what you do. Go with Melinda but stay out of the way. Come along, Mr. Black,” he ordered, ushering the boy away.

Sufficiently cowed, Aaron let them go and retreated to where the mediwitch was finishing settling Nathan onto a hovering stretcher. She gave him a tight, distracted smile as she straightened, one hand guiding the stretcher towards the doors. “Come along, auror,” she said.

Aaron caught Rogers’ eye as he was leaving and pointed at Nathan. His partner nodded, lifting his notepad in response. The two boys still with him watched their little group slip out of the bustling hospital wing, their expressions twisting oddly.

Melinda led them to an open door a little further down from the wing where a large fireplace dominated the back wall. It was the only feature in the room.

“It links up directly with St Mungo’s,” she explained, taking a handful of floo powder from the container. “We rarely have it open, but when the full scope of the situation became known we had the Department of Magical Transportation reconnect it with the network.”

She stepped into the large hearth, navigating Nathan's stretcher inside with her, and tossed her handful of powder down. "St Mungo's," she said loudly, and they disappeared in a swirl of green flames.

Aaron quickly followed.

OoO

Nathan's hand was cold and limp in hers.

Cynthia traced her thumb over his knuckles, trying futilely to rub some warmth back into his skin.

His eyes were closed, his breathing level as he slept on the hospital bed. *A reprieve*, the mediwitch had told her solemnly when they had arrived, *something to keep him calm*.

Cynthia wished someone would give *her* a potion to quell the mix of rage and heartache battling out in her chest.

Benedict's calloused hands settled on her shoulders, squeezing once in support, and Cynthia's eyes fluttered closed. She raised Nathan's hand to her lips and pressed a kiss to his fingers.

She heard the door open, and only once the healer entered the edge of her vision did she turn to look at the man.

"Lord Ciro, Lady Ciro," he greeted, his voice the perfect blend of professionalism and sympathy. "My name is Martin Turner. I'll be Nathan's primary healer and will be overseeing his recovery."

"What can you tell us?" Benedict asked before Cynthia could snap the question out herself. It had been almost an hour since they had rushed to St Mungo's, clutching the summons in one hand and half-mad with fear; and yet no one had had the time to explain the extent of their son's injuries to them.

Not even Aaron Deaken had given them much to go on before he had slipped out to give them some privacy.

All they knew was that someone had attacked Hogwarts.

Turner held what could only be Nathan's chart in his hands. His lips pursed briefly, blue eyes flicking to Nathan before meeting theirs again.

"Your son suffered a laceration to his throat, and he lost a substantial amount of blood. Judging by the reports, it was a cutting curse that struck him."

Cynthia looked up to the ceiling, then down at her son in despair, stifling a horrified gasp. She felt unsteady.

Turner cleared his throat, continuing after giving them a moment to process. "From our tests it appears that the injury has, for the most part, been healed."

"How is that possible?" Benedict asked, sounding shattered. "Nathan doesn't know any healing charms – or at least nothing that could..." he glanced at their son, unable to finish.

Turner shifted, fingers fluttering nervously around the chart he held. “Your son didn’t use any charms. It looks like he used flash healing instead, which makes sense, all things considered.”

“Flash healing?” Cynthia echoed, shaking her head lightly.

Turner nodded. “It’s not an official technique and falls more under accidental magic than anything. This type of healing isn’t advised. It saved his life, certainly, but I have only seen it used by soldiers on the battlefields. It prioritises the end goal over the minutiae, and that leaves plenty of room for error.”

Benedict and her shared a stricken look. “Does that mean...his neck isn’t...”

Turner raised a hand, and she fell silent. “From what we can tell, your son’s throat has been healed completely. Internally, everything seems to be where it should be, and doing what it needs to. Externally...” Turner grimaced, “I’m afraid the scar will likely never fade.”

Cynthia immediately looked to Nathan, to the perfect ring of thick bandages around his neck. She had yet to see the damage herself, but the idea that her son would forever carry such a mark pained her greatly.

She pressed her palm to her stomach, leaning back in her chair while still keeping her grip on Nathan’s hand.

“Is there anything else that might be wrong?” Benedict asked, his head bowed.

Turner looked at them with concealed pity in his eyes. “There may be some lingering consequences beyond the scar,” he admitted. “While the wound has healed physically, it might take time for Nathan to regain his ability to speak.”

Cynthia’s hand rose to cover her eyes, her breath stuttering.

Turner continued grimly, “The level of trauma he suffered was significant, and his body will take time to catch up with what happened. Right now, I would advise against him doing anything strenuous that might aggravate the muscles in his throat. They’re strained right now from the excessive amount of magic they’ve absorbed, and we don’t want to risk anything.”

“He’s lost his voice?” Cynthia asked, a whine lurking behind the words.

“Temporarily,” he reassured. “You need to understand that this is not something we can rush. Nathan will need to take his recovery slowly. It will be a very trying time for him. For now, there is nothing to do until the calming draughts wear off. After that we will need to explain this all to Nathan and make sure he understands. Beyond that...we might just need to see what happens.”

It was not enough. It was not nearly enough, but Cynthia bit back the toxic words she wanted to spill. She had to think about Nathan. They had to do what was best for him – and yelling at his healer would help no one.

“Thank you,” she said instead, giving the man a grateful nod. She wanted to scream, to curse and claw at the world.

“May we be alone now?”

Turner hesitated, though with a pointed look from her husband, the man nodded and left the room.

Cynthia waited until she heard the door close before she finally let her tears fall.

“Oh, my darling,” Benedict murmured, moving to kneel beside her.

“Why is it always him?” Cynthia cried, trying uselessly to wipe her tears away. “Why is it always Nathan that gets hurt? Ben, *why?*”

Benedict gathered her in his arms, and Cynthia sunk into his embrace desperately.

“I don’t know,” he whispered brokenly. “But we’ll help him, love. We’ll protect him this time. Him and Simon will be safe.”

They had never protected him, Cynthia thought in dismay. They had been failing Nathan since the day they had decided to raise him.

She had been failing him.

OoO

Benat limped after Klaus, cradling his arm against his stomach. The muscles in his thigh burned, the skin tearing more with every step, and beneath his mask his face was twisted in pain.

He had splinched himself with his hasty apparition, cutting a gash from his hip down around to the back of his knee. Blood soaked through the bandages he had hastily applied to the wound, but Benat knew he was lucky to get away with just that.

He had no idea what curse Nathan Ciro had flung at him in those last few seconds but given the black hate that had been in the boy's eyes, he was glad he had not found out.

Klaus led him through the labyrinthine halls until they came to a set of large doors Benat had never seen before. He had only been in this complex once before, and certainly never this close to his Lord's quarters. He had never been important enough to require an audience with the man, but Klaus had been waiting for him when he had arrived, not even giving him a minute to clean himself up before guiding him inside.

Benat stood back as Klaus knocked politely on the door, struggling to keep his breathing steady as he waited for entry to be granted.

After a long minute, the doors swung open to reveal an expansive stone room. Klaus stepped aside, waving in invitation, and Benat inched forward cautiously. He had expected an office or a sitting room – but it was more akin to a chamber and was almost completely empty save for a marble podium and the torches evenly spaced along the walls.

He dragged himself past Klaus, avoiding those cold green eyes, and into the dimly lit room. Klaus followed on his heels, closing the doors, and waiting unobtrusively before them.

But Benat barely noticed. His attention was wholly ensnared by the man standing in the centre of the room.

Grindelwald was leaning over the podium, gazing intently down at the bowl that sat atop it. His hands were braced against it, long fingers curled loosely into fists. His profile was half-hidden behind the fall of his blond hair, though Benat could still make out the elegant slope of his nose and the arch of his cheekbone.

The blue flames that lit the room washed over the man, giving him an ethereal glow.

Benat swallowed, momentarily stunned at being in his Lord's presence, then hastily removed his mask and hooked it onto his belt.

"Benat, as requested, my Lord," Klaus announced from his post.

Grindelwald looked up briefly, turning his head enough to allow his mis-matched eyes to scan Benat before his focus shifted to the wall opposite him. His voice, when he spoke, was

low and echoed eerily.

“Well. You have certainly had an eventful day, haven’t you?”

There was a bite of disapproval lurking under the amicable tone, and Benat winced. His shoulders hunched and he nervously licked his lips, “My Lord. I bring information... important information –”

“Yes,” Grindelwald interjected mildly, and completely derailed Benat. “I’m sure you do, and I hope that somewhere in that information you explain why you felt the need to launch an attack on a school. I gave you permission to lead an assault. I did *not* give you permission to target Hogwarts.”

The blue flames swelled, showing his Lord’s ire even if it had yet to grace his expression or voice.

“I-it was technically Hogsmeade that we attacked,” he stuttered out, all the moisture in his mouth drying up.

“On a weekend. When students are known to visit.” Grindelwald’s gaze slid back to him, pinning him in place. They were still so calm, and yet every instinct in Benat shuddered with fear. “You are treading a very thin line between wilful ignorance and stupidity, Benat. And I have no need for either of those traits in my followers.”

“I...I admit that the attack was a hasty decision –”

“Six,” his Lord interrupted again. He pushed away from the podium, facing Benat fully and folding his arms behind his back. Being the sole focus of this man was electrifying in the worst ways.

“P-pardon, my Lord?”

“Six. The number of students that were killed because of your *hasty decision*. Six magical children – and that’s just the initial reports I have received. It could very well rise in the coming days.”

Benat opened his mouth uselessly, his voice failing him.

Grindelwald watched him, a dragon observing a mouse, and waited.

Sweat beaded his forehead as the silence stretched, and Benat’s hands began to shake when he remembered that Klaus was blocking the only exit. He was unsure if it was even safe to speak, but the other man made no effort to break the tense lull. He unstuck his tongue.

“I discovered something during the attack. Something I knew you would want to hear immediately.”

“I’m *breathless* with anticipation,” Grindelwald said, raising a hand. Benat flinched, but all the Dark Lord did was gesture impatiently. “Speak, then, and know that if I find your information in any way dissatisfying, I will skin you alive and leave you for the crows.”

Benat nodded shallowly, knowing there was precedent behind the threat. He rushed to explain, to prove that while he and the others had acted rashly, they had found something of worth.

“During the attack I came across a boy –”

“Shocking,” Grindelwald muttered, once again cutting through the meagre amount of courage Benat had gathered. He stumbled, halting to see if his Lord would continue but the man merely stared at him blankly, so much so that Benat wondered if he had misheard.

“It was Benedict Ciro’s bastard, Nathan.” Benat said, meeker this time, feeling like a child. “He seems to have recovered from...what happened to him.”

“What you did to him,” Klaus corrected evenly.

Benat’s shoulders tightened.

He knew that their decision to target Nathan Ciro was a contentious one amongst group. He knew that the only reason he and the others had not lost their head was because they had actually made progress with their mission to push Lord Ciro.

He knew that Klaus, in particular, had made his opinion on their actions clear enough.

“Continue,” Grindelwald ordered.

Benat’s hand briefly gripped his shirt, sighing through the spike of pain from his injury. “The boy was different. He was stronger, more vicious. He killed Jonas with a single curse – disintegrated him in seconds.”

Finally, a glimmer of interest appeared in his Lord’s eyes. Benat seized it like a lifeline.

“We duelled and, my Lord,” he shook his head, “I have never seen someone his age that skilled before. The spells he used were some I had never even heard of. And he cast them *nonverbally*.”

He stopped then to cough into his elbow, something wet and metallic rising up in his throat. “He was trained,” Benat rasped. “His reflexes were auror-level, and a high-ranking one at that. I only managed to hit him by luck.”

It grated to admit being so outclassed by a child, but any indignation he had felt had died off long ago.

“I cut his neck,” Benat admitted.

“Committing the crimes yourself now?” Klaus commented airily. “Such growth.”

Glowing at the condescending words, Benat forced himself to meet Grindelwald’s eyes. “I killed him, I know I did but, my Lord, he didn’t stay dead.”

A heavy silence settled over the room. In it, he could clearly hear the deep breath Grindelwald released.

He licked his lips, preparing to continue, but the other man waved him off. Benat's teeth clinked from how quickly he shut his mouth.

Terror strangled him when Grindelwald began to approach, wand slipping into his hand with a flick of his wrist. Slowly, the tip of it raised to press against Benat's temple, lightly digging into the skin.

"Your memory," Grindelwald demanded softly. "I trust it more than your verbal recount."

Benat instantly closed his eyes, pulling the memory of the attack up and allowing his Lord's magic to slip into his mind and pluck it free. He shuddered, blinking rapidly, and watched as Grindelwald gently dropped the white, misty strand down into the bowl on the podium.

A pensieve, he realised belatedly.

Without even a pause, Grindelwald plunged his face into the water.

There was no telling how long it would take. His perception of time had felt distorted that entire fight – everything moving too fast and too slow – and the wait to see his Lord's reaction was excruciating.

Unable to help it, Benat glanced over his shoulder to the only other person in the room.

Klaus was staring at Grindelwald's back, attentive and placid, but his eyes flicked to catch Benat's. The utter lack of anything – scorn, distaste, even annoyance – in the man's gaze was disturbing, especially because Benat *knew* that Klaus disliked him.

Itching at the attention, he turned back to face Grindelwald, wondering what part of the memory the man was viewing currently.

Had he seen Jonas' death? Or the cold, frightening expression on Nathan Ciro's face when he cast the curse? Was he watching the unnatural skill the boy displayed in their short duel? Or was it when Benat's curse had slipped through his guard and sliced open his neck?

Was he watching the boy come back to life?

Benat bit his lip, studying his feet and the small patch of his blood that was pooling beneath his left foot.

He recalled the sinister black wisps that had appeared around the boy, and the chilling presence that had spread through the street. He could still see the way Nathan had, impossibly, twitched and surged back to life.

It had been too much to process. It was beyond comprehension –

At that moment, Grindelwald straightened, pulling free from the pensieve.

Turned away from them as he was, Benat could not see his Lord's reaction to the memory. Even his magic, normally a vibrant force, was oddly stilted and subdued.

Over a minute passed before Grindelwald released a long breath.

"Fascinating," he whispered, wonder and a dark kind of interest creeping into his tone.

Benat straightened as much as he could, relief bursting in his chest.

"My Lord?" Klaus asked softly, quietly drawing the man's attention.

Grindelwald blinked, visibly collecting himself. "Of course," he murmured, rolling his shoulders back. "Where are my manners?"

He pivoted, eyes dancing between them before landing on Benat. He smiled, stepping forward to clap his hands on Benat's upper arms. The force behind the friendly hit made Benat wheeze.

"*Thank you*," Grindelwald said sincerely. "This information is certainly worth a life. You have done me a great service by showing me your memory."

"Of course, my Lord," Benat mumbled, wincing as the grip on his arms began to tighten.

"It's a pity you still need to make up for the other five," the man continued, smile sharpening suddenly. "I'm sure we can think of a suitable punishment for you though," his Lord said, blithely ignoring Benat's dawning horror.

"No –" Benat tried to twist, but his legs seized, and he dropped. Grindelwald let him fall, gaze already drifting to the side, bright with excitement.

"I think I would very much like to meet Mr. Ciro," the Dark Lord said. "Klaus, I will leave this in your capable hands. I have plans to make."

"Of course, my Lord."

"At least something useful came out of this fucking mess."

Chapter End Notes

So, more things are moving forward. Harry has to deal with more trauma because I said so, and we're hitting the next major piece of plot.

Would love to hear your thoughts!

As always, my [tumblr](#) is open. I've also got a [discord](#) if anyone is interested to join! The link has a time limit, just be warned.

Come along to either if you want to discover theories, scream at me, discuss new snippets or get some behind the scenes commentary! Thanks guys!

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Notes

Firstly, thank you to everyone who has been patient with me. I know it's been a long wait, and I do apologise for that. Writing is something I love intensely, but there are times when I really struggle to find the motivation or opportunity to touch my projects. I guess it all just caught up with me at once in regards to this story. I want to make this a good story for you, and sometimes my brain just does weird things and I let that pressure get to me. I wanted to just say I appreciate every single one of you for sticking with me and being supportive.

Secondly, to the not-as-patient people, while I am sorry that you had to wait longer than normal, please do understand that I do this for fun. Being demanding and (even if you don't mean for it to come across this way) rude is not the way to get writers interested in their stories again. We're human. We get tired. Shit happens. Please just be kind.

Thirdly, while I'm still not 100% happy with this chapter, I feel like I'll never make any progress if I don't just get it out of the way. Hopefully you all still find it enjoyable, and hopefully the next one will not take as long to get done.

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

The afternoon sun brought with it a warm glow, painting the walls of the hospital room orange. A streak of sunlight stretched across the polished floor and up over his bed, running along his thighs and making his skin prickle from the concentrated heat.

Orion paid the growing discomfort no mind, instead fixing his eyes on the wall opposite him as his father spoke with the healer. He followed the conversation passively, expression unchanging even at Arcturus' thinly veiled aspersions towards the hospital's decisions regarding his son's treatment.

He had known his father would not be pleased when the healers had refused to let him see Orion yesterday; and had been proven right within minutes of his parents' arrival because while it was expertly hidden, he could taste the slow anger that seared through Arcturus' magic.

However, Orion could not help but be grateful for the reprieve. He had needed the afforded time to collect his thoughts and prepare himself to face his parents. Normally he had weeks to pull himself back into the role he played, to fold himself down into the perfect heir they expected, and he knew if they had seen him directly after the attack, he would have made a mistake.

He had been too rattled from the assault, too filled with questions and energy to dance to their tune. It would have been a disaster on every front. Even now he was still unbalanced, positively brimming with burning curiosity about what had happened yesterday. The only thing grounding him right now was the woman beside him.

His mother sat on the single chair pulled close to his bedside, her back straight and her hand perfunctorily resting atop Orion's uninjured one. She was dressed impeccably as always, but had left her hair loose, giving the careful impression that she had rushed to get here. The brown curls framed her strong features, and she would have been the image of motherly concern if not for the bland, almost bored, set to her face.

Her skin was cold against his and the smooth touch of her rings on his knuckles made him itch to pull away.

She had not looked at him once since the two of them had swept into the room; merely claiming the available seat and beginning her pretence. But Orion did not let it bother him, long used to her cool detachment.

He knew that he did not exist to Melania Black unless he had done something wrong.

After only a minute more of talking, Arcturus finally cut the healer off with a wave of his hand. "Get out," he ordered, turning his head dismissively. Orion watched from the corner of his eye as the witch gladly fled from his father's domineering presence.

The door clicked shut behind her, casting the three of them into a tense silence.

Melania stirred to life, retracting her hand from Orion's, and stood. She flattened out the creases in her heavy dress, then folded her hands together in front of her.

Arcturus observed his wife for a moment before diverting his focus back to his son. He stepped towards him, calloused fingers catching Orion's chin and tipping his face up to meet that heavy scrutiny. There was no disapproval or disappointment to be found, only the irritation of a man whose property had been damaged.

Even his father's magic had gone quiet, the intensity of it no longer sizzling along the edges of Orion's senses – and *that*, more than anything, was what worried him.

"Your wounds?" Arcturus asked.

"My shoulder was punctured by shrapnel," he reported dutifully, voice low. "The rest were superficial bruises and cuts. I need to keep my arm in the sling for another two days." He met his father's eyes squarely. "No lasting issues."

It was exactly what the healer had told them when they first arrived, stripped to the bare minimum. Arcturus accepted his answer with a nod and released his grip, taking a step back. His hands fell to his sides as he took the time to just look at Orion.

It had been months since he had been subjected to the full weight of his father's attention. Orion could only hope he was not wearing his thoughts on his face.

The calm that descended on them was turbulent, delicate as silk. Each second dragged on for an eternity but he did not dare drop his gaze, enduring whatever test this was as best he could.

Eventually, just as his heart was about to beat out of his chest, the quiet was broken.

“*What happened?*”

Orion did not know how much of the incident his father was privy to. The man had connections throughout all levels of their government, though he could not even begin to guess how wide his web spread. It was best to err on the side of caution, though. He did not want to get in trouble if his story did not corroborate with what Arcturus already knew.

“Grindelwald’s Acolytes launched an attack on Hogsmeade during the weekend visit,” he began, speaking steadily yet quickly. “We were on the main street when the assault started and were caught in the crossfire. I was with a few classmates –”

“Names?”

“Lestrangle. Riddle. *Ciro.*”

His father nodded, recognising the first two at least from Orion’s stories, but it was Melania’s eyes that narrowed at the last one.

“*Ciro?*” she echoed with disdain. “Benedict’s bastard?”

“His name is Nathan,” Orion said without thought, his gaze snapping over to his mother. He bit his tongue the second he finished, internally scolding himself for not masking the hint of reproach in his tone.

Melania froze, her shock at being spoken back to palpable. It gave way swiftly to icy contempt. “Excuse you?” she hissed, her magic going sour. “It is bad enough you are associating yourself with that stain. Now you are speaking out of turn?”

Orion clenched his free hand and this time his response, while unscripted, was intentional. “He saved my life. The least you could offer him is the use of his name when insulting him.”

The words were biting, fuelled by the memories of yesterday, of how *Ciro* had pulled him down and out of the way of a spell. Of how carefully he had cradled Orion protectively on the ground. Of how he had planted himself between their attackers and them, as if it was the easiest decision *Ciro* had ever made.

Guilt, hard and bitter, stuck in his chest. Because it had been *him* that had distracted *Ciro* during his duel. It was his fault that *Ciro* had been injured. *Killed.*

And if it had not been for that strange black mist then the older boy would have *stayed dead.*

All thoughts of playing submissive for them vanished. Orion had never felt the urge to protect someone else, but it burned through him now, flooding him with a level of anger he had not felt before.

He would not allow his mother to disrespect Ciro.

Melania's mouth twitched into a sneer, one Orion met in viciousness, but Arcturus intervened before it could escalate.

"Enough," he snapped, ripping the oncoming reprimand to shreds before his mother could draw another breath. "Leave us. Go finalise the paperwork."

Melania's mouth parted in surprise, and she stared at Arcturus in bewilderment. It was a sentiment that Orion could not help but mirror, having never heard his father use such a tone on his mother before.

"Arcturus –"

"Do not make my repeat myself. *Out.* "

Orion held his breath, half-expecting his mother to protest further, but she subsided after several seconds. Her expression remained mutinous as she turned on her heels, heading towards the door; and she was too well-bred to slam it behind her – no matter how much she clearly wanted to.

Neither of them moved for a long minute after she departed.

Orion, baffled, stared at the door before sliding his attention back to his father. Arcturus was staring at him, those grey eyes running over him again and again, something contemplative lurking in their layered depths. He was looking at Orion like he had never seen him before.

Confused and more than a little unsettled, he lowered his gaze to his knees, jaw tightening with apprehension.

But his worry was for naught. All his father did was roll his wrist pointedly, gesturing for him to speak, "Continue with your story."

Orion hesitated, his fingers skimming uncertainly down the outer seam of his pants. He looked to the side, peeking at his father from under his lashes as he considered what to say.

It was not often that he lied to either of his parents. He hardly ever tried since the consequences, if he was caught, were too severe to risk. Fabricating the story for the aurors was one thing – that was *easy*, and it had been the most advantageous route available to them at the time; but he had always intended to tell his father about what he had seen.

It was only now that his stomach twisted with indecision.

Orion glanced down at his hand, stewing on his choices, and pressed his lips together.

"The four of us were pinned down by two of Grindelwald's men," he said slowly, weighing his words. "The rest of the area evacuated, and we were forced to fight. We managed to hold our own until Ciro's shield got overwhelmed and he was hit. Riddle broke away to help heal him, and the Acolyte used the distraction to retreat. We managed to keep Ciro alive, and

shortly after that the aurors appeared to take us back to the castle. We were treated, interviewed, and then Ciro and I were transferred here yesterday.”

He fell silent, looking up and awaiting his father’s judgement.

Arcturus’ eyes had sharpened through the rest of his retelling, suspicion lining the skin around his mouth. Clearly, he knew something was amiss.

Orion braced himself, back going taut as the room grew stifling, and refused to flinch.

Finally, his father clicked his tongue. “Well well,” he said slyly, tilting his head and giving a closed-lip smile, “how curious. You’ve grown a spine.”

“What?” Orion asked, thrown by the remark.

Arcturus raised his eyebrows. “You know that I do not like repeating myself, Orion,” he said, and adjusted the cuffs of his shirt superfluously. “I must admit though, I do wish it was something else that prompted your show of teeth. Arguing with your mother, lying to me...all that fire for a half-blood, and a bastard one at that?”

Orion’s breath hitched in surprise. He should have known his father would slice right through to the core of the matter – identifying just who was at the centre of all of this.

Arcturus shook his head with caustic amusement, but his expression lacked the censure or scorn Orion was expecting.

He blinked rapidly, not understanding why he was not being punished.

“I will not ask you what actually happened,” Arcturus continued, his odd spark of humour fading gradually until all that was left was the memory of it. He sounded so completely unconcerned in a way Orion struggled to connect to his normally controlling father.

“Evidently you think this important enough to try and deceive me, so you may keep your secrets for now.” The man stepped close to him again, his hand coming up to curl around the side of Orion’s neck and tip his head back. It was a commanding hold, though for the first time Orion found himself unafraid by his father’s touch.

“But remember, son, that you have not tricked me. You have not outsmarted me. Your secrets are secrets only because *I* allow it. The moment I suspect you have jeopardised your own safety or that of our family, I will step in.”

Orion swallowed, his throat working around the stone lodged there. Despite the seriousness of the warning a part of him brightened at the permission inherent in his father’s words.

“Do you understand?”

“Yes Father,” he murmured, wetting his lips, and hardly believing his luck.

Arcturus let out a soft breath, dipping his head in approval. “Good,” he said softly. “Now, we must go home. Your mother is handling your check-out. Do you have your things ready?”

He nodded, pointing to the small bag tucked between the bed and the cabinet that held his ruined clothes. His father picked it up with a cursory look, then turned back to him.

Orion hopped to his feet but made no move towards the door. "I'm not returning to Hogwarts?"

Arcturus smiled, a grim little quirk to his thin lips. "No. There is talk of cutting the term short in the wake of the attack."

His eyes widened. It was weeks before the end of term. He could not think of a single instance in all its history when Hogwarts had closed.

Then again, he thought, it's never been so brazenly attacked before.

"You will be coming home regardless of the board's decision. Once you are healed, if the school remains open, you can return to your studies." Arcturus' tone brooked no argument.

Orion nodded, biting his lip. That was reasonable, though he wondered...

"Father?"

"What is it?" he asked, some impatience now creeping into his voice.

"I would like to be able to visit *Ciro*, during the holidays if not before. And Augustus and Riddle."

Arcturus hummed, unsurprised by the request. An emotion Orion could not place wound through his otherwise expressionless eyes. "Order of importance," he muttered to himself. "Very well, Orion. I suppose it is far passed the time we met your other...friends."

Orion smothered his pleased smile.

He was not so foolish as to think his father was doing this out of the goodness of his heart or any kind of fondness. But so long as Arcturus was more content to observe rather than interfere, Orion knew he and the others could work together to solve this new conundrum.

With enough time, he knew they could figure out just *what* *Ciro* was.

And the excitement at that prospect was enough to override any caution his father's watchful eye might have evoked.

OoO

“Sir?”

Klaus looked up from his task, eyes locking onto the woman standing in the entry. Even backlit by the brighter hallway lights, he could place her face easily.

“Yes?” he asked, ignoring the whimpering lump on his table. He removed his hands from the man’s insides with a sickening *squelch* and wiped the worst of the gore onto his apron. Ilse, to her credit, did not recoil, though her face was noticeably paler.

“Lord Grindelwald asked me to deliver this to you,” she said, holding up a slip of paper. Her voice quivered, clearly excited at being tasked something from their Lord despite her alarm. “He apologises for interrupting your...work. But he said this was important.”

Finally.

“I think I know what this is about, so it’s fine. Besides,” Klaus murmured, stepping away from the table and approaching his workbench, “I’m finished anyway.” He dipped his hands into the water bowl, washing away the congealing blood that stained all the way up to his elbows; then plucked the towel from the railing and dried himself.

Behind him Benat let out a low, hoarse groan that morphed into a wet cough. Klaus folded the stained towel and placed it off to the side, then took off his filthy apron. He glanced over his shoulder, running his eyes contemptuously over the mess he had made.

“Shush,” he ordered the other man, turning his attention back to Ilse. “Give it here.”

She stepped slowly into the room, tension winding through her shoulders as she avoided the puddles on the floor. Klaus watched her calmly, impressed at her steel. She was only young, a fresh graduate from Durmstrang if he recalled correctly. He had seen members twice her age and experience blanch at similar scenes.

Ilse handed the paper over, instinctively falling into her school’s parade rest. She kept her eyes dropped respectfully, but not so low that it could be mistaken for fear. Klaus studied her for only a moment, taking note, then opened the paper to read the single line of script.

You may proceed. Get someone in place.

Klaus released a deep breath, satisfaction bubbling up. He tucked the note into the leather pouch attached to his belt, keeping it safe. “Thank you, Ilse. Tell Lord Grindelwald that I will start immediately.”

She dipped her head, blue eyes briefly darting over to Benat’s wheezing body. Klaus followed her gaze, quietly amused that she looked away when she noticed he had seen her fervent glance.

“Don’t fret,” Klaus told her. “His suffering can come to an end now. I’ve got more important things to occupy myself with.”

“Of course, sir,” she whispered.

Klaus scanned Benat once more, taking in the extent of the damage though lingering on the gash stretching across the man’s stomach that exposed his organs to the air, and the pain-glazed eyes. Benat’s death had always been a sure thing – the only question now was if Klaus killed him instantly or left him to choke on his own blood.

Cocking his head, Klaus decided on the second. He had always enjoyed karmic justice.

“Let’s go,” he said, gesturing for Ilse to move.

She startled; her age painfully evident in the way she stumbled back a step. “What about –” she began to ask, jerking another look at Benat.

“He won’t last much longer,” he cut her off mildly, staring down at her. Klaus was not known to be gentle with those that fell into his care, and really, the only reason Benat had survived beyond the first day was because he had been bored.

Ilse looked down at her boots.

Klaus did not say anything more, simply ushering her through the door, and closing it behind them. “Run along now,” he told her kindly.

She nodded stiffly and hurried away, her pace just shy of a jog. Klaus watched her go, waiting until she had disappeared from his view before turning on his heels and making his way in the opposite direction. He stalked down the winding hallways of their current headquarters, his mind abuzz with the preparations he needed to make.

Now that he had approval to kick things into motion, he could begin getting their pieces into place. First and foremost, he needed a loyal and skilled agent – and luckily, he knew precisely who could assist him.

She would likely be tired from her previous mission, but she was not one to enjoy idleness for long.

He descended the first lot of stairs and kept right, entering the wing lined with austere doors, each leading to their members' individual rooms. Klaus stopped before one in particular and pushed his way inside without bothering to knock.

A dagger hit the door jamb inches from his face.

“Leopolda,” he greeted, reaching up to yank the blade free.

His sister, second dagger in hand, loosened her stance and dropped back down on her bed. Her pale green eyes pierced him, and when she tilted her head curiously some strands of her hair fell over her face, escaping her messy bun. “Little brother,” she returned, picking up her whetstone and resuming to sharpen her other enchanted knife.

“I should have known it was you. No one else just walks in.” Her tone was flat, but her eyes glinted with humour. “To what do I owe the honour?”

“I have a mission for you.”

Leopolda raised an eyebrow, intrigued despite her obvious exhaustion, just as he had known she would be. She leaned back, her cot squeaking under her weight, and nudged the only chair in her room towards him with her foot. Klaus took the silent invitation and sat, passing her blade back as he contemplated the best way to explain the situation to her.

“You know of our efforts in Britain?”

“Bits and pieces,” she admitted with a shrug. “I only got back from Germany yesterday. I haven’t had time to catch up on the gossip yet.”

Klaus pressed his tongue into his cheek, nodding slightly. “Benat and his group led an assault on Hogsmeade. The village outside of Hogwarts.”

His sister stilled, her eyes hardening, before she let out a barking laugh. “You’re fucking joking. Are they still alive?”

“Some,” Klaus said, waving his hand dismissively. He knew Leopolda spotted the few blood splatters he had not cleaned off yet because something darkly amused danced across her face. “Benat is dying a floor up, and we lost Jonas in the attack. A few more were injured and are being treated accordingly.”

She grinned at him. “Oh, little brother, have you been having fun without me?” she breathed, batting her eyelashes.

“Always,” he quipped, baring his teeth back at her.

Leopolda snorted, slumping forward, and letting her hands hang down between her knees. “So, what’s the mission?”

“Benat caused a mess, but he at least uncovered some interesting information. One of Hogwarts’ students apparently came back from the dead.”

“*What?*” Leopolda demanded, squinting at him.

It was his turn to shrug. “I do not know the details, but whatever Benat’s memory showed it was enough to pique our Lord’s interest. He wants us to follow up on it.” Klaus paused then to open his hip-pouch, reaching down into its expanded space, and rummaged around until he found the file he needed.

He handed it over. “This is all the information I’ve been able to gather in the past few days.”

Leopolda wasted no time, flipping the file open and reading through the pages. Her gaze periodically jumped back to the photo attached to the file, studying the young boy who smiled shyly up at them.

Something in her softened a touch as she gazed down at the picture.

“Nathan Ciro, fourteen,” she mused, finger running over the lines of text. “He died?”

“Benat reported that he cut the boy’s throat with a curse. He bled out in seconds right in front of him, then seemingly sprang back up, completely healed if a little...angry,” Klaus explained, repeating what he had written in the file.

“I can imagine,” Leopolda muttered under her breath. Klaus chose to ignore it.

“As I said, the details are murky – but that’s why our Lord wants confirmation. You are to go to Britain and get close to the family if possible. Observe Nathan Ciro as best you can and report your findings back to us. If there is credence to this...there is the potential this could escalate.”

“How close do you want me?” Leopolda asked, flicking her eyes up.

Klaus held her gaze, not faltering at the sudden coldness in her. “As close as you can safely get without giving yourself away.”

A beat passed, then his sister sighed. “Very well, baby brother. I will leave tomorrow. Is there anything else I need to know before I go?”

He hesitated for a second, drumming his fingers on his knee. “We are playing this one loose, Leo. We do not know much about this boy, but you need to exercise more caution than usual. Ciro was the one to kill Jonas, and he duelled Benat to a standstill. The child would have won if Benat hadn’t fled.”

Her eyes widened at the revelation, disbelief plain to see. Klaus knew what she was thinking – he had the same reaction when his Lord had told him what he had seen in the memory.

Klaus stood up and stepped towards her, gently brushing her hair behind her ear. “You need to be careful. We don’t know what this boy is capable of. Lord Grindelwald is...fascinated by what this could mean, and anyone that captures his interest is someone we need to be wary of.”

Leopolda let out a soft huff, tipping her head so that his fingers caressed her cheek. “I will be careful,” she promised. Klaus nodded, grateful that she had never been one to brush off his concerns.

“I will get your documents in order and debrief you once more before you leave. Stop by my office once you’ve packed.”

Leopolda stood as well, still a few centimetres taller, and took his face in her rough hands. She studied him with all the prudent care of an older sibling, then pressed a kiss to his forehead. “Of course, Klaus. I will see you soon.”

She let him go with a playful shove. “Now go eat something – I swear you get thinner every time I see you.”

Her tinkling laughter followed him all the way down the hall.

OoO

Augustus dropped the last of his books into his trunk. He stood next to his bed, fingers drumming agitatedly on his thigh, then sighed heavily through his nose.

He could not believe they were closing Hogwarts.

On a purely logical level he understood why they were, and he could even admit that he appreciated the strong reaction, but it still felt *wrong*.

Hogwarts had always been untouchable, a beacon of safety in the world that was wrought with chaos. Its walls had carried the promise of protection for centuries, and Augustus felt as if his last remnants of naivety had been shredded at this violation.

If any place was off-limits from the war, it should have been here.

He gritted his teeth, glaring at the stone wall of his dorm room as anger rose steadily inside him; a spitting, ferocious beast that wanted nothing more than to ruin something.

Knuckles rapped against the door, snapping him from his darkening thoughts.

He glanced over his shoulder to see Riddle standing in the opening; the other boy watching him clinically. Riddle had always been able to see through even the best masks, slicing under peoples' skin with a unique and wholly unnatural precision, so Augustus did not bother to hide his annoyance.

He was not in the mood for games right now.

"Almost done?" Riddle asked after he had found whatever he was looking for in Augustus' expression.

"Yes," he replied shortly, jaw stiff from how tightly he was clenching it.

Riddle nodded, then entered the room and closed the door behind him. The sound of the latch sliding into place was grating and loud, and Augustus bristled at the arrogance of the gesture. He turned to face his Housemate, crossing his arms, and quashing the trickle of unease he always felt when he was alone with Riddle.

"Did you need something?" he asked as the other came to a stop next to Augustus' bare desk. Long, pale fingers ran along the rim of it, the touch innocent and yet somehow innately possessive.

Augustus opened his mouth to ask again only to close it when Riddle, easy as anything, hopped up on top of his desk and sat there, his legs kicking in the air idly. Those dark eyes were curious and intense as he stared at the empty bookshelf.

He waited for a moment to see if the other boy would say anything, then turned back to his trunk with a huff when no answer was forthcoming. He had seen Riddle get like this over the years – times when he would become trapped in his own head, ruminating and theorising, picking things apart until he knew them down to their core.

Normally it happened around exams but given the current situation Augustus knew it was not schoolwork that had captured Riddle so.

Three guesses what has, he thought fiercely, slamming his trunk closed. He braced his hands on the lid, leaning his weight on it as he took a deep, fortifying breath. Now was not the time to lose his temper, no matter how close to the edge he had felt since the attack.

It had been almost a week now, and the days had been filled with uncertainty and fear as the investigations and interviews had dragged on. Almost a week since Orion had first been bundled up and shipped off to St Mungo's along with Ciro.

Augustus had spent most of his life looking after Orion in some way or another, and they had rarely gone more than a few days without seeing or writing to each other. Being unable to speak to his oldest friend was a restriction he had never experienced before.

Just a little bit longer, he thought. *I can see him soon.*

There would be plenty of time to check in with the younger boy now that the Minister had declared Hogwarts to be closed for the term.

With their normal schooling suspended, every student that lived within the magical world was being sent back to their homes until the next term began in a few weeks. Those that resided in the muggle world would be staying, but that was only because it was too dangerous for them to be thrust back out, unprotected, into a war-ravaged Britain.

Augustus' eyes slid back to his unwanted company. Despite having been the one to seek him out, Riddle was still ignoring him; and judging by the frown he was sporting, whatever the other boy was thinking about was causing him some frustration.

He used Riddle's distraction – capitalising on the rare chance to study the other boy freely.

It was difficult to remember sometimes that Riddle was muggle-raised. He conducted himself with a level of dignity and poise usually found in purebloods, and the full depth of his knowledge was honestly intimidating. For someone who had only become aware of their world a few years ago, Riddle was a brilliant wizard, and his magical potential eclipsed that of anyone else in their year group.

Even Augustus, who had seen the second-hand robes, tattered trunk and old textbooks from their first year, was still occasionally taken aback.

But, he supposed, that was the inherent danger of Riddle. Having the ability to reinvent himself so seamlessly that people forgot who he really was.

Augustus pressed his lips together and leaned against the bedpost, facing his Housemate.

“What are you going to do until next term?” he asked, because he knew there was no way Riddle would partake in the monotonous activities that the staff were planning for the remaining students.

Riddle tipped his head towards Augustus, unfocussed but still present enough to respond. “Research,” he said, “I’ve only gotten a third of the way through that book Orion gave me.”

“Really?” Augustus raised his eyebrows, genuinely surprised. “You usually tear through whatever we lend you.”

He blinked, finally granting Augustus the dubious pleasure of his full attention. “I was distracted,” Riddle admitted, shrugging his thin shoulders.

Augustus’ mouth twisted down at the corners. “By *Ciro*?” he asked snidely, hoping to hit a nerve.

Shame was evidently not an emotion Riddle had experience with, though, since his reply was light and unaffected. “Of course,” he said, lifting one of his legs so that the heel of his boot caught on the lip of the desk. Riddle looped his arm around his knee comfortably and blatantly disregarded the glare Augustus gave him. “You can’t say that you’re not interested in what’s going on with him.”

Augustus scoffed, glancing away. “Interested or not, he’s a threat. You and Orion might be happy to overlook it but I’m not. You...you saw what he did,” he finished lamely, wrapping his arms around himself defensively. The memory of what he had seen that day left him cold.

“Yes, I did,” Riddle replied, equally soft. “I saw him react the instant the assault began. I saw him defend a group of students and defeat several of the attackers, and I saw him *come back from the dead*.”

The tilt of the other’s head was avian, as was the gleam in his eyes. “I might not know everything that *Ciro* is capable of right now but believe me – I very much want to.”

“He’s not *normal*, Tom,” Augustus snapped, shoving himself away from his bed and marching forward. “Whatever he is, it isn’t *safe*. Do you really think it’s smart to mess with someone like him?”

A year ago, a month ago, a *week* ago Augustus would never have dreamed of saying such a thing about Nathan *Ciro*; but it was the truth.

Ciro was something *other* now, something that Augustus could not neatly define, but whatever it was terrified him.

He had felt the oppressive magic that had erupted out of *Ciro* in Hogsmeade, that ancient force that had rattled his bones and the scent of rotting fruit that had permeated the air. Augustus had smelt death that day, and he wanted nothing to do with whatever was wearing *Ciro*’s skin now.

Riddle met and held his gaze, calm and unruffled and knowing – and Augustus hated him for it.

How someone so intelligent could be so singularly blind about something so obvious, he did not know.

“Safety is an illusion,” Riddle murmured, a condescending lilt to his voice. “And ‘normal’ is a term people throw around to shield themselves from their own lack of imagination and potential. I don’t want safe, and I have no desire for normal.”

Augustus stared at the other boy, perturbed at what was lurking under the surface of his words. The back of his neck prickled, and he shuddered as if a nail was tracing down his spine. Riddle continued to watch him with patient amusement, like a parent would a child as they waited for a lesson to click into place.

“What do you even hope to get out of this?” Augustus asked, shaking his head. “This isn’t some game anymore, Tom. We shouldn’t be involved in this.”

Riddle smiled, a slow pull of his lips that was almost grotesque when coupled with the glint in his eyes. “Oh, Augustus, we’re already involved.”

He dropped his leg and slid off the desk, his shoes hitting the dark wooden floors with a dull thud. Augustus was taller than Tom, yet as the other came to a stop in front of him, he felt all of two inches tall.

“You saw the masks; you’ve heard the rumours. That wasn’t a group of random wizards that attacked us – they were Acolytes. Gellert Grindelwald’s followers,” Riddle told him, sounding coquettish as he leaned in. “Ciro killed one of Grindelwald’s men, and another saw him do it. They saw him come back to life. That means someone out there knows what really happened. They would know that we lied in our reports. Do you think he hasn’t told anyone? You think something like that would stay a secret for long?”

Riddle clapped him on his upper arms, making Augustus jump. Those hands squeezed harshly as his smile grew sharper. “If he were interested, how long do you think it would take for the Dark Lord to identify the heirs of the Black and Lestrangle families?”

Augustus scowled, shoving Riddle’s hand off of him. Fear stirred in his gut at the very idea of attracting Grindelwald’s attention. “So what? We’re supposed to throw ourselves on the sword for *Ciro*?”

“Where’s your sense of House unity? Slytherins have to stick together,” Riddle said, a laugh hidden in the back of his throat.

“Ciro – or whoever the fuck is walking around with his face now – is *not* one of us,” Augustus hissed.

“Well, you’re half right,” Riddle muttered, stepping back as he pulled at the hem of his shirt fastidiously, tugged at the lapels of his coat so that it once again sat smartly. He looked

pleased by Augustus' words, like the remark had confirmed something he had already suspected.

Augustus frowned. He had blurted it out without thinking, but now that the words were out there, they stuck to him like a burr. "You think so too," he whispered. "You think he's... someone else."

Riddle gave him a look. "I thought it was obvious by this point."

Someone new knocking on the door stopped Augustus from having to reply. In an instant, all of Riddle's jagged edges and carnivorous intrigue snapped back, buried under a bland smile. The other waved a hand, unlocking the latch.

"Come in," Riddle called, tucking his hands behind his back.

Slughorn opened the door, visibly startling at the sight of them together. "Oh, Tom, I didn't realise you were in here," the man said with a slight chuckle.

"I was just saying goodbye to Augustus, Professor. It will probably be some time before we see each other again," he explained, polished boyish charm on full display.

"Of course, of course," Slughorn agreed, amicable as always. He then looked to Augustus, "Are you all packed, Mr. Lestranger? The rest are gathering in the common room now. We're expected to be in the Great Hall in about fifteen minutes."

Augustus unstuck his tongue from the roof of his mouth, his mind still reeling from the unfinished conversation. "... Yes, Professor. I'm ready."

"Excellent!" the man crowed, oblivious to the cautious way Augustus was watching Riddle. "Come along then, boys. Oh, and Tom, would you mind keeping the remaining students in line while I'm escorting the others to the train? There's a good lad."

Riddle slipped from the room, engaging their Head of House in easy banter. Augustus grabbed his trunk, taking the chance to regain his composure. He cast one last look around his room, ensuring he had everything he needed, before following the other two out.

He closed his dorm room, listening with half an ear to Slughorn anxiously rambling on as he locked it. "– I really would recommend it, Tom. You're a bright boy, and one of the best in Slytherin. There would be plenty of people interested. Why, I'll even write a letter to put in a good word for you, if you'd like."

"You're too kind, sir," Riddle demurred, though there was an odd note in his voice that claimed Augustus' attention.

He trailed after them, about to ask, but they hit the common room before he could. With too many ears around them, Augustus swallowed his questions and allowed Slughorn to steer him towards the other students that were being sent home.

He craned his neck around as they were being herded out of the common room, catching the pensive look on Riddle's face just as the other boy turned away.

OoO

Martin rubbed tiredly at his face as he watched Charmaine disappear around the corner, no doubt heading towards the staff room to collect her things and leave. He blinked drowsily at the wall, staring at a brightly coloured poster with sluggishly moving figures on it, and mentally prepared himself for his rounds.

He yawned, belatedly covering his mouth as his eyes teared up slightly, and then messily brushed his hair back. This late at night there was no one around to see how unkempt he was, but even if there was, he doubted he would get anything other than a sympathetic nod.

They were all running on fumes after such a hellish week.

The attack on Hogsmeade had shaken them – and Britain – to their core. It was not just because Hogwarts held such a special place in all of their memories, or that it was so unexpected. It was because so many of the wounded were so *young*.

Martin shook those thoughts away and looked down at the handful of charts he needed to get through. Thirteen in total.

He really hated having the night shift sometimes.

Slowly, he flipped to the top file and had to grimace when he read the name. Shoulders slumping in resignation, he set off down the hall towards the first room on his list, smothering another yawn as he went.

It was a thankfully quiet walk; the hallways lit gently by the soothing, blue-tinged orbs that ran along the roof, providing plenty of light while not being so strong as to keep patients awake.

Martin turned a corner, his gaze skimming over the numbers on each door until he came to a stop outside Nathan Ciro's room. He closed his eyes for a moment, rallying himself. He took several deep breaths before softly knocking and opening the door.

His eyes needed a few seconds to adjust to the dim lighting as he entered.

Leaving the door half-open, Martin silently approached the bed situated in the middle of the room, the head of it pressed firmly against the wall. Above, the charmed gem embedded in the wall glowed green, telling him that nothing had changed since the boy was last checked on.

Martin grabbed the chart from the foot rail and circled around so that he could see Nathan's face, relaxed and softened by sleep.

The tension he carried eased just a touch, and a kernel of guilt stuck in his chest at his reaction.

He knew it was ridiculous of him, and he truly did not mean anything by it, but a part of Martin still found Nathan to be an unsettling patient.

At first glance there was nothing about the kid that should disturb him. His injuries were nothing Martin, a former army medic, had not seen before; and with the spells and potions keeping him unconscious to aid his recovery there had been no complications or issues with his treatment.

Like this, Nathan was hardly the most difficult patient he had ever dealt with. And yet whenever Martin was around the boy the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end, and some voice in the corner of his mind whispered that something was not right here.

With every time he changed Nathan's bandages to apply salve to the scar tissue on his throat, the less he believed his initial theory. It stared him dead in the face. Pink, puckered skin against white – undeniable and indelible.

The depth of the cut on Nathan's neck should have killed him, and no matter how Martin looked at it, that fact remained.

The carotid artery had been severed, and Nathan would have been haemorrhaging in a matter of moments. The blood loss alone would have rendered him unconscious in under a minute, but that coupled with the shock and exhaustion...it was a miracle that he had held on long enough to heal himself.

It was a miracle that he had managed to channel his magic at all.

Martin bit his lip, frowning deeply as he stared distractedly down at Nathan's limp hand. His thoughts swirled with questions, each one more incredulous than the last, before he caught himself.

He shook his head, shoving his suspicions to the side, and tugged his wand free. Determinedly, he started casting his diagnostic charms, making the appropriate notes on Nathan's chart as he worked.

It was a matter of minutes, and as he came to the end of his tasks a faint scent caught his attention.

Martin paused, sniffing to try and identify the smell. It was sickly sweet, like rotting fruit, and he rubbed his nose in confusion.

In front of him, Nathan took a deep inhale, loud enough that Martin thought he might have woken up.

But the boy settled almost instantly.

Martin's frown grew more pronounced as he carefully put the chart back on the bed's rail. He stayed in place for a few more seconds, but the strange scent was gone, and Nathan was once more still.

He tapped his fingers on the metal rail, though eventually took a step back. “Just tired,” he mumbled.

Looking down at the boy again, Martin lowered his head slightly. “I’ll be back in a few hours,” he said quietly, gripping his other files protectively to his chest. “I...hope you wake up soon, kid. There’re people out here who miss you.”

OoO

It was dark and cold inside his cupboard.

Harry sat on his thin mattress with his legs drawn to his chest, and his head was tucked down into the safety of his arms in a futile attempt to shield himself. He could hear nothing inside these four walls – not the rush of blood in his ears nor the frantic breaths that punched out of his chest, and the quiet was so utterly perverse that he wondered if he was actually dead.

Curling in more, Harry crushed his face against his bony knees in an attempt to feel something, *anything*, other than the exhaustion that dragged him down.

But there was nothing.

He was drained. Gutted. Everything inside him ripped clean out, leaving a gapping void behind that he could not even begin to fill; and he was just so *tired*.

The exhaustion clung to him, and he was helpless against the weight of it, barely having the strength to keep his eyes open. All he could do was sit and think, and none of his thoughts were kind.

He...he was *bereft*, drowning in a sea of desolation and sinking further with each second that passed. The walls were pressing in on him, buckling under the strain of holding it all back, and Harry just wanted it to be *over*. He longed to rest, to just slip away into oblivion – but he could not.

Because he was not alone.

A figure stalked the hallway outside, footsteps languid and unhurried each time they passed the door. It blazed like a star in Harry's mind, eclipsing everything until all of his attention was centred on It.

Nails scratched along the wall, the grating sound becoming louder and louder as It circled back around. He tracked It without lifting his head, hunching down when fingers caught on the metal grille, the noise turning high and clear before dropping back to that harsh drag.

They were at a stalemate.

Harry listened to Its progress even as his mind drifted and grew numb.

"Do you understand yet?" It asked him, and though he could not see it, Harry was assaulted by the impression of teeth and tongues and a too-large mouth. *"Do you know what true pain is?"*

It stopped in front of the door again, fingers drumming against the wood. Harry's neck prickled at the condemning eyes that reached through the barrier towards him, heavy like a physical touch.

“Are you broken?”

He licked his lips and opened his mouth, but no words spilled forth. His throat burned.

Mean laughter rang out. *“Poor boy,”* It crooned. *“Little lost lamb – you think you’re safe in there?”*

Its hand slammed into the door suddenly, hard enough to shake the hinges. Harry tensed, terror cleaving its way through the haze infecting his thoughts. He swallowed thickly, squeezing his eyes shut.

He just wanted everything to stop.

“It will never end,” It hissed in anger. Harry could almost feel the icy press of lips against the side of his neck. *“You can’t hide from this. You can’t hide from me.”*

Harry shook his head as best he could, denying Its words. His ears were buzzing, a low drone that made his head swim.

“Let me in,” It said, the rage dropping away into something cloyingly sweet.

Stop it, Harry thought, the plea fuelled with his burgeoning fear.

The knob on the cupboard door rattled. *“Harry. Come back, Harry.”*

The voice was faint.

Go away, he demanded, his hands coming to cup his ears. *Goawaygoawaygoawayletmego –*

Chapter End Notes

I'd love to hear your thoughts. We had a lot of character POVs this chapter, and hopefully you had fun seeing all the little pieces starting to spin!

As always, my [tumblr](#) is open if you want to come along to discover theories, scream at me, discuss new snippets or get some behind the scenes commentary! Thanks guys!

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Notes

Okay so, first - I'm really sorry about the wait. I lost a lot of motivation for writing this one for a bit, so this took way longer than I anticipated.

Second - thank you for everyone who continued to support the story by leaving comments and kudos and who came by my tumblr to talk about the story and what they liked. Those kinds of comments really helped to get me back in the mood for this. I sincerely appreciate it!

Now, I'm still not 100% pleased with this chapter, but I am my own biggest critic and if I didn't post this today I'd never post it. Hopefully with this out of the way I'll get back into the swing of things and can get on to writing the upcoming chapters that I really am interested in.

(Also, just wanted to shout out to the people on tiktok that apparently made videos about ybtm! I don't use tiktok myself but I watched a few that were brought to my attention and it was delightful!! Thanks for the support and for helping bring ybtm to the attention of a new bunch of readers!)

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

He was alone.

The realisation came slowly, rising up through the haze until it prised Harry from the hollow he had buried himself in. He lifted his head from the cradle of his arms and waited, burning with tension.

The silence stretched on, unbroken.

Trick, his mind hissed, but the space beyond his cupboard felt empty, that terrible cloak of predatory anticipation absent. Without that presence dominating everything his mind was clearer, his thoughts sharper, and Harry drew in what felt like his first full breath since he had awoken in this place.

There was no fear dripping down his spine now, no mocking voice or sweet, crooning threats clouding his senses.

Harry was alone, with only the unquantifiable passage of time filling his ears.

He unfurled in jagged twitches, his limbs frozen stiff from holding the position for so long; and darted his tongue over his bottom lip. His eyes roved sightlessly over the darkness surrounding him, tracing the outline of the door that he knew sat inches from him. Harry had

spent an entire childhood mapping out the grooves of the wood and the cold plates of the grate; he knew it more intimately than he knew the shape of his friend's faces.

Unerringly, his hand found and hovered over where the latch was located. It was the only difference to his memories, the thin lock on the inside instead of the outside – the only thing that stood between him and the nightmare that lurked beyond.

Harry stopped just shy of it, the pads of his fingers not quite brushing against the smooth metal. He hesitated, fingers flexing inwards, before he bit his lip and slid the lock out of place.

The scrap of it was abrasive and Harry withdrew with a wince. He clenched his hand nervously, half-expecting to hear footsteps rushing towards him or to have the door ripped open and be hauled from his haven.

But everything remained still.

Swallowing thickly, he laid his hand flat against the wood. Every one of his nerves alight as he gently pushed out. The door popped open with hardly a squeak. Aunt Petunia had always hated the sound and had made Harry keep a small bottle under his mattress to ensure the hinges were well-oiled.

The door swayed back lightly, resting against his palm, and the thick blackness that was revealed to him through the crack made his eyes itch fiercely. It was so deep, so total, that the shadows in his cupboard seemed like daylight in comparison.

Harry sunk his teeth further into his bottom lip until he could taste a hint of iron.

Frigid air began to spill through the gap, curling around him, making his skin pebble. Harry clamped his eyes shut and took a steadying breath. Gathering the remnants of his courage, he pressed forward with a shuddering exhale. With his arm stretched out fully, he bowed his head under the low frame and stepped out.

His foot hit a hard floor instead of the plush carpet he expected, and from that point of contact a weak grey light began to expand. It skittered along the newly defined floor, giving the impression of polished tiles, until it reached an edge and began to climb, outlining a wall, and –

Harry blinked, because the first thing he saw was a shelf filled with little knick-knacks.

“–gured out that cooling spell. Did you want one?”

He turned at the voice, body stiff and cumbersome, and his heart felt like it was shattering when his gaze fell on Hermione.

OoO

The cup of tea was tepid, the delicate wisps of steam having long since dissipated in the cold air.

Albus stared down at the circuit of golden leaves painted on its polished surface. His nail traced the outline of one leaf, chasing its warm colouring around the smooth edge, before he looped his hand around the cup and clasped it loosely.

He sighed.

It was close to mid-morning now, the pale light filtering through his office window and giving everything a dim glow, and he would have to head down to breakfast soon to oversee the students that remained under their protection.

And what protection it is, Albus thought bitterly, his bone-deep faith shaken.

The initial report on the damages to Hogsmeade – the tally of injuries, of *casualties* – was burned into the back of his mind, and every time his thoughts drifted back to those damning figures it left him feeling weary beyond his years. So many innocents had been thrust into the middle of the war and now the children, his children, walked around with fear in their eyes; their little shoulders burdened by a weight they should not have to carry.

Albus rubbed his hand over his mouth, the furrow of his brows deepening with guilt.

None of this was supposed to happen. Hogwarts, and Hogsmeade by extension, was supposed to remain untouched.

His school. His home. His territory.

Albus closed his eyes and gritted his teeth as a rush of uncharacteristic anger enveloped him. Gellert *knew that*, so *why* –

A quiet *chink* snapped him back to the world, and his attention dropped instantly to his cup. A thin crack stretched up the ceramic, reaching to the lip but not quite cutting all the way through to the inside.

He relaxed his grip and his fingers, strained without him realising it, ached with sweet relief. Albus chastised himself for his lack of control as he vanished the crack with a brush of his fingertip, returning the cup to its former glory and erasing any sign of his mistake.

Laying his hand flat on the table to minimise the risk of a repeat, Albus cast his eyes over his office for a distraction and, magnetically, his gaze seemed to land on the opened letter from Cynthia Ciro – the one Horace had passed to him yesterday with a miserable look on his face.

Just glimpsing that thick expensive parchment pulled his thoughts in the unwelcome direction of the woman's son, and all the uncomfortable emotions he evoked.

Nathan, with his once shy smiles and carefully averted eyes, replaced with sharp distrust and all the viciousness of a hunted, wounded animal.

Yet another of Albus' failures, though one he was beginning to doubt he could have prevented. There was something profoundly different about that boy these days, after all; and even with their brief interactions since he had returned to Hogwarts it was obvious.

It was not *Nathan* that stared out from those steely grey eyes anymore and Albus...did not know what to do about it.

If he even should. If he even had the right.

The boy had made his opinion on Albus abundantly clear. His standoffish demeanour had shown how little he wanted to be around Albus and his voice when he had been questioned – *both times*, he thought with some shame – had held a thread of defensive nervousness. But rather than give Albus confidence it had had the skin on the back of his neck prickling.

Careful, careful, his instincts had whispered that day in his office. *Don't push this one.*

And truly, it was ludicrous to feel so cautious around a student, particularly one such as Nathan who had never so much as put a toe out of line, but...

But.

Hogwarts had felt strange lately, as if there was an indiscernible scent lingering in the air or a faint electric current blanketing the grounds, one that foretold a ferocious storm.

It had Albus out of sorts, trapped with a sense of expectation that had his magic writhing under his skin, and he could not help but think that everything that had happened – the ghosts hiding themselves away, the increased centaur movement, the unrest of the merpeople, the threatening stillness encroaching the castle late at night and the traces of inhuman magic that saturated the attack sight in Hogsmeade – was because of Nathan Ciro.

You're tired, he tried to reason. *You're rattled, paranoid, upset at Gellert and the world.* The excuses tumbled forth easily, justification after justification he could pin this all on, but the sickly churning in his stomach said otherwise.

Albus felt as if he were slowly, unwillingly, collecting the pieces of a puzzle that he did not want to put together.

He sat back then, shoulders slumping as he tore his gaze away from the letter. The past few nights of poor sleep were getting to him, he told himself, digging his fingers into his eyes as he tried to massage the burgeoning headache away. He smothered that train of thought, letting all his suspicions slip away for a blessed moment, and forced himself to his feet.

Getting out of his stuffy office suddenly sounded wonderful. To get away from the letters of concerned parents and auror reports and assignments he did not know if he was still expected to grade.

He slipped out into the hallway, locking the door behind him, and walked briskly past the transfiguration classroom and out into the courtyard. The fresh air was bracing but it soothed the knot that had been forming inside him, and Albus tilted his head slightly to look up at the cloudy sky. He buried his hands in his pockets, breathing deeply and watching the wisp of white escape his mouth when he exhaled.

His eyes fluttered shut, easing the sting that had been building.

High above him, the clocktower began to chime, the large bell there ringing out with the call for breakfast. It was an eerie, hollow sound that merely served to reflect the general lack of noise throughout the castle. With a good portion of the students away, and those that remained marred with sorrow and fear, the halls felt emptier than they ever did during the holidays.

Albus sighed again, shifting his weight, and dropping his gaze back down as he headed for the Great Hall. It only took a handful of minutes to get there, thankfully, and he met Ms. O'Broin at the door. The young woman was ushering in a small group of students, her smile strained but genuine as she glanced up at his approach.

"Professor Dumbledore," she greeted, eyes alert despite the dark bruises under them. "How are you this morning?"

"As well as can be, Cara," he said with a weak quirk of his lips. "And you?"

She gave a half-hearted shrug, eyes darting around to check they were relatively alone before answering. "Not the best, to be honest, sir. My cousin is still in the hospital wing and I..." she shrugged again, more helpless this time.

Albus reached out and laid his hand on her shoulder. "I understand. Why don't you go visit him after breakfast? I'll join our two groups together and watch over them this morning."

Her expression was uncertain but carefully optimistic. "Are you sure, sir? I can always go see him this afternoon, after curfew."

Albus' smile warmed. "I'm sure, my dear. You can take the day off, perhaps try and catch up on some sleep after your visit," he suggested tentatively.

Embarrassed, Cara wiped at her face, as if she could rub the signs of her fatigue away. "Sorry, Professor," she said meekly, "I know I must look a mess. This week's just been —"

"Yes," Albus agreed softly, patting her shoulder once before letting his hand fall. "But there's nothing to be embarrassed about. No one is expecting you to remain unaffected by this. I'm also struggling," he confessed, and knew it was the right decision when Cara brightened with relief.

"You don't look it, if you don't mind me saying so, sir."

He let out an airy, tired laugh. "I'm afraid I'm rather used to misfortune," he told her. "The worst thing about getting older is that eventually one tragedy looks much like another."

She tilted her head, mouth pulling down at the corners. The sympathy in her eyes was not what he wanted though, so he shook his melancholy away.

“Ah, don’t listen to me,” he said ruefully. “I ramble more and more with each year; you youngsters should just tune me out at this point. Wheel me off to St Mungo’s so I can bother the mediwitches instead.”

Cara’s smile was small, still tinged with worry, but undoubtedly more relaxed. She looked away for a moment, her hands no longer twisting anxiously at the hem of her sweater and nodded to herself. “Thank you,” she whispered, grateful and shy.

“Anytime, my dear,” he said. “Now off you go.”

She gave him one last grin before trotting off, heading in the direction of the hospital wing. Albus watched her go, his chest both heavy and light, then turned to greet the next wave of students that were scurrying through the doors.

And was it just not serendipitous that Tom Riddle was a part of it?

Albus did not let his expression waver, greeting them all with equal regard. Tom did nothing more than nod politely at him, none of the dislike Albus *knew* he felt visible, and made a beeline for the Ravenclaw table, two of the other muggleborn Slytherins trailing in his wake nervously.

Normally the sight of Houses mingling would bring him great joy, but there was something about watching Tom interact with non-Slytherins that had Albus tensing.

Perhaps it was just the unease he felt at seeing him not surrounded by his usual crowd of Housemates. Slytherins, through no fault of their own, were rather insular and tended to travel in groups. Seeing Tom Riddle surrounded by blues and yellows and spots of red was just odd due to its unfamiliarity.

There was nothing insidious there, he reprimanded himself. Nothing suspicious about conversation over toast or through passing someone a jug of juice.

Albus pinched the bridge of his nose hard.

He had to stop jumping at shadows.

OoO

She was looking at him, eyebrows raised, standing between the table and kitchen counter with two bottles of butterbeer in her hands. Dressed comfortably in a simple grey shirt that had ink stains along the sleeves and black leggings, she looked relaxed and soft and cosy.

Harry stared, bewildered but utterly arrested by the sight of her.

“I...what?” he mumbled, disorientated. His throat twinged and his hand fluttered up to his neck, caressing the skin there in confusion.

“Did you want one?” Hermione asked again, one bottle still raised towards him.

Harry glanced around, his heart pounding in his chest, and his next breath hitched.

He knew this place.

He knew the pale-yellow wallpaper and the patterns on the tiles beneath his feet. Knew the window to his right and the way the sheer curtain draped over it shimmered in the afternoon sun. Knew the pictures that lined every available space on the walls, a chaotic blend of familiar faces grinning out from the plain frames.

Hermione and Ron’s apartment. But this...it could not –

“Did you want one?” Hermione asked a third time, and it was like something in the back of his mind *clicked over*.

His shoulders dropped, his tension unwinding as the warmth of the apartment began to seep into him.

“Yeah, sorry,” he answered, shaking his head. He gave her a little smile, still uncertain, but his next words bubbled up without thought, “I just...zoned out for a minute. I’d love one.”

Hermione appeared to jolt out of her own reverie. She smiled back, walking over and taking a seat at the table. Harry dithered in place for a few seconds before joining her.

The moment he was seated, he slumped. It felt like he had not slept in days.

Hermione pushed one of the bottles at him, the bottom of it scraping softly and leaving a thin trail of condensation behind. “You look tired,” she said, cocking her head. Her brown eyes were kind even as they scrutinised him.

“I’ve just been having trouble sleeping, I guess,” he told her clumsily. He rubbed his cheek, then the back of his neck, trying to get rid of the chill that seemed to live there. “It’s been hard, and I’ve been...having some really weird dreams lately.”

She hummed, a wave of understanding sweeping her features. “About the war.”

“What?” Harry asked, shooting her a look. “Uh, no. No, it’s way weirder,” he paused, casting around for what he meant but the answer danced out of his reach. His hands clenched around the bottle, unnerved. “I – I can’t remember them right now.”

“Talking about it might help,” Hermione offered, leaning forward.

“Won’t do much good if I don’t know what they were, will it?” he said, tight with frustration. A dull ache throbbed in his head, skirting the line between discomfort and true pain, and he kneaded at his forehead.

“Okay,” Hermione replied quietly, “but you know that Ron and I are always here for you, Harry.”

“That’s right,” Ron said, clapping him on the shoulder and squeezing. Harry startled at the touch, nearly jumping from his seat. His wide eyes flew to where Ron was walking by him.

The redhead took the third seat, completing their little circle around the table, and tipped a grin Harry’s way. “You can tell us anything, mate.”

“Ron?” Harry murmured, growing frazzled. “What...what the hell is...”

Ron’s smile became small, a fond little curl of his lips, and slowly Harry settled once more. His apprehension eased, though did not quite disappear.

He was just tired.

Harry pressed a hand to his chest and dug the heel of his palm into his breastbone. He felt odd, as if a great load had been lifted from him but the sudden weightlessness left him unstable.

He looked at them and a burning rush of tears welled up, the thought of *God I missed them so much* whispering through his mind – and Harry frowned because he did not understand it.

He looked away, half-listening as Ron said something that made Hermione laugh.

His attention slid along the room, taking in the pictures and paintings and the one ornament Harry had given Hermione when she had graduated from Hogwarts and moved into this apartment. The oblique writing was stark against the wooden plank – *have hope, be strong* – and Harry remembered how they had snickered over the cliché phrase.

Unfocussed as they were, it took his eyes a second to move on, landing on the door that sat behind Ron’s shoulder. Harry’s eyes narrowed, his headache returning in a cresting wave.

His fingers drummed against his bottle. A drop of condensation hit his hand and dragged over his knuckles, the touch of it barely registering.

“Do you guys –”

“What about you, mate?” Ron asked, pulling Harry’s focus back to them. The redhead leaned back in his chair, precariously balancing on the two back legs.

Hermione paused in taking a sip, giving her partner a baleful, flinty look. “Ronald, if you fall...” she warned, pointing at him threateningly.

Ron grinned, rocking in place, every inch of him a taunt. Hermione huffed, rolling her eyes with a level of humour that belayed her annoyance as she turned resolutely back to Harry. “But yes – how has work been? Is training going well?”

“Training?” Harry repeated dumbly.

“You should be almost done, right?” Ron asked, tilting his head back in thought. “Didn’t you say you finished your last assignment? You’ll be bumped to first grade in the next few weeks?”

“...Right,” Harry agreed, looking between the two of them. Under the table his leg started to bounce. “I think so?”

Ron nodded gamely, unbothered by Harry’s lacklustre response. “I know I can’t wait to finish and get out. Tiffons is riding my arse hard. It’s like she thinks there’s a prize in it for her.”

Hermione wrinkled her nose at that. She placed her foot on the bar between the two front legs of Ron’s chair and shoved it down. Ron cursed, smacking his hands against the table to stop himself from crashing into it.

“Bloody hell,” he hissed. Harry’s mouth twitched in helpless amusement at their antics.

He let out a short breath and made himself relax, raising his bottle to drink. The taste was barely there. “How ‘bout you, ‘Moine?” he asked, and it felt right – nice, *normal* – to say the words. “How’s work?”

She dropped her chin into her palm, shrugging. “I can’t really complain. We’re still combing through all the legislation that was shoved through when,” she sent Harry a subtly probing look, “Voldemort was in power.”

“Voldemort,” Harry echoed, his fingers stilling where they had been drawing through the puddle of condensation on the table.

“You’re a fool...”

Harry snapped upright, twisting around at the whisper. “Did you hear that?” he asked brusquely, the back of his neck prickling again.

“Sounds a right mess,” Rom said as if he had not heard Harry speak. “But it’ll pay off in the end. You’ll get things sorted in no time, and then you’ll be a shoo-in for the ministership.” He jerked his head towards Harry as he continued, “And Harry here will be the head of the DMLE in five years. With you two in charge of things there’ll be no more pesky Dark Lords crawling out of the woodworks for a good long while, I say.”

“Guys,” Harry tried again, tapping his hand on the table to get their attention. The throbbing in his head was distracting, like a steadily compressing band around his skull. “Guys, something’s not right.”

Hermione ignored him too, instead smiling at Ron. “And what will you be while Harry and I are running the country?” she asked with a chuckle.

“*Liar.*”

Harry gripped his head, grimacing as a hum started in his ears. The shelf behind him began to rattle.

Ron stretched his arms above him, then interlocked his fingers behind his head and smirked. “Isn’t it obvious?” he replied mischievously. “I’ll be your —”

“Trophy husband,” Harry whispered in time with Ron, his stomach dropping.

He stared down at the table, his mind stagnant as the cold realisation began to steal through him. Carefully, he lifted his head and let his hands fall to his lap.

Another spike of pain ricocheted through his head as he looked beyond his friends to the door behind them.

Ron and Hermione continued to banter in front of him, but Harry could no longer hear their words.

It was not like they were talking *to* him anyway.

He could see it now – the gaps, the pauses in their conversation where he knew he was supposed to say something; yet they carried on without a hitch when he failed to speak. Their eyes stared straight through him when they turned to him, and Harry knew that if he stood and walked their gazes would not follow.

It was just a scene from a play, everything already scripted, and Harry had let himself be swept up in it.

This was a goddamn memory, and with that initial cloud of relief and desperate longing now dissipating, the tacit knowledge dropped seamlessly into place.

This was two weeks before his graduation from the academy. He had been dead on his feet from back-to-back assessment and had badly needed a distraction. Ginny had been away for a training session, so he had come here.

Harry’s throat closed up.

Around the edges of his vision, he could see the walls ripple. Small objects shook, skittering across the counter and shelves and table. The furthest corners of the room started to distort.

He leaned forward, cradling his head in his hands.

None of this was real. He was not with Ron and Hermione; he could not be – because they were dead. *Everyone* he had ever known or loved was.

This was nothing more than a pale imitation of his friends, something halfway to believable because he so desperately wanted to fool himself into thinking otherwise.

“Fuck,” Harry rasped. “*Fuck.*”

Something slammed against the wall then, loud enough to make the world around him tremble. Harry sprang to his feet, stumbling back from it.

Whatever it was came back again, colliding over and over in beat with the tension in his head. Sections of the wall warped, and Harry made the strategic choice to get the hell away. He kept his eyes on the buckling wall, stepping back faster until he knocked against something tall and firm.

He spun on his heels, finding the door he had been staring at earlier.

Splintering sounded behind him and Harry wrenched the door open, throwing himself into the swirling darkness beyond.

OoO

Tom closed the book he was reading and leaned forward, his forearms bracing on the table. His fingers tapped against the glossy surface of the book, letting his thoughts wander as he absently surveyed the Great Hall.

Clusters of students were sprinkled across the four tables – though they condensed primarily in the middle two – in a mismatch of coloured ties and ages. The lines that typically governed their social lives blurred more and more as the days passed until it hardly resembled the Hogwarts he knew.

For the first time in its history, muggleborns and halfbloods were the only students on the grounds.

Salazar Slytherin would be turning in his grave, but Tom found it horribly, hilariously ironic.

Lips still curved into a private smile; his eyes slid over to the High Table.

Only three professors, Dumbledore unfortunately included, were in attendance. The rest of the staff, Tom knew, were either patrolling or helping with the recovery efforts in Hogsmeade. They had been doing an admirable job, putting on brave faces since the attack and working to calm the fear now rampant amongst the students, but Tom could easily pluck out the worry that simmered in their eyes.

It was a sour victory for him – the fact that finally the professors and purebloods had tasted a sliver of the fear that he had lived with for *years*. That they could no longer hide behind the walls of the castle or their ancestral homes and could now see the terror that everyone in muggle Britain experienced every time they left the relative safety of the school grounds.

Maybe now the government would understand. Maybe they would finally *do something*.

He dropped his gaze back down to his book, mouth twisting with bitter, caustic amusement at the very thought of the wizarding world taking a stand and being proactive. “As if,” he muttered, hiding the movement of his lips behind his glass of pineapple juice. It was sweet and biting, and cold enough to make his teeth ache.

“Did you say something, Tom?” Jenny Campbell asked, looking up from her eggs with a quizzical frown. Her tie was askew, the knot down at her second button rather than the collar, and her red hair was frizzing up despite the thick braid she had pulled it into.

He gave her a bland smile. “No, no, just thinking aloud.”

Her brow smoothed out, and her returning smile was bright and brimming with warmth. “Did you know which group you’re in today?” she asked, scooping up some more of her breakfast.

Of course she had taken it as an opening for a conversation. Tom withheld a sigh.

“I’m supposed to be in O’Broin’s,” he answered, “but I don’t see her.”

“Oh, that’s because Professor Dumbledore sent her off,” a Hufflepuff one place down from him – Saoirse Barnes, he identified after a moment, a seventh year muggleborn and one of the better witches of her age group – said with a lazy wave of her hand. “I saw her heading to the hospital wing on my way here – I think her cousin’s still in there.”

Barnes paused then, a brief miserable glint in her eyes, before she continued with a stubbornly positive set to her face. “I asked Professor Dumbledore when I came in and he said they’d be joining her group with his for today, so I guess you’ll be with him, Riddle.” She finished with a nod.

Tom clenched his fist underneath the table.

And his day had been going so well too.

There was no way Dumbledore would let him slip off to the library, as O’Broin did, to peruse the books at his leisure. Which meant he would have to endure hours of useless activities and boring conversations until they were allowed free time in the afternoon.

He could feel his patience already dwindling.

“Looks like we’ll be spending the day together,” Campbell said happily.

Tom forced himself to seem somewhat enthused. “Great,” he replied, and though Campbell missed the flat note in his tone, Barnes shot him a terribly amused look. She nudged the person between them to shift forward and leaned over to him so she could reach his ear.

“Try not to completely shatter her when you let her down,” she whispered, pulling back with a wink.

Tom grimaced, before covering his distaste with a smile. He detested people that were infatuated with him – especially the unremarkable ones. They were irritating and obnoxious and persistent in the worst ways, always wanting to talk to him or be around him and Tom, though a skilled actor when he wanted to be and understanding the advantages it gave him, still found it exhausting catering to their perceptions of him.

It was at least tolerable when his would-be admirers had some talent, some trait or unique aspect that made being in their presence not a completely tedious experience.

Campbell, conversely, was as interesting as dishwater and her attention was not unlike a rash.

She had been notably subdued the last few days, as most of the others were; but with the regular patrols the aurors performed some of the tension had begun to ebb and her usual personality had sadly made a reappearance.

Honestly, Tom did not know why she even bothered. He had never given her the impression that he enjoyed her company, and the number of times they had spoken could be counted on both hands. And it certainly did her no favours, a small part of him murmured, that she was

competing for his attention against the likes of Ciro, who was so utterly fascinating without even *trying*.

The conversation moved on around him and Tom used the chance to open his book again – not because he wanted to read but to deter others from speaking to him for the moment. As he ran his eyes over the page, his hand unconsciously reached out and brushed against his upper pocket, crinkling the folded paper tucked away there.

The letter Orion had sent him yesterday informing him that there had been no change in Ciro's state, and of Orion's intention to visit their hospital-bound Housemate later today.

Tom could admit that he appreciated the update, but he would have much preferred to be there in person rather than rely on Orion for an unfiltered account. He just knew that the younger boy would leave details out purely to spite him.

Not that he could blame him for hoarding information – it was expected of people like them to obfuscate and lie to maintain the upper hand. No, Orion was well within his right to hold back details, and ordinarily it would not bother Tom if it was about *literally anything else*.

But it was not.

This was about Ciro, who had been a topic of interest since he returned but had become something far more than a mere curiosity after his showing in Hogsmeade. It had been over a week and still Tom was no closer to understanding what he had witnessed that day – and not for a lack of effort on his part.

Hogwarts' library was expansive and filled with every subject one might ever think to study, but the area that Tom assumed he might find his answers was necromancy and not even Hogwarts had that information readily available for their impressionable students.

Too difficult, too nebulous, too *dark*, but it was the only place Tom could think to start his research.

Ciro had been dead, after all. The amount of blood he had lost would have done it easily, and yet he had risen from the blood-soaked snow with only a grizzly scar as a reminder.

It had to be a type of necromancy, and Tom *wanted it*.

The very notion had his fingers twitching and heart pounding. If there was a way to come back to life, to anchor the soul to this plane if not one's own body, then he needed to know it.

And if that meant pulling the secret straight from Ciro himself, if it meant pinning the other boy down and peeling him apart layer by layer until he had the truth wrapped in his bloody hands, then so be it.

The truth, and Ciro's real name, he added with a flicker of grim anticipation.

Tom had never been shy about chasing the things he wanted, after all; though he was beginning to suspect that he would not find his answers at Hogwarts.

He picked up his glass and drained the last of his juice, rolling it between his fingers, mulling over the way the light blended through it.

Perhaps he should take Slughorn up on his offer for a reference, and Tom's lips quirked up because he even had the perfect family in mind.

Augustus owed him one anyway.

OoO

The world reformed around him in an instant, and Harry nearly went careening into a desk. He slid to a stop, clipping his hip on the corner of it, and had to grab it to steady himself.

He looked around wildly, trying to figure out where he was, when it hit him.

The auror department. This had to be another memory.

Harry looked down at the desk he was leaning over, finding the golden plate with *Potter* carved into it in neat little letters. He remembered this too. Tiffons had given it to him after he had finished his training with a wry smirk and a comment about legacy, and Harry had known from the barely noticeable scuff marks that it had belonged to his father before him.

He had not cried that day, but it had been a close thing.

He hesitated for a moment, hand reaching out to trace the black lettering with reverence – because this was gone too, he would never hold it again, never get to watch the sun play off the gold or use it to reflect light into Ron’s eyes when they had some downtime and lose himself in laughter – but he jolted out of it when bodies and voices began to fill the space around him.

Harry backed away, gritting his teeth and ignoring the conversations that picked up. Ignored Ron and Tiffons heckling each other, and McCade complaining about his latest report, and Kline who was talking in Harry’s direction but not to him.

It was hard, so hard to turn his back on them, to not let the fog he could already feel climbing inside him take him over completely, and just bask in the memory.

Not real, he told himself, *they’re not real. They’re dead, they’re gone, they’re gone.*

He clapped his hands over his ears to block out the siren-call of their voices and searched frantically for an exit. He had gotten here through a door, so surely...

Harry hurried across the room to the entrance to the office space, scrabbling to open the door and escape. He felt the crushing sense of awareness lock onto him just as he stepped through, sinking into the black once more as a high-pitched cackle rang out around him.

Bellatrix, he knew, a bright spark of anger flaring in his chest at the name, but instead of landing in the atrium, with its black stone and green fire and that woman on the ground before him, he stumbled into the Gryffindor common room on too-short legs.

“What...?” Harry said, stepping back and shoving some of his hair from his face. He turned in a slow circle, and the flood of confusion and hurt that had been driving him forward dropped away under the strength of his frustration when he looked down at his stick-thin arms. “What the hell is this?” he hissed, glaring at the crackling hearth.

Was it Death? Was It doing this to him, dragging him from memory to memory to just rub it all in? To make him face all the things, the people and places, that he would never get to have again? Or was this just his own demons tormenting him?

Harry pressed his hands into his mouth, letting out a tumultuous breath. He could feel his chin begin to shake, a rush of heat crawling up his cheeks and towards his eyes, and he slammed them shut in denial. “Not now,” he said, voice reedy, “not now.”

He jabbed his tongue into his cheek hard to starve it off just as the voices started up again.

Hermione, Ron and Neville this time, high with youth but still recognisable. He turned his back on them immediately, because if he saw them like this – young and vulnerable and so unprepared for the life ahead of them – he would break.

“There’s got to be a way out of this,” Harry muttered as the eleven-year-old versions of his friends squabbled in the background.

He moved to the opening that would take him to the dormitories, the sound of Neville’s petrified form dropping to the ground and the deep *thud* of something knocking into the Fat Lady’s portrait chasing after him. Harry raced up the stairs on his skinny legs, taking them two at a time, until he reached the first-year boy’s dormitory.

The overwhelming sensation of a presence coming up behind him sent him through this door, slamming it closed behind him.

Harry leaned against the wood, hands pressed flat to it, hoping that this one would be enough to keep whatever that thing was *out*.

He just wanted a second to stop, to not be hunted.

A second of *peace*.

Harry knocked his forehead on the door. “Shit,” he cursed, because it was that or drop to his knees and cry.

“Language,” someone chided with a tinkling laugh.

Harry spun around with a harsh inhale and recoiled when he saw where he had been brought now.

A poorly rendered impression of his apartment’s living room was forming around him, growing more vibrant and accurate as the seconds ticked on – including the lounge and the woman sitting on it, her arm braced along the back, chin resting on her forearm.

His eyes widened, lips parting in wonder.

“Ginny,” he breathed rapturously.

Ginny smiled at him, silent laughter lighting up her features the longer he stared, until the colour of her eyes resembled liquid caramel – warm and absolutely lovely. With her hair

bundled messily atop her head, she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

“Hey Harry,” she said, and just hearing her say his name had the tears he had been fighting pushing forward. His face was hot and itchy, as if the skin was pulled too tight over his cheeks.

The need to touch her came at him with the force of a hurricane, powerful enough to leave him quivering, and he wrapped his arms around himself to try and quell it. His knuckles turned white.

His eyes darted to the banner hanging up behind her, the one he had bought to celebrate her official acceptance onto the Holyhead Harpies. “This isn’t real,” he told himself, shaking his head. “This is just another memory. You’re not *her*.”

The disappointment was suffocating.

She tipped her head to the side, smile dimming but not disappearing, and compared to Ron and Hermione her eyes were damningly aware.

“This is all in my head,” he continued, voice firming.

“You know that doesn’t mean it’s not real,” Ginny replied quietly.

Harry *stopped*, his shoulders tensing, because he was sure that Ginny had never said those words to him.

He fixed his stare down between his boots, trying to strangle the unnamed emotion welling up inside him. But the pull was too much, and he inevitably looked at her, drinking her in.

Ginny stared back at him, and the fact that she did not say more, that she was not saying anything related to quidditch or her training schedule or the travelling she would have to do – the things he remembered her gushing about so excitedly that night before she had pinned him to the lounge and kissed him breathless – gave him a sick feeling of hope.

A lump formed in his throat, threatening to choke him when he tried to speak. “You’re not *It*, are you?” he croaked, entire body tensing like he was preparing for a hit.

Because Ginny was dead and that meant that Death could wear her face. Harry did not know if he could survive having her used against him like that.

“No,” Ginny said gently, kindly, and he wanted to believe her, but he felt like he was one wrong word away from unspooling.

“But you’re not Ginny either, are you?”

She did not answer, just continued to watch him with the same careful measure of fondness she had always held towards him.

Harry pressed his lips together, fingers digging into his arms harshly. “What is this? What the hell is going on?”

“You’re dreaming,” Ginny told him plainly. “You’re hurt and scared and so you burrowed deep down in an effort to hide because you can’t handle what happened.”

Harry stiffened, his jaw flexing at the implication. “I’m *not* hiding –”

“It wasn’t an insult,” she interrupted soothingly. “But it is the truth.”

Harry scoffed, defensive, and was approaching her without thought. “I got my throat cut open,” he spat, taking a tone he never normally would have with her. “I learned –” he swallowed.

“I know,” she said, the steadiness in her voice grounding him, stalling his anger before it could bubble forth. “You lost everything. You’re allowed to be upset. You’re allowed to be angry.”

“But?” Harry prompted, the word coming out unsteady. Ginny gestured for him to sit and against his better judgement, he did; sinking into the cushions close enough to feel the heat of her. His eyes slipped shut and he pressed the thumb of his left hand into his right palm until he could feel the bones shift.

Ginny moved, sliding closer, and her hand came up to cup his cheek. Harry froze at the touch, *aching*, as she dipped her fingers into his hair and drew her thumb tenderly along the skin beneath his eye. “It’s not safe for you here, Harry,” she said. “You need to wake up.”

“I don’t want to,” he confessed, pushing into her touch. It was not even a lie. Better to deal with whatever horrors haunted him here than face a reality where she and all the others were gone.

“I know,” she answered, tugging him until she could press their foreheads together. “But you’re not meant to wallow away here. You need to go back.”

Harry collapsed into her, head sliding to the junction of her neck and shoulder, lulled by her scent and soft touch. He felt muddled, on the verge of being sick and so very *tired*. His mind shied away from knowing what awaited him should he wake.

“I – can’t I be selfish just this once?” he mumbled into her skin. “There’s nothing there for me anymore. It’s all gone. *You’re* gone. How am I...how am I supposed to...”

Hands dragged up his back, one arm curling around his shoulder while the other buried itself in his hair again. “We’re gone,” she agreed sadly, “but you can make new bonds. New memories. This could be a gift.”

A bruising bark of laughter left him. Harry wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her into his lap. She folded into him, her weight on him the most natural thing in the world. “A *gift*?” he repeated, incredulous at the thought even if it was so painfully *Ginny*. To be hopeful when hope was dead. “Can I return to sender?”

He heard her huff in amusement, felt it ruffle his hair, and burrowed in closer.

He had always loved that sound, and he knew that this was not Ginny – he *knew it* – but everything from her perfume to the warmth of her in his arms to the way she scratched at his scalp was familiar and he could not remember the last time he had been touched like this.

It had been weeks and it had been *eons*.

His tears finally got the best of him. Harry crushed his face further into her neck. “I miss you so much,” he breathed, voice tangled by his sorrow. “God, I miss you so much.”

“I know, I know,” Ginny said, holding him tightly and laying a kiss against his head. “Though we’re not really gone, you can speak to us whenever you want.”

But that just made him cry harder.

How cruel was life that being the Master of Death had done this to him, and yet those tools could give him a small sliver of his loved ones back?

“It won’t be the same,” he said wetly, pulling back to look at her. “It won’t make things better, or easier. This...this is still eternity we’re talking about. There’s no end. Even if I do...” *make new bonds*, but he was not ready to say the words, “it’ll still end up as just me and...It.”

Ginny brushed some of his tears away, smiling sweetly at him, as if he was precious and wonderful. “You don’t know that,” she told him, and continued before he could question her. “Your life has never been your own. Dumbledore. Voldemort. The Ministry. People have been planning around you since you were born, but now you have the freedom to do whatever you want. To learn whatever you want, go wherever you want. Help others. Be good or, hell, be evil. Live how *you* want.”

She kissed him, chaste, and Harry sighed into it. Tears still wet his cheeks and his mouth felt uncomfortably dry, but for just a moment he felt whole.

“You have all the time in the world,” she said as she pulled away. “Don’t deprive yourself of living, Harry.”

His hand rose to cup the side of her neck as his eyes fluttered open. He stared at her, frowning in consideration, letting his fingers trail over her face. “Are you sure you’re just a figment of my imagination?” he asked with a dim smile. “You can talk me around just like she could.”

Ginny’s lips curled impishly. She placed a hand flat against his chest.

“Find the stone and ask me yourself.”

And then she was gone, and the room was gone, and Harry was alone in the infinite darkness once more.

Utterly alone – until a hand shoved him forward and then he was falling.

OoO

Waking was not kind.

The room was empty when Harry's eyes snapped open, thrust from the nothingness into a world filled with light and colour and magical signatures that *scraped* against his senses like blunt knives, cutting into his senses and gouging his flesh.

His throat was in agony.

Harry coughed, shoving himself up because he was about to gag. There was a loud ringing in his ears, shrill and obnoxious, and he hunched over to try and get away from it.

It was too much too much *too much* –

Someone burst into the room, their voice joining the cacophony of noise. Hands were on him, gently trying to rearrange him on the bed, and Harry twisted out from under them, leaning over the side of the bed and heaving. What splattered on the ground was more liquid than anything, and Harry did not stop until he was shivering.

He was pushed back, a wipe cleaning away the mess on his face and someone was speaking to him, low and urgent as cool, healing magic began to roll through him.

Harry blinked rapidly to clear the spots in his vision, squinting through the tears so he could make out the face of the man standing over him. There were other people in the background now, but they were moving too quickly for him to focus on.

“Can you hear me?” the man asked, not for the first time. Harry nodded weakly, coughing again when he tried to respond.

“Don’t talk,” he cautioned, keeping a hand on Harry’s shoulder as he motioned to someone else. “Get Mr. Black out of here and get me another calming draught.”

Sirius? Harry thought, head turning to look, but by the time he had managed the movement the door was already closing. *Come back*, he wanted to demand only to end up coughing once more.

The healer shushed him, magic rushing to Harry’s chest and easing the burning pain. “Don’t try to talk, Nathan. It’s still healing, you have to let it rest.”

Harry slumped back, staring up at the ceiling. He reached up to brush his fingers over his throat, though he was quickly intercepted. Harry squirmed, his confusion beginning to melt away bit by bit.

Hospital, he realised. The fight, Hogsmeade, *his throat*.

The wheeze he made sounded awful, a pathetic rasp of air that had even the healer wincing.

“You’re safe,” the man explained hurriedly, “you’re at St Mungo’s for treatment. No one will hurt you. You’re safe.”

But I’m not, Harry wanted to say. His other hand grabbed blindly at the man’s robes, tugging on it insistently.

“We’ll get you a potion,” the healer said resolutely, covering Harry’s hand with his own in some attempt at comfort. “We’ll explain everything once you’re calm.”

Harry shook his head, ignoring the way it made his neck twinge.

The door was thrown open and a woman handed a vial to the healer. Harry almost smacked it out of his hand but he was still too sluggish to resist when they worked to tip it past his lips.

The artificial calm descended over him swiftly.

“I can’t believe he’s awake,” the woman said in a hushed voice, helping to guide Harry back into his pillow. “That he survived – he’s so lucky.”

A few tears dripped down his numb cheeks, but the woman cooed and wiped them away.

I’m not, Harry thought. *I’m really not*.

Chapter End Notes

So Harry didn't have a great time this chapter, but when does he ever, let's be real.

Like I said, I'm a bit iffy on certain things in this chapter, but I hit all the plot points I wanted to, so that has to count for something. There was supposed to be a scene with Orion, but I'll rework it and have it as the opening scene in the next chapter. I just couldn't cram him in without messing with the flow too much, so we'll get a glimpse of our boy next time!

Thanks again for all your patience and support - I really appreciate it! For interest, my [tumblr](#) is open if you want to come along to discover theories, scream at me, discuss new snippets or get some behind the scenes commentary!

Works inspired by this one

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